

# PERRYSCOPE 48



**PERRYSCOPE 48**, November 2024, is an issue of a personalzine published mostly monthly by **Perry Middlemiss**, 32 Elphin Grove, Hawthorn, Victoria, AUSTRALIA 3122. E: [perry@middlemiss.org](mailto:perry@middlemiss.org)  
Available for the usual or download at [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com) with thanks to Bill Burns, and FANAC.org with thanks to Joe Siclari and Edie Stern. Unless otherwise specified all material is written by me.  
Cover photograph by Robyn Mills, Morocco, May 2023.

### INTRODUCTION

With this issue I can finally say that I've caught up with the outstanding reviews I wanted to write and that had been left over from the two-month period between issues 46 and 47, when I was travelling in the UK and then recovering my senses, if not my sensibility.

I'm sure you will be relieved to learn this so we can get back to regular procedures. I know I am.

As a result of all that reviewing I find myself with an issue that's the largest of any I've published so far with this title. Hopefully I can get back to something approaching normality after this. Thirty-four pages is just a step too far. Certainly too much to maintain over any period of time. Something of this size means that I'm working on it nearly every day and that can take away time I need to work on other things, like finalising my UK trip report.

This issue sees a new contributor with a book review from Chong. He's graced the cover of previous issues (most recently issue 44) and I hope he will do again sometime soon. He's here, for the first time with a written contribution, and, as I might have expected from him, he hasn't taken the usual approach to reviewing that I seem to have become rather too accustomed to. Again I hope to have more from him in later issues.

Looking to the future I'll be running my regular annual review of my reading and viewing for 2024 in the first two months of 2025. The January issue will be the 50<sup>th</sup> of this title. And that's not something I had ever contemplated when I started out. My previous attempts at small fanzines of this type had normally petered out after a year or two, so to be still going four, almost five, years down the track seems very peculiar indeed.

Sometimes I do find that it can all become a bit of a trial. The aim is to keep going with the knowledge that it will all come good again. I certainly do appreciate the schedule it forces on my time, meaning I always have something to work on or something to go back to when any of the other little projects that fill my time become a little tedious.

As long as I keep enjoying the ride I'll stay with it; this is all supposed to be fun after all.

#### Cover notes:

Breakfast in Morocco, somewhere. Most of the small riads we stayed at on our trip were actually converted family residences and so didn't have any eating facilities for guests included. This meant we had to walk down the street to another hotel or cafe or restaurant; generally only a hundred metres or so. The food on offer was always rather basic but right for the climate. Here I'm having jam on some thin pancakes with a boiled egg and yoghurt to follow. Oh, and all the coffee you could handle. Perfect.

### **WHAT I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT LATELY - Where to Live in Retirement by Perry Middlemiss**

Back about 15 years ago most of the conversations I was having over beers included topics such as superannuation (did we have enough to sustain us during our retirement years?), health (similar) and where we were going to finally end up. Robyn and I had been discussing for some time the idea that we would like to retire somewhere in the country, preferably around Bendigo in central Victoria.

That city, and surrounding districts, had a lot going for it: Robyn had been brought up there and had always had an inkling that she would like to return; she still has family there, including a brother and a few cousins; my brother had, after a few stops along the way, also ended up in Bendigo. It had a decent hospital and plans for something bigger (since completed); a lively arts and food culture; a few excellent wineries in the district; and it was only a couple of hours outside Melbourne by either rail or road. It got a bit warmer in summer and a bit colder in winter than Melbourne, though not enough to be outside the bounds of liveability. It seemed to fit all of the criteria we could think of.

In addition, we were starting to find that Melbourne was becoming more and more crowded. For reasons relating as much to the cost of housing as anything else, Melbourne was starting to overtake Sydney as a destination city for people migrating to Australia from overseas, or Australian citizens moving to a city to study or find work. As a result the place was becoming more and more crowded. The trains were filling up, and peak-hour traffic was turning into a nightmare. I was lucky in my working life in that I only had to drive on a regular basis to one work location for about a year, and that was in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, away from the centre of the city, against the flow of the peak-hour traffic jams. I didn't like it but at least it was bearable. Mostly I worked in and around the central business district and caught trains to and from work each day. If I left home early enough – say, before 7:30am – I was mostly guaranteed of getting a seat and an express train to the city. Thirty minutes later I'd be entering my building.

That was great for Monday to Friday, but what about weekends? Whenever I'd attempted to get around my suburb of Hawthorn, or even further afield, on a Saturday or Sunday the roads were packed with cars. With no Clearway regulations in place on weekends, cars on most main road through the suburbs were restricted to one lane only. Everyone seemed to be out and about, going to hardware stores or general shopping on Saturdays, or heading out to lunch or family events on Sundays. The prospect of competing with all of these vehicles on a regular basis in retirement filled me with dread. When Robyn and I moved into this house in Hawthorn in 1993 we had one car. At one point, when the children were still living here and also old enough to drive, we had three. I suspect we weren't alone in that regard in this part of the city. I was also part of the problem.

It seemed the only solution was to move to the country and get away from the mayhem.

So we started looking at real estate sites and spending some time in the area looking at properties. Fairly soon after we started we decided that we needed something around 2 hectares (5 acres) in size on the south side of the city, preferably a few kilometres out of town. The idea was to aim to live a semi-rural lifestyle, growing a lot of our own fruit and vegetables. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

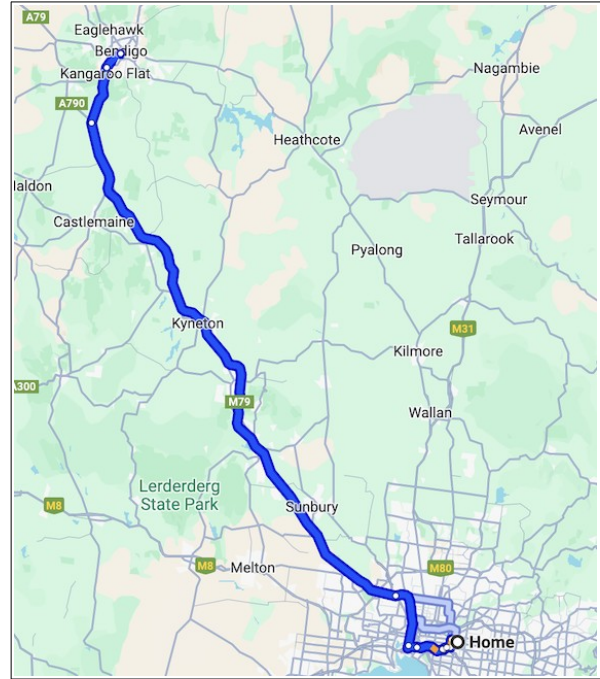
One property in particular, which we saw very early in our search, stood out, and I would have been happy to put in an offer as soon as we could. The home needed some work, though was liveable as it stood, the amount of land was right and the location was perfect: the right distance out of town

and down a country road that was really only used by residents and visitors going to the two wineries and the golf course. The fact that there was a winery across the road didn't hurt either.

The only major problem was that the block was covered in olive trees. In order to carry out our plans we would have to rip out the bulk of them. It was a prospect that Robyn didn't want to face.

We kept looking, discussing building our own home on a vacant block (too difficult and probably too expensive we decided), or buying a rundown house and putting up a kit home while we renovated (also difficult and also expensive but probably a better option in the long run).

And we kept looking and not being able to decide what to do. So we went to see a financial advisor. They didn't really tell us anything that we didn't already know. They seemed to think we would be able to achieve our aims given our financial situation and suggested that we buy an apartment in Melbourne first, especially if we could buy a property off-the-plan, before it had been built. In addition to a rural property, our aim was to purchase a two-bedroom apartment somewhere in the city that we could use whenever we came down from the country; a classic pied-à-terre. The overall plan involved selling the Hawthorn home, which we'd purchased in 1993 and which we'd fully paid off, and use the proceeds to buy both the city apartment and the country property. We were sure the amount we'd get for the family home would more than cover the cost of the other two properties even if it meant that we might have a year or two when we owned all three properties at the same time.



We had been vaguely looking here and there for an apartment, dropping in for inspections in likely locations when we came across them, though we hadn't really been searching in earnest. After our finance advice we started to take a bit more interest.

And, as it happened, something came up fairly quickly, a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment in a new block in Abbotsford, a suburb that is one closer to the city from Hawthorn. Buying it off the plan would save us some purchase costs and push the final payment down the road for a few years, until after the whole block had been completed. We put down a deposit and sat back to wait for the building to commence.

And then the delays started. First due to problems with cranes used for the building (there had been a collapse of a couple on other building sites in Melbourne that had not been inspected properly and the State Government had imposed tighter restrictions), and then there was a shortage of building workers and building materials. None of this was a major issue for us as we were fine with not having to make any final payments on the property for a few years.

Our problems lay mainly with the property in the country. We couldn't find anything we actually liked. We kept on coming back to the place with the olive trees, lamenting that we didn't take the chance when we had it. It seemed to be off the market, though an investigation showed that it hadn't been sold, and some new aerial photographs of the area indicated that the owners had

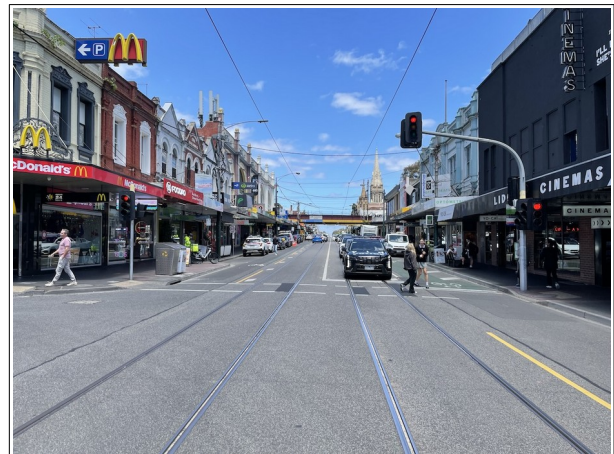
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themselves removed some of the olive trees. We figured it might still be possible. We would have to go back to the bank to re-negotiate the mortgage we had over the apartment in Abbotsford, though we figured that was possible. Just.

Then COVID hit and all our plans went out the window. My work finished and it didn't look like I was likely to get any more. That meant that the banks would only give us a mortgage based on Robyn's income, and, with our other outstanding mortgages, that wasn't going to be enough.

Two years went by and by the time we were able to surface again the whole idea of moving to the country was starting to lose its lustre. I was now fully retired and Robyn wasn't sure how much longer she wanted to work so money was going to be an issue. Assuming that we could have worked our way around that, and there were options, we had the other problem that getting a country property into the shape we wanted it to be would take a lot of work, work that we weren't sure we would be able to handle on our own. Money again, and physically. Added to that my view of our family home in Hawthorn was starting to change.



On the left Glenferrie Road looking north, you can just see the edge of Readings bookshop on the left, next to the Coles supermarket. On the right, Glenferrie Road looking south, with the Lido cinema on the right of the photo. You can also see the elevated railway line in the centre above the road. The railway station is to the immediate left of that elevated track.

It was only when I retired that I came to realise how lucky we were with the location we already had. We live close to the retail area that is the Hawthorn end of Glenferrie Road, and which is, in effect, like a small village. We had shops, restaurants, pubs, bars, cafes, a cinema, a bookshop and a railway station within walking distance. Previously I had really only seen it when it was overcrowded – in peak-hours during the week when I was travelling to and from work and during busy times on the weekends – and now I was seeing it when it was more sparsely populated. I was beginning to appreciate it a lot more. And the more I thought about it the more I came to the conclusion that we would really struggle to find anything to match it. Certainly not in a rural setting unless I could find the right house in a similar “village” like setting. It didn't seem likely.

Then, in 2023, Robyn got a new job that meant she was able to work from home and the kids had finally moved out. This house in Hawthorn seemed crowded when we had four adults in it, fine with three, and now quite spacious with just the two of us.

We had finally determined that everything we wanted in a retirement house had aligned and we found ourselves in the perfect location in the house in which we had been living for thirty years. Sure beats moving.

### **WANDERINGS AND READINGS – An Occasional Column by Julian Warner**

#### **Too Much Whisky (Galore)!**

I'll say now that both Perry and I have too much whisky. And some whiskey too. In both cases this probably comes from a wish to have a bit of a try of as much as possible.

I had 40 or so bottles of whisky on the shelf at one stage. I've whittled that down quite a bit due to a house move and some conscientious self-control. Goodness knows how many bottles Perry admits to.

Normal people, I suppose, might have a bottle of Scotch in the cupboard in case a guest might want some. Or you might have a bottle of Bourbon, just in case you have an American guest. Or a bottle of Irish whiskey in case someone fancies that. You could just play it safe and have a bottle of each. And a bottle of Canadian perhaps? But then — that bottle of Scotch — should it be blended or single malt? Best to get one of each. Then with that Bourbon — what if the hypothetical guest prefers Rye whiskey?

So to be the complete host, you end up with half a dozen bottles of whisky in the cupboard. Or more. Someone brings back a bottle of Vietnamese whisky from their holidays and gives it to you (thank you, perhaps). The bottle of joke whisky that someone leaves behind at a party. The bottle of over-expensive Australian whisky that you felt obliged to buy after a visit to a distillery. This is how I started off having several bottles of whisky.

Then there's that competitive need to not just have something okay on the shelf, but to have something of the best. What is the best? You need to try lots of whiskies to find that out. You can't always go to a whisky bar and try a bit of everything for two simple reasons: cost and getting blind drunk. The 'Whisky and Alement' bar in Melbourne has more than 400 whiskies on offer. One takes a more measured approach, being a bit experimental when considering a whisky to drink when in a bar, or by buying new and intriguing whiskies which present themselves via whisky clubs and importunate advertising. When a friend visits, you give them the opportunity to express an opinion on a recently acquired whisky. You hold a whisky tasting, which might perhaps reduce your over-stocked state a bit but people bring their own bottles along and you end up with more whisky than when you started.

Occasionally mistakes are made. A highly-promoted 'special' turns out to be disappointing [How much sulphur did they use to fire the barrels for this?] and sits on the shelf as an unlovely reminder of money ill-spent.

We visit Australian distilleries in the fated search for something which is a really nice drink and not horribly over-priced. We take away souvenir bottles which are okay to drink but not something you keep returning to.

The quest continues, to find really good whisky at non-eye-watering prices. We are not collectors. We just want to find better whisky. There are Facebook groups for people who want to show off just how much money they have spent on whisky and whisky cabinets and rooms to drink whisky in. To me, whisky is a drink — which you drink. You don't wrap it in plastic with a certificate of authenticity and wait for its value to rise.

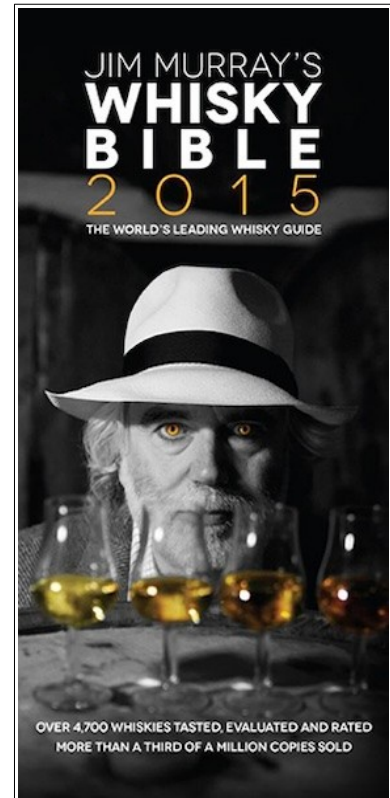
I do have a couple of bottles which I have saved for a special occasion, but just a couple.

In the introduction to his *Whisky Bible* writer Jim Murray\* said that his friends told him that his scheme of rating whiskies to find the best one was pointless. Everyone knows that Highland Park is the best, they said. Well, Highland Park is generally very good. If I was that person with just one bottle of Scotch in the cupboard — just in case — then a bottle of Highland Park would suffice.

I doubt whether I will slim down to just that one bottle for some time. I'll get back to that quandary stage of whether you need both a Bourbon AND a Rye, a peated Islay whisky and an unpeated one ... and so on. There will still be times when I am intrigued enough by a new offering to splash out on an untried whisky. I don't want to go back to having too much whisky.

For anyone who cares enough about whisky to read about it, I recommend *Scotch Whisky: Its Past and Present* by prolific writer David Daiches — whose own life is remarkable. Take a look at the Wikipedia entry on him.

\* Jim Murray was called out for some sexist imagery in a few of his whisky reviews. Rather than quietly admit guilt and withdraw the comments, he fought back and lost a lot of respect and readers.



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### **NOTES AFTER READING THE 2024 HUGO BEST NOVEL WINNER *SOME DESPERATE GLORY* BY EMILY TESH by Chong**

Spoiler-free.

#### **Fantastic trigger warning:**

'*Some Desperate Glory* contains sexist, homophobic, transphobic, racist and ableist attitudes; sexual assault, including discussion of forced pregnancy; violence; child abuse; radicalization of child abuse; genocide; suicidal ideation; and suicide.'

#### **1 — Post-Banks space opera**

If the old school hard SF writers were famously good at the hardware and scientific concepts, but lame at the wetware and EQ, then today's writers have reversed the equation. *Some Desperate Glory* is a very good work of its type, which I'd like to type as post-Banks space opera. (For his own purposes Jonathan Strahan has the term "new space opera tradition" which includes the writers below and Tamsyn Muir.)

Iain M. Banks connotes a lot but let's say post-Banks is about writerly attitude. Beyond the usual matters of plot and content, it is about style, playfulness and sophistication as pleasure. Post-Banks prose and ideas swing. Ann Leckie led the charge in 2013, the year Banks died, with the dazzling first of her Ancillary novels. Arkady Martine's more recent Teixcalaan books have turned this same trick.

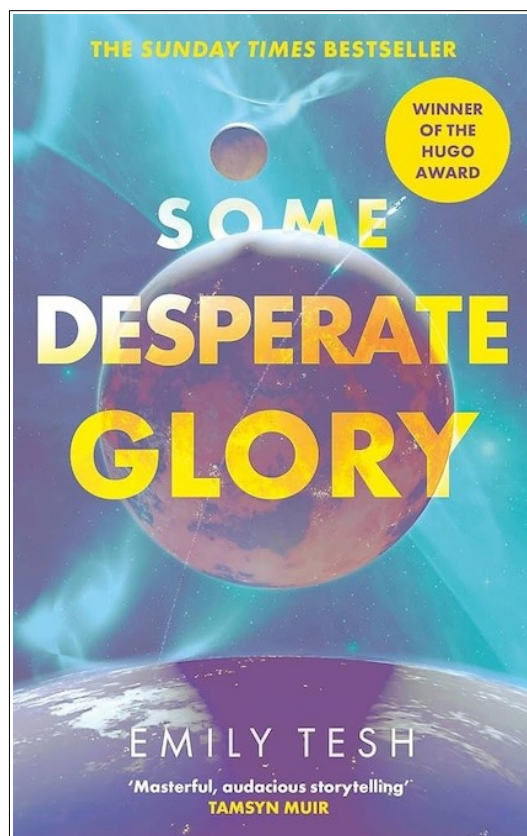
Leckie, Martine and Tesh are very good at characters and concept, and the tech and battle fireworks deployed seem much less the compelling reason for the stories than fun prerequisites of their genre. It's notable that Leckie, Martine and Tesh all foregrounded queer sexual politics — seemingly *de rigueur* nowadays, in perfect contrast to the square heteronormative hegemony of the Golden Age, a legacy that still held sway in the late 1980s. Equally notable is that all three also won the SFF popularity contest that is the Hugo Award.

### 2 — Ender's Game

*SDG* is about children who are brought up in a war culture to avenge the human race. On Coode Street podcast, Tesh says that Gaea, the setting of *SDG*, 'is Sparta', the ancient Greek city-state on a permanent war footing, with its despots, elite warrior class, slave underclass and perpetual surveillance.

A significant provocation is the recognisable DNA that *Some Desperate Glory* grafts from Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*. (In today's SFF, the author is *persona non-grata*.) Post-Banks as it is, *SDG* joyfully subverts *Ender* into its own game. *Ender* is a powerful dark vision of indoctrinated childhood, and seems far more relevant now than 1985, when a gamer's world and long-range drones were not even a glimmer in the oscillating, compound eye of the Pentagon (according to Wikipedia, *Ender* is required reading in some US military outfits).

*SDG* asks the questions: Can one escape a crypto-fascist ideology? Maybe, painfully. And, what can happen after Unhappily Ever After? Tesh proposes an obvious other road not taken in *Ender*'s downbeat denouement — when the kids find out what the adults have been making them do, what furious justice will they visit upon their carer-abusers? The corrective of generational conflict is satisfyingly played for keeps in *SDG*.



### 3 — EQ

Tesh has served up a tale of power dynamics of all kinds within a strict social structure, with complex, unpredictable characters, and emotional beats, relationship and moral issues that would not be out of place in a "literary" work. Making it SF and space opera of course is that the story very much requires the scenarios of space habitats and transportation, FTL, multiverses, and alien intercourse (not that kind) for the plot just to begin. End of the world plot points merely up the emotional ante — *SDG*'s central plot device is very SF smart and manipulative, with extreme stakes.

Not for nothing was Tesh a scholar of Classics and Humanities (Cambridge; Chicago) and teaches Classics. With motifs of the military Greek in the background, emotion, relationships and morality are very much the drivers of the story, not qualities one would have highlighted with SF of the last century.

(Hugo winners: 1996 Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*; 1997 Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars*; 1998 Joe Haldeman's *The Forever Peace*; 1999 Connie Willis' *To Say Nothing of the Dog*; 2000 Vernor Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky*.)



### 4 – One example of tone (among other inflections)

‘You can’t make choices for other people.’

The ship’s silence had a sarcastic quality.

‘All right, you shouldn’t make choices for other people. There’s a moral position for you.’

### 5 – Hugo female authors check (binary gendering for simplicity)

1981–2000 – 21 Hugo Novel winners (inc. a tie) / 13 male, 8 female, 48%.

2001–2013 – 14 Hugo Novel winners (inc. a tie) / 9 male, 5 female, 36%.

2014–2024 – 64 Hugo Novel nominees / 44 female, 69%.

2020–2024 – 30 Hugo Novel nominees / 24 female, 80%.

2014–2024 – the only male Hugo Novel winner was Cixin Liu, 2015, *The Three-Body Problem* – 10 out of 11 were female authors, 91%.

### 6 – Hand-wavy

Amusingly, Tesh literalises the hand-wavy SF trope. Here’s tech-as-magic:

–‘Yiso was making awkward, twitching gestures at nothing. Eventually a shimmering array of symbols appeared...’

–‘They held up one of their thin hands...and the cloud of Bees descended.’

–‘They closed their eyes...and began to speak...around the room lights rippled and then went dark.’

### 7 – Dulce et decorum est

On Coode Street Tesh mentions that her title is taken from a WWI poem by Wilfred Owen. It’s from the last stanza of ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’:

... If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

The Latin phrase is itself lifted from the Roman poet Horace:

‘It is sweet and fitting to give one’s life for the fatherland.’ (trans. by Tesh)

**SDG** is a refutation of that old nationalist lie.

### 8 – Verdict

A grand, complex blast. Rating: multiple stars.

**THE MOOCH OF LIFE by Perry Middlemiss**

**LIFE IN OCTOBER**

**October 1-10**

I am often asked by friends and acquaintances what it is I get up to now that I'm retired; what do I do to keep myself busy. Usually I just respond by saying that I have a number of little projects on the go. If pushed I may fall back on a statement that Mark Loney once recommended to me: "Just say you're working on a bibliography of C. J. Dennis. That should keep them thinking."

It is a good line, mainly because it has elements of the truth and some mystery about it. If people know who Dennis is then they may ask a few further questions, and I'm safe in answering them. If they don't then they usually won't enquire any further and I'm off the hook. Early on I used to start talking about all the little things I was working on, and then watch the eyes slowly glaze over as my interlocutor wondered how they could safely extricate themselves from the grips of this nerd in front of them.

So these days I don't get down to the point of explaining why I go to the Special Collections room at Monash University with Leigh Edmonds and spend a couple of days a month sorting old fanzines in the John Foyster collection. There are just way too many things that need to be explained before whoever it is I'm talking to can have some idea of what I'm doing. (Who was John Foyster? What are fanzines? Why are you wasting your time doing this?) These are usually people who have seen some of my FaceBook postings about this activity. It can seem a little odd to them.

The word "wasting" does come up from time to time, and, for a lot of people, they may well think exactly that, that I'm just doing this to fill in a day when I might well be off doing something else, presumably something useful. However, I don't usually get down this far, and I'm now at an age when I really don't care if someone wants to judge me for what I do. My wife isn't worried about it — as it gets me out of the house and fills in a day or two — or at least I don't think she does.

I keep doing this, and the other things, not because they are easy but because they do keep me busy, and interested. And there is always an ulterior motive or two, which may come to fruition one day. Or maybe not. Doesn't really matter one way or the other.

**October 11-20**

Sometime in the middle of this year my local cinema, the Lido in Hawthorn, announced via their website that they would be showing a retrospective season of Akira Kurosawa films, subtitled "The Art of the Epic". They would be screening nine films over nine weeks with sessions on Saturday afternoons and Monday evenings, from October to December. When I read that I turned to Robyn and told her I knew where I was going to be each Monday night for a couple of months. It was too good an opportunity to pass up.

The retrospective led off with Kurosawa's best-known work, *Seven Samurai*, one of my all-time favourites. It was a good choice. It's very popular. So popular that the Lido is still running extra sessions each week.

The films being shown have all been recently restored, mostly in 4K, occasionally in 2K. For those not across this terminology the restoration is made from the best possible original source (negative

or master) into digital format; with 4K this amounts to a resolution of 3840 x 2160, or around 8 million pixels per screen. Mostly this results in a crisp, clean look to the film on screen though it all depends on the quality of the original material. I assume there is some level of cleanup during the conversion process which, at a minimum, results in a better viewing experience than anyone has had in years.

Some of the original material, of early films in the history of cinema, is so bad that nothing can be done with it. The old cellulose nitrate film that was used a lot in the early twentieth century is both flammable and decomposes over time. It is estimated that 90% of silent films made before 1920 are lost, and 50% of sound films made before 1950 have suffered the same fate. Some are truly lost, with no copies being known at all, but a lot have deteriorated beyond the point of repair.



It is a privilege to be able to see these Kurosawa films on a big screen again. And I'm especially glad that my local cinema has decided to show these and a number of others coming up. I like living in a suburb where there is such a cinema within easy walking distance, and I intend to keep patronising it as much as I can in order to help it stay exactly where it is.

### **October 21-31**

Normally I don't worry about too much about when I wake during the middle of the night. I know it's going to happen once or twice, a quick visit to the toilet and I'm back to sleep again. Well, that is usually the case when my sleeping patterns are working well.

So it's weird that, of late, I've been waking up, for the second time usually, at 4:22 am. It's happened three or four times in the past fortnight. Or so it seems. I really can't be totally sure. Am I waking each night remembering what I saw on the clock the night before, or the one before that? I don't know. In the whole scheme of things it doesn't matter a jot of course, though it is a bit strange.

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This fanzine acknowledges the members of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land on which it is produced in Hawthorn, Victoria, and pays respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

## WHAT I'VE BEEN READING LATELY

Codes – F: format (e for electronic, blank for paper); R: rating, out of 5.0.

Abbr – 1001: 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die; Aust: Australian; Gdn: Guardian's 1000 Best Novels; Nvla: novella; Trans: translated.

### September-October 2024 books

Title	Author	Genre	Date	F	R	Pub Date	Notes
<i>Spook Street</i>	Mick Herron	Spy	Sept 7	e	4.0	2017	
<i>The Name of the Rose</i>	Umberto Eco	Crime	Sept 18	e	3.6	1980	1001; Gdn
<i>Alibi Innings</i>	Barbara Worsley-Gough	Crime	Sept 29		2.7	1958	
<i>Wake in Fright</i>	Kenneth Cook	Lit	Oct 7		3.8	1961	Aust
<i>The Little Prince</i>	Antoine de Saint-Exupery	Fantasy	Oct 14		3.3	1943	1001; Gdn; Trans (French)
<i>The Shadow-Line</i>	Joseph Conrad	Lit	Oct 20		4.0	1917	1001
<i>The Latecomer</i>	Dimitri Verhulst	Lit	Oct 26		3.2	2013	Trans (Dutch)
<i>Goodbye Mr Chips</i>	James Hilton	Lit	Oct 28		3.4	1934	nvla
<i>Liza of Lambeth</i>	W. Somerset Maugham	Lit	Oct 31		2.3	1897	

Books read in the period: 9

Yearly total to end of period: 56

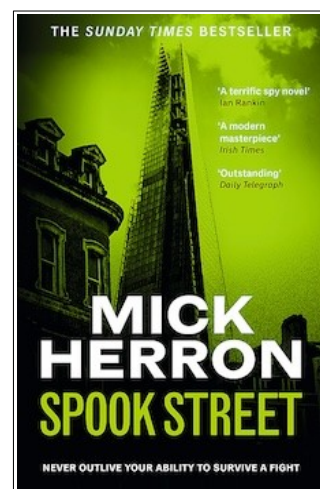
### Notes:

Only 9 books over a two-month period, which is about half of the rate I should be reading at. I can put this down partly to the time I spent on holiday up till mid-September, as I can start to see an increase in October, though it's hardly back to where it should be. If I were to judge this I might make the comment: "could do better." Which is a phrase I seem to remember reading in a number of my school reports.

***Spook Street*** (2017) – This is the 4th in the author's Slow Horses series of novels.

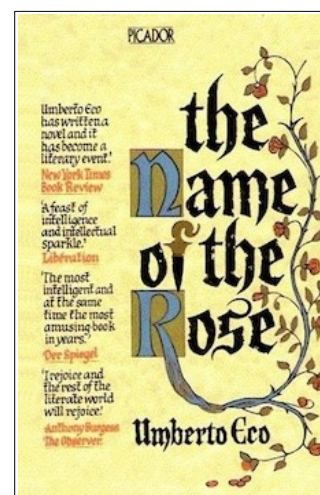
When his ex-spy grandfather shoots a man who has tried to get into his house, claiming to be him, River Cartwright realises that someone has decided to kill his grandfather. He moves the old man to a safe house and then sets off to follow the would-be assassin's trail into France. Meanwhile a bomb explodes in a crowded London shopping centre killing a number of people and MI6 is under a lot of pressure to find out what is going on and to ensure something like this doesn't happen again.

There are a lot of questions to answer: what does the old Cartwright know? How is this all related to River's history? So there are a lot of story-lines here which slowly begin to coalesce over the course of the novel. All the old favourite characters return, though, as seems usual, one won't make it through. Another very good entry in this highly entertaining series. R: 4.0/5.0

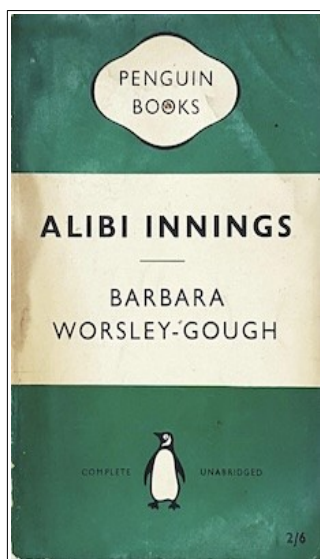


***The Name of the Rose*** (1980) – This novel appears on the list of 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die, the Guardian Best 1000 Novels, the Crime Writers Association Top 100 Novels, the Mystery Writers of America Top 100 Novels, and the Sunday Times Top 100 Crime Novels.

Although this novel appears on quite a number of lists of the best crime novels of all time you'd be forgiven for thinking it is anything but. William of Baskerville (okay, I suppose that's a pointer), along with his assistant Adso, is sent by the Catholic Church to a Benedictine Monastery in Northern Italy in 1327 to attend, and possibly help adjudicate, a theological dispute. Shortly before they arrive a monk is found dead at the foot of the castle walls and the Abbott, knowing William's reputation as an Inquisitor, asks him to investigate. The next morning another monk is found, this time head-first in a vat of pigs' blood, with a blackened tongue, suggesting poison. And so we are off.



Then again, maybe not. There is a mystery to be solved here, and William and Adso set about it with some enthusiasm but it is stifled by the interminable arguments between monks about theological arguments regarding such topics as the nature of laughter and whether or not Christ was "poor". It's rather hard going and I often longed for the mystery to start coming to the fore again. Things speed up at the end and the resolution is rather ingenious. It is a classic, though you should expect to have to slog your way through a lot of it. R: 3.6/4.0



***Alibi Innings*** (1954) – This is the 1st in the author's Aloysius Kelly series of novels.

Although published after the classic period of the "country house mystery" (generally considered to be at its height between the wars) this novel ticks all of the required sub-genre boxes: a stately English manor house; a range of people attending for some event, some are relatives and some friends or acquaintances; a nearby village; a mysterious murder; a couple of rather obvious and credible suspects who turn out to not be the perpetrator; and the least obvious person identified as the murderer.

Here the gathering is at the Squire's house for his annual Squire's Eleven versus Village Eleven cricket match. The victim is the Squire's wife, Elizabeth Elliott, author of fifty-odd novels who is found bludgeoned to death (well, okay, one blow to the head by a sharp, metal object, but "bludgeoned" sounds so much better) in her study. Elizabeth is the classic victim, hated by everyone who knows her, except possibly her husband.

The police arrive, question everyone and "determine" that the time of death was during the match when everyone was supposedly down at the ground either playing or watching the match. When one of the visitors leaves without permission and heads for France everyone is of the view that he did the deed. But what about the villager who seems to be hiding something?

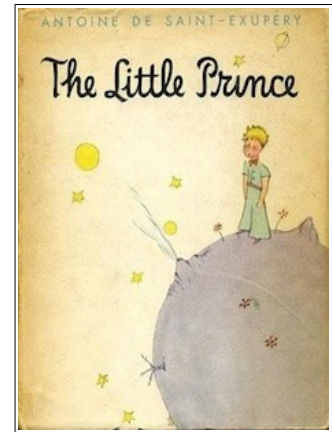
This is all good stuff and a reasonably fine example of this type of murder mystery. It has the added bonus of some fairly decent cricket descriptions which I found no fault with. And Aloysius Kelly? She just seems like a side character in the action but the author must have seen something in her for there to be further mysteries featuring the woman. I doubt I will be following them up however. R: 2.7/5.0

***Wake in Fright*** (1961) – see major review below.

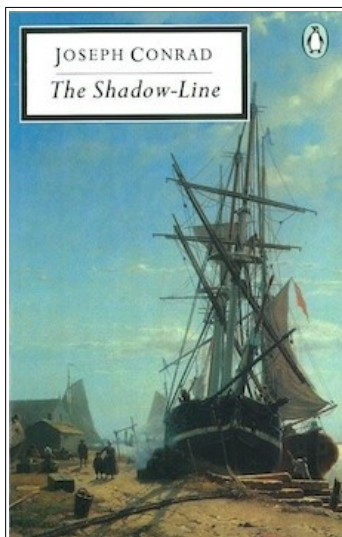
***The Little Prince*** (1943) – This novel appears on the list of 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die, and the Guardian Best 1000 Novels.

This is reportedly one of the best-selling books of all time, having sold over 140 million copies.

The unnamed narrator crashes his aircraft in a remote part of the Sahara desert and attempts to fix it on his own before his water runs out. Seemingly out of nowhere appears the Little Prince who engages the narrator in conversation and begins to tell him his life story. We learn that the Prince is originally from a house-sized asteroid and has since visited six other “planets” along his journey. On each “planet” he meets a sole inhabitant though, when he lands on earth, in the middle of a desert, he assumes that Earth is uninhabited, until he meets the airman. This story continues for a few days while the pilot works on his aircraft before the two set off to look for water. The prince then decides to leave but first allows himself to be bitten by a snake. The next morning the Prince’s body is gone and pilot has finally repaired his craft and flies away.



I’m not sure what this book is attempting to get at beyond the obvious – that all men are self-centred and capricious – as I think its message has become a little dulled over the years. R: 3.3/5.0



***The Shadow Line*** (1917) – This novel appears on the list of 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die.

This is a semi-autobiographical novel based on Joseph Conrad’s first command.

Our unnamed narrator (presumably Conrad) resigns his commission as First Mate on a ship in Singapore in the 1880s. He is rather confused as to why he has done this, as is everyone else. His intention is to travel back home to England and to work out what to do next. As it happens the Singapore Harbour Master has, on the same day, received an urgent request for a Captain to be appointed to a ship in Bangkok, to take charge of it and to sail it to England. Our narrator is sought, offered the role and he accepts, setting out for Bangkok later that evening. When he arrives he finds a ship in fine fettle but a crew that has been struck down with “tropical fever” (malaria?). The narrator attributes this to the poor health conditions in the harbour and gets the ship off-shore as soon as he can. A few days later the ship is ready to sail and they attempt to head off. However there is no wind, or very little of it, so they make slow headway down the Gulf of Siam (now the Gulf of Thailand). As they travel the ship’s First Mate tells the narrator the story of how the previous captain came to die: it appears he started to lose his mind in the heat, later succumbed to heart failure and was buried at sea. The First Mate believes that the current journey is cursed by the late Captain and that they must, somehow, get past his burial site. This becomes a terrific struggle as there is little wind and the crew are all very ill indeed. Finally a storm blows up and they are able to reach Singapore.

This novel has variously been described as having “supernatural” elements though I must admit to not finding any, the First Mate’s superstitions and ravings aside. It has also been described as a metaphor for the First World War, emphasising the need for members of any team to pull together to reach their final goals. I think this is also a bit of a stretch. The novel is really interested in teamwork, planning and commitment and depicting a group of men who must survive on their own

wits with no outside help. It is an excellent piece of work. Maybe not one of Conrad's absolute bests but up there. R: 4.0/5.0

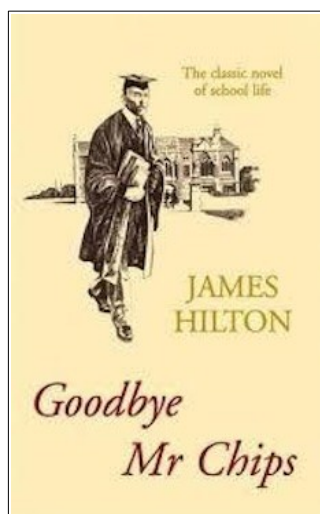
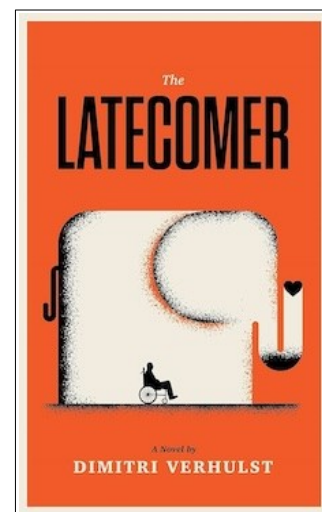
### ***The Latecomer*** (2013)

[Translated from the original Dutch by David Colmer.]

Désiré Cordier is in his early 70s, confined to a nursing home, after being diagnosed with severe dementia. But it's all a farce as he is perfectly healthy. He just decided, at some point, that living with his wife any longer was more than he could stand. He just wanted to be alone with his thoughts. And so he concocts a long campaign of forgetfulness, erratic behaviour and dangerous aimless journeys on trains to convince his family and medical authorities that he needed to be hospitalised for his own good.

There are difficulties associated with this of course – having to defecate in his pyjamas at night on a regular basis is rather demeaning – but the arrival in the home of a woman who was someone he lusted after as a teenager pushes all of those difficulties to one side. And then he begins to suspect that someone else in the home is doing exactly the same as him, someone with a sinister past.

This is a strange but amusing little book about a man who really only wants to stop the world from spinning so fast, to get away from an over-bearing wife he no longer loves and to just think of himself for awhile. Seems like a very peculiar way to go about it though. R: 3.2/5.0



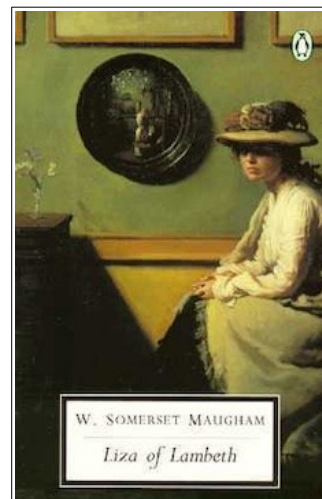
### ***Goodbye Mr Chips*** (1934)

Mr. Chippington (the “Mr Chips” of the title) has been the classics master of Brookfield school since the 1870 and tells the story of his life in a slow reminiscence. As a result we get a look at how “public schools” in England operated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chips is a classic bachelor schoolteacher: unworldly, lonely, intelligent, and shy. That is until he meets Katherine, a young energetic woman who later becomes his wife. But, like all good things, that is not destined to last as she dies in childbirth and he is left alone again. The school becomes his whole life and even though he retires in 1913, he returns during the Great War to cover for the young men who have enlisted to fight.

Hilton gives us a wonderful, compelling, and sympathetic picture of school life, and life in general, in these years. It's a world that no longer exists and is probably looked back on by many people with great longing and nostalgia. This novella has been adapted for both film and television on a number of occasions. R: 3.4/5.0

### ***Liza of Lambeth*** (1897)

Somerset Maugham's debut novel follows the life of Liza Kemp, who lives in Vere Street Lambeth with her widowed mother. Liza is one of the liveliest of the young women in the street, known to everyone in the area.



As such she is the object of many a young man's attention, especially Tom who asks her to marry him. However Liza is having none of that, wanting more from life. She falls for an older local man, Jim Blakeston, who is already married with numerous children, and has to hide her affair from everyone around her as she knows she will be met with disapproval. It ends badly, as you knew it would.

I couldn't help thinking, as I read this short novel, that Maugham was setting out to write a cautionary tale, warning against the evils of drink, extra-marital affairs and, probably, poverty. He sets the scene well enough and the people who populate seem authentic, though I did get more than a little tired of the idiomatic dialog spelling. Not one I am going to remember well. R: 2.3/5.0

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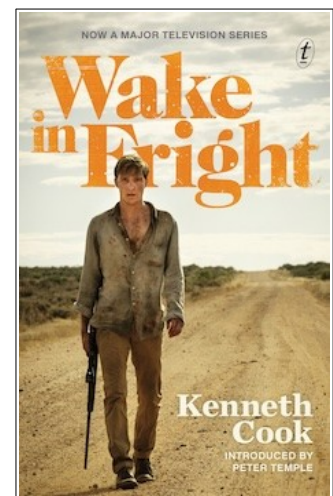
### REVIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

***Wake in Fright*** (1961) by Kenneth Cook

**Genre:** Literary

John Grant is a bonded primary school teacher, contracted to work for two years in the small school of Tiboonda, a small settlement in the outback of western New South Wales. At the end of the school year he locks up the school and heads to the nearby mining town of Bundanyabba (known as "The Yabba" to the locals) with the aim of catching a flight back to Sydney where he intends to sit on the beach and do very little for six weeks.

When he arrives in Bundanyabba (actually a fictionalised version of Broken Hill) he books in to the hotel and heads to the pub to while away his evening. While there he gets talking to the local police officer who invites him to a "two-up" school. Although not usually a gambler Grant places a few bets and wins big, but this is the start of his downfall. Hoping to make a sizeable sum on the game he keeps betting and eventually loses the lot, leaving him with only a few shillings, not enough to get to Sydney. Some locals take pity on him and start buying him beers at the pub, which then progresses to dinner and beers back at one of their houses, and then more beers, and yet more. The next few days pass in a completely inebriated state, and involve him being nearly seduced by a local girl and an horrific kangaroo hunt. By the end of the novel Grant finds himself destitute and in hospital having not made it to Sydney but convinced he now has the capacity to see his contract through to the end.



I've described Cook's novel as "literary" but I could also have tagged it as a "gothic horror" story. The Bundanyabba locals appear to be benign, well-meaning people on the surface but are grotesques, permanently drunk, cruel and dark beneath the surface. Cook captures the dry desolation of the far west of NSW, the heat, the nature of the cultural and intellectual desert, and the salvation that lies for some in the bottom of a glass or the spinning coins of a two-up school. Among other Australian authors maybe only David Ireland in *The Glass Canoe* has captured the lure and pull of the beers as a means of escape and self-violation.

This is a disturbing novel. It paints a very unflattering picture of life in the Australian bush, though I have to admit that, from personal experience, it is a remarkably accurate one. It's brutal and won't be to everyone's taste, though it will give you a view of a part of Australia that few ever get to see. For a debut novel it has some problems with pacing, though that is a rather minor quibble in what is a remarkable book.



The novel was adapted for the screen in 1971, directed by Ted Kotcheff and featuring Gary Bond as John Grant, Chips Rafferty as the local copper, with Donald Pleasance and Jack Thompson in major roles. It was Rafferty's last film and Thompson's first, hence marking some sort of changing of the guard in Australian film.

R: 3.8/5.0

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## WHAT I'VE BEEN WATCHING LATELY

### Television

Codes – Sn: season (blank for mini-series); R: rating, out of 5.0.

Abbr – Aust: Australian

#### September-October 2024 television

Title	Sn	Eps	Genre	Platform	R	Rel Date	Notes
<b>Rebus</b>	1	6	Crime	SBS	4.2	2024	
<b>Slow Horses</b>	4	6	Spy	Apple TV	4.2	2024	
<b>Only Murders in the Building</b>	4	10	Comedy Crime	Disney +	4.0	2024	

TV shows watched in the period: 3

Yearly total to end of period: 30

**Rebus** (Season 1 – 6 episodes) (2024)

Platform: SBS

Genre: Crime

Based on the Rebus novels by Ian Rankin, this series updates the time period to the present day (probably as a cost-saving measure) and casts Richard Rankin (no relation) as the eponymous Edinburgh-based Detective Sergeant John Rebus. Rebus is also portrayed as being in his mid-late thirties probably with plans to produce further seasons in the future.

After a man is attacked by two young men with knives in broad daylight in Edinburgh he is saved by a stranger who intervenes and then runs off. Rebus and his associate DC Siobhan Clarke (Lucie Shorthouse) use CCTV footage of the event to track down the stranger to get his story. Rebus discovers that he is ex-Army, living rough on the streets, and that he is also known to Rebus's brother Michael. Before Rebus can get the two ex-army colleagues together Michael has robbed a drug dealer near his home but let slip a phrase that John Rebus recognises when he interviews one of the dealers. From there Rebus and his brother get heavily involved with the Edinburgh drug scene which leads them to Ger Cafferty, a well-known character from the Rebus novels. In the background of all of this, and eventually intertwined with the main police storyline, is Rebus's family, his ex-wife and child. She has moved on since their separation and is now pregnant with her new partner, though Rebus still hopes for a reconciliation.



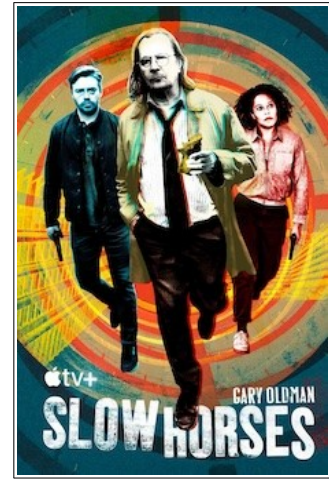
While this is not a faithful adaptation it is true to the spirit of the books, contrasting the upper and lower parts of Scottish society, using Edinburgh as a character in the story, and dealing with specific social problems affecting Scotland. Definitely worth following. R: 4.2/5.0

### ***Slow Horses*** (Season 4 — 6 episodes) (2024)

Platform: Apple TV+

Genre: Spy

I outlined the plot of this story in my book reviews earlier this issue so I'll skip that for now. There are some changes between the novel version and the screen adaptation and these seem to work rather well. The novel does have a few flat points but they are now ironed out and there is a bit more emphasis on Jackson Lamb here, which is understandable given Gary Oldman's wonderful portrayal. Hugo Weaving presents yet another in a long line of excellent performances as Frank Harkness, the ex-CIA operative turned mercenary who runs the organisation in France that River Cartwright goes to investigate. I don't think it matters much if you haven't read the book here, though I doubt you will follow the story or the various characters' interactions unless you've seen the previous three seasons in this series. Maybe you could get by but I wouldn't risk it. This is one of the better tv novel adaptations going around and it is excellent to learn that it has been renewed for a fifth and a sixth season. R: 4.2/5.0



### ***Only Murders in the Building*** (Season 4 — 10 episodes) (2024)

Platform: Disney+

Genre: Comedy Crime

At the end of Season 3 we, the viewers, saw Charles's friend Sazz Pataki (Jane Lynch) shot and killed by a rifle while she was in Charles's apartment. However when our three apartment building detectives look for her she is not to be found; they then assume she's just gone off somewhere on her own. Meanwhile the three are informed that a Hollywood producer wants to make a movie out of their podcast and flies the three out to California to meet the movie team: screenwriter and the three leads (Zach Galifianakis playing himself playing Oliver, Eva Longoria playing herself playing Mabel, and Eugene Levy playing himself playing Charles). Mayhem ensues. Back in New York Howard Morris (Michael Cyril Creighton) introduces his new dog to the trio in Charles's apartment only for the dog to start getting very agitated. When they discover the dog is a retired cadaver dog they discover bloodstains on the floor of Charles's apartment and, later, evidence that Sazz's body has been destroyed in the apartment's incinerator. Mabel, who is still looking for a permanent place to live, starts to investigate the West Tower of their apartment block from where the shot was fired, and long, deep connections with some of the residents there start to emerge.

It is surprising that this comedy is maintaining its forward momentum and continues to entertain and amuse it. Long may it run. And there are definite hints of a fifth season in the final episode.

R: 4.0/5.0



## Film

Codes – P: platform (c for cinema, a for airline, blank for home); R: rating, out of 5.0.  
Abbr – 1001: 1001 Films You Must See Before You Die; Subs: subtitles

### September-October 2024 films

Title	Director	Genre	Date	P	R	Rel Date	Notes
<i>The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare</i>	Guy Ritchie	Action War	Sept 10	a	2.6	2024	
<i>The Fall Guy</i>	David Leitch	Action Comedy	Sept 11	a	3.2	2024	
<i>Local Hero</i>	Bill Forsyth	Comedy	Sept 14		4.3	1983	1001
<i>Alien : Romulus</i>	Fede Alvarez	SF	Sept 17	c	2.2	2024	
<i>28 Days Later</i>	Danny Boyle	SF	Sept 18		3.8	2002	
<i>Twister</i>	Jan de Bont	Action Drama	Sept 21		2.9	1996	
<i>The Killing</i>	Stanley Kubrick	Crime Drama	Sept 26		2.7	1956	
<i>Megalopolis</i>	Francis Ford Coppola	Drama	Oct 1	c	2.4	2024	
<i>Wolfs</i>	Jon Watts	Action Comedy	Oct 7		3.6	2024	
<i>Seven Samurai</i>	Akira Kurosawa	Drama	Oct 8	c	5.0	1954	1001; Sub
<i>The Name of the Rose</i>	Jean-Jacques Annaud	Crime	Oct 12		3.4	1986	
<i>Rashomon</i>	Akira Kurosawa	Drama	Oct 14	c	4.6	1950	1001; Sub
<i>Roman Holiday</i>	William Wyler	Romantic comedy	Oct 18		3.3	1953	1001
<i>Ikiru</i>	Akira Kurosawa	Drama	Oct 22	c	4.4	1952	1001; Sub
<i>Casino Royale</i>	Martin Campbell	Action	Oct 25		4.0	2006	
<i>Greyhound</i>	Aaron Schneider	War	Oct 26		3.3	2020	
<i>Throne of Blood</i>	Akira Kurosawa	Drama	Oct 28	c	4.2	1957	1001; Sub

Films watched in the period: 17  
Yearly total to end of period: 58

### *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare* (2024)

Platform: Airline  
Genre: Action War

Remember those World War II movies from the 1960s when some shady British armed forces guy would gather together a group of unlikely characters to carry out some secret mission behind enemy lines? The ones where the target couldn't be bombed into oblivion by air or sea, ones where boots on the ground were required, where the prospects of survival were slim, and where the British Government would deny all knowledge if the mission was uncovered? Films like *The Heroes of Telemark*, *The Dirty*



**Dozen** and **The Guns of Navarone**. If so, then this film fits exactly into that sub-sub-genre of war action movies, but doesn't quite reach the heights of those mentioned.

Here the main conceit is an attempt by Winston Churchill in late 1941 to help bring the USA into the European war by reducing the effectiveness of the North Atlantic U-Boat menace. Presumably this would allow more US boats to make the crossing to Britain, bringing with them men and supplies. The aim is to attack a German installation on an island in the Gulf of Guinea off the coast of Africa where the U-Boats are being supplied with munitions, rations and carbon dioxide filters. Trouble is, the island is in neutral territory so a direct attack is out as it may bring other nations into the war on the side of the Germans. Cue Gus March-Phillips (Henry Cavill), who is tasked by Churchill to organise a team and get to the island and do the business. So he does, and they do, and they all live happily ever after. As you knew they would.

I probably would have quite liked this if it had been made in the 1960s and I had seen it in my teens. Now, not so much. The characters are all old-hat now, the Nazi villains are cliched and there is really no sense of drama. You know they are all going to survive, mostly without a scratch. And it all just seems a more than a little ho-hum. R: 2.6/5.0

### ***The Fall Guy*** (2024)

Platform: Airline

Genre: Action Comedy

Colt Seavers (Ryan Gosling) is a Hollywood stuntman, mostly known for working with Tom Ryder (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) who, in this cinematic universe, is the world's most popular movie action hero. Seavers is also in a romantic relationship with Jody Moreno (Emily Blunt) who is an assistant camera operator. At the start of the film Seavers has a major accident on set which results in him breaking several vertebrae. Eighteen months later he's recovered physically, if not psychologically, and is now working as a valet at a small Mexican restaurant; he has left both Moreno and the movie business behind. Then he gets a call from the producer of a movie in Australia, asking him to drop everything and get to the production as Moreno, who is now a first-time director on the new film, has asked for him. When he arrives he discovers that Ryder has gone missing and the producer actually wants him to track down Ryder and get him back to the film. Mayhem ensues.



This is all rather good fun though it hardly pushes the actors in any major way. I might have enjoyed it a bit more if I hadn't seen it on a plane where I was being interrupted on a regular basis. It's amusing but little more than that. Keep an eye out for all the actors putting in cameos in the final sequences. R: 3.2/5.0



### ***Local Hero*** (1983)

Platform: Amazon Prime

Genre: Comedy

[This film appears on the list of 1001 Films You Must Watch Before You Die, and is 37<sup>th</sup> on the BBC's list of the Best British films of all time.]

When critics and reviewers refer to a film as being a "gentle comedy" this is probably the prime example they are thinking of. The comedy doesn't

rely on anyone being abused, vilified, embarrassed or offended. It all stems from the situation, the characters' reactions to it, and some light witty banter.

Houston-based Knox Oil is planning to build a large oil facility on the north-west coast of Scotland, so they send young hot-shot negotiator "Mac" MacIntyre (Peter Riegert) in to negotiate the purchase of the required parcels of land from the locals. He joins up with young local Knox representative Danny Oldsen (a young Peter Capaldi) and they move into rooms at the local pub. The publican, Gordon Urquhart (Denis Lawson), is also the town's accountant and the inhabitants' main negotiator. All seems to be progressing well (the locals all want to sell and make themselves rich) when it is discovered that one of the beaches is actually owned by Ben Knox (Fulton Mackay) whose family has been "working" that beach for over four hundred years. He isn't willing to sell so Knox CEO Felix Happer (Burt Lancaster) flies in to take charge.

It is hard to find anything to criticise with this film, though at a stretch I'd probably leave out the rather unfunny scenes between Happer and his shrink. Otherwise, it has everything you could want: interesting and amusing story, good script, fine scenery and excellent performances from all concerned. Added to that is Mark Knopfler's soundtrack. Although the main theme is only played over the closing credits, which seems a pity. There are echoes of it occasionally during the film but you have to pay close attention to notice them. R: 4.3/5.0

### ***Alien : Romulus* (2024)**

Platform: Cinema

Genre: SF

This is another instalment in the long-running *Alien* franchise and is set between *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986).

In the opening sequence a spaceship discovers a debris-field of an exploded vessel it had been searching for. Within the destroyed vessel an object, looking rather like a cocoon, is found, brought over to the spaceship and cut open. As the ship leaves the field a large section of shattered hull reveals the name "Nostromo". When you see that you just know things are bound to go bad from here.

Cut to a mining colony where a group of youngish adults have decided that they need to escape in order to get out from under the jackboot control of the planet's mining company. They somehow have access to a craft that will take them to orbit and have just discovered a derelict space station that seems to have entered their system and is on course to collide with their planet's ring system. But they have also discovered that it has a number of cryo-pods that will be necessary for them to travel from their planet to another some five years flight time away.

You can pretty much guess the rest as it closely follows the plot of the first film in the series. So closely that I was left wondering why they bothered to make this film at all. Maybe future instalments will enable us to see why things were done in this film the way they were. I can only hope so.

I was left disappointed with this film: it looks fine and the special effects are up to scratch, but the script seemed rather weak to me, with the outcome entirely predictable from the opening sequence on the mining colony. And don't get me started on all of the errors in it. R: 2.2/5.0

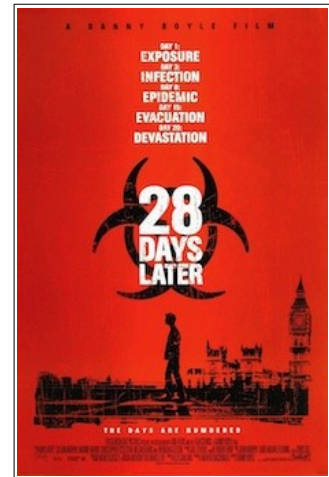


### **28 Days Later** (2002)

Platform: DVD

Genre: SF

Early Alex Garland (writer) meets early Danny Boyle (director) in this very interesting and enjoyable British post-apocalypse zombie movie. Jim (Cillian Murphy) wakes from a coma to find his world changed forever after the accidental release of a highly contagious virus that turns its victims into rage-filled zombies. Wandering the streets of London he is rescued by Selena (Naomie Harris) and Mark (Noah Huntley), but when Mark is infected and killed by Selena she and Jim decide to escape to the country. Accompanied by taxi driver Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and his daughter Hannah (Megan Burns) the four head north in the hopes of finding the source of a radio broadcast that Frank has picked up. Outside Manchester they fall in with a small army group lead by Major Henry West (Christopher Eccleston) but it soon transpires that the soldiers may be as much of a threat as the zombies.



You can see all sort of influences in this film from Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and much more besides. There is a lot to like about it, with its low-budget set design and lighting giving the whole thing a run-down desolate feel. This is a worthy member of the sub-genre of small-scale "end-of-the-world" horror films that the British do so well. R: 3.8/5.0



### **Twister** (1996)

Platform: Amazon Prime

Genre: Action drama

The film follows a group of storm chasers who are attempting to deploy a weather monitoring device into an active tornado in Oklahoma. The team is lead by Jo Harding (Helen Hunt) who is estranged from her husband Bill Harding (Bill Paxton). The two meet as the storm chasers are heading out to monitor tornados with the aim of finalising their divorce papers. But Bill gets drawn into the chase and over the next few days gets more and more involved in his former life as the tornadoes get stronger and stronger.

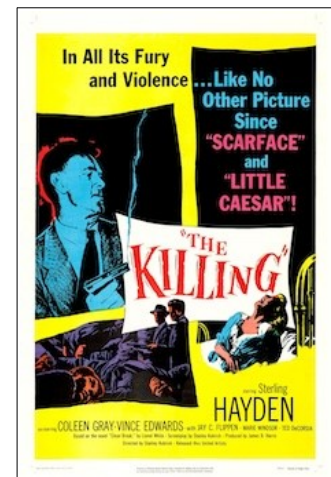
This is a fairly run-of-the-mill story of a romance rekindled in the midst of an action movie, with another storm chasing team, also trying to deploy a monitoring device, acting as the main villains of the piece. But special praise must be extended to the special effects crew who must have been pushing the CGI technology to its limits with this film back in 1996. I watched it as homework for the new film about this subject, *Twisters*, which was released earlier this year. R: 2.9/5.0

### **The Killing** (1956)

Platform: Amazon Prime

Genre: Crime drama

Stanley Kubrick's second film as a director follows the set-up and execution of a heist of \$2 million from a racetrack. Johnny Clay (Sterling Hayden) is recently out from jail and is already planning an audacious



robbery. He recruits a racetrack cashier and bar-man, a corrupt cop, a marksman and a wrestler to complete his crew. Of course, things start to go wrong when the cashier (Elisha Cook Jr.) tells his wife (Marie Windsor) some of the details about the plan, who then tells her lover (Vince Edwards), and the rest is fairly predictable. Yet, in the end, it almost comes off, and if not for the untimely intervention of a runaway dog at an airport Clay and his girlfriend would have made it away free and easy. But we have to remember the film was made during the rather moralistic period of the 1950s where it was required that all criminals get their comeuppance.

The film is an adaptation of Lionel White's 1955 novel *Clean Break*, and while the film's credits state that Kubrick wrote the screenplay and Jim Thompson the dialog, it was probably more likely that Thompson did the bulk of the work while Kubrick blocked out the story. Kubrick was more interested in the cinematography though he was told by that union that he could not be both director and cinematographer on the same film and so hired veteran Lucien Ballard to handle the camera. Needless to say Kubrick intervened rather often in that area of the production as well. And you can see some very noirish lighting when the conspirators are sitting around a table, and some interesting tracking shots as the robbery gets underway. The film falls very neatly into the *film noir* sub-genre.

The story is told in a non-linear fashion and, at times, can be rather confusing as to where the action is up to in the robbery's timeline. It all comes together in the end, though I did find it rather lacking in many aspects. Most of the actors seem to be walking through their roles; even Hayden to a degree, and he is the pick of the bunch. You long for a time when he loses his temper so that he will show some emotion and just belt someone. God knows most of them deserve it.

It is interesting to see this as an early example of the films that Kubrick would make in his later years, pushing and prodding his characters around the set rather like chess pieces. R: 2.7/5.0

### ***Megalopolis* (2024)**

Platform: Cinema

Genre: Drama

It's a Francis Ford Coppola film, so you have to go and see it. Right? He's one of the major American film-makers of the second half of the twentieth-century with four certifiable masterpieces under his belt so you'd hope he knew what he was doing. Well, that might have been true thirty years ago. Now I'm not so sure.

Sometime (maybe the present) in an alternate New York, now re-named New Rome, Cesar Catilina (Adam Driver) is an architect with an ability to stop time for a few seconds, and an ambition to remake his city into something that will stand way into the future, his Megalopolis. He has developed a wondrous new bio-adaptive building material, Megalon, for which he won a Nobel Prize (physics? chemistry?). Opposing Catilina's dream is Mayor Franklyn Cicero (Giancarlo Esposito) who only wants to build for the now, to provide entertainment venues such as casinos for the populace. He has no dreams for the future, just a desire to stay in power, at all costs.



We learn early on that Cicero was the prosecuting DA when Catilina was charged with his wife's murder, a charge that was eventually thrown out of court. Her death haunts Catilina throughout the film but we never really get to find out the true story behind it. Actually, we struggle to find out much of what happens as the story-line is very disjointed. There is a reasonable enough story lurking here somewhere but too much time is spent on side-tracks and set-pieces designed to reveal

Catilina's character which only serve to slow the film and blur the focus. While some minor incidents are dwelled upon at length others are just brushed over with little or no explanation.

Visually there is a lot to like about this film. Coppola has always had an eye for design and framing and he hasn't lost that along with his story-telling skills, luckily for us. He made his best films when he was on a tight leash, and here there seems to be no leash in sight.

Overall this is a memorable mess; the first forty minutes or so are hard to watch, as you hope against hope that the director will begin to pull it all together. It took Coppola forty years to get this made, and now it's easy to see why production companies were reluctant to invest in it. R: 2.4/5.0

### **Wolfs** (2024)

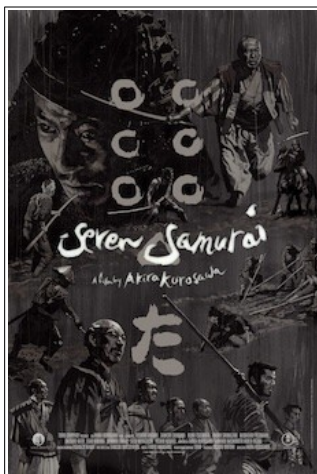
Platform: Apple TV+

Genre: Action Comedy

When a leading District Attorney finds herself in a difficult situation (a young, half-naked man has died in her hotel room) she calls a number that she has been given. A short time later "fixer" George Clooney arrives (I have to call him by his real name as none of the major characters in the film are named, for legitimate reasons) and starts to clean up. But before he gets very far, Brad Pitt arrives. He is also a fixer who has been called in by the hotel management who seem to be monitoring the room via CCTV. Both of these men usually work as a "lone wolf" (hence the title) but here find themselves thrown together to clean up the mess, which includes not only the body but also the man's backpack which contains four bricks of some sort of drug. Clooney and Pitt figure out that they really do need to get the drugs back to their rightful owner, in order to avoid future unpleasant consequences, and what follows is a fast and frenetic action thriller that barely misses a beat.



I'm not sure why this went straight to streaming rather than to cinemas as it's a good "buddy" movie, has a decent story-line and a star-pairing of Clooney and Pitt that any film company would probably kill for. The two work very well together, rather reminiscent (in more ways than one) of a certain western starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford. My wife and I both enjoyed this. It's not going to win any awards, though it's certainly one for a quiet night at home. R: 3.6/5.0



### **Seven Samurai** (1954)

Platform: Cinema

Genre: Drama

[Japanese with subtitles. This film appears on the list of 1001 Films You Must Watch Before You Die, and is 20<sup>th</sup> on **Sight and Sound** magazine's 2022 list of the best films of all time.]

The Australian Macquarie Dictionary defines the word "epic" as: "heroic, imposing, impressive". It then goes on to add that, when applied to a novel or film it means one "resembling an epic [poem], especially one dealing with the adventures and achievements of a single individual." In terms of film I'm guessing most people would extend that definition and add to it a requirement that the cinematography also has to have an "epic" quality, wide and vast. Think of **Lawrence of Arabia** with its wide shots of deserts and Omar Sharif slowly appearing out of the heat haze. **Seven**

**Samurai** doesn't have any of those wide, cinematic shots but it certainly has everything else, and can rightly be considered an "epic" in all senses of the word.



The plot of the film follows the fate of a group of individual samurai in 16th-century Japan who are contracted by a small village to defend it from marauding bandits. The villagers learn that the bandits have decided to wait until after the village harvest their rice so their haul will be better. So they concoct a plan to hire some swords to defend their houses, their harvest and their people. The villagers can't pay the samurai any money, all they can offer is food during the time of the conflict. At first they struggle to find anyone, until they come across one man, Kambei Shimada played by Takashi Shimura, an honourable ronin who is persuaded to lead the recruitment of the group: he says seven are required although the villagers were only told to recruit four. And so the first half of the film, leading up to the 10-minute intermission, is taken up with the problem setup and the recruitment of the warriors. They decide on six but are persuaded to include Kikuchiyo (Toshiro Mifune) due to his persistence and humour. This is a masterful performance from Mifune which could easily be dismissed due to the manner in which he plays the fool at almost every occasion. But we discover the real reason for his behaviour during the climactic battle with the bandits and it all makes perfect sense. That battle takes up the bulk of the second half of the film.

The story-line is a slow build, in fitting with the material. The first half is dialogue heavy as the villagers, and the samurai, come to a working arrangement and the work of setting up the village's defences begins in earnest. Then the action begins after the intermission with a few small episodes, as the bandits test the villagers' mettle, becoming more frequent until the final battle scene, mostly occurring during a heavy rainstorm, takes place inside the village itself. The pacing is a masterclass in building tension and drama with the aim of reaching a definitive climax.

This film is nothing short of a masterpiece and I can't think of a single thing that I have any qualms about. Yes, it's three-and-a-half hours long, including the intermission, yet that just seems to fly by. If you go to see a film and want drama and melodrama, comedy and tragedy, action, suspense, pathos and romance then I'd strongly suggest you watch this; it has them all and much more besides.

For me this is as close to perfection as a film can get. R: 5.0/5.0

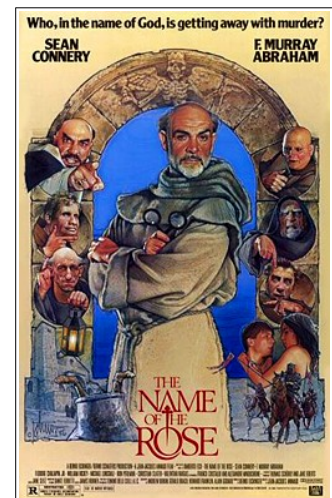
### ***The Name of the Rose* (1986)**

Platform: DVD

Genre: Crime

Jean-Jacques Annaud's adaptation of the Umberto Eco novel strips away all, or nearly all, of the long and very detailed religious discussions that I found the most tedious part of the original. Left in is a relatively brief debate about the nature of laughter ("Did Jesus laugh?" "It's not mentioned in the scriptures that he did." And so on.) which is rather central to the mystery's solution.

Here William of Baskerville is played by Sean Connery, with a very young Christian Slater as his novice Adso. William has been summoned to a 14th-century northern Italian monastery to help adjudicate a religious discussion but is asked by the monastery's Abbot to investigate the death of a monk. Connery is great in this role as he has the intelligence to be believable as a detective while still having the humanity to fit the role as a Franciscan monk. Slater has enough acting chops to carry his role as a wide-eyed innocent and rather superstitious young man, and F. Murray Abraham delivers a great turn as Bernardo Gui, the Pope's Inquisitor, who positively relishes the torturing of monks to obtain confessions. Ron Perlman as the deranged and deformed Salvatore also shows his range.



This is a rather enjoyable film and it may well fall into that category where the film adaptation is the equal, if not better than the book. R: 3.7/5.0

### **Rashomon** (1950)

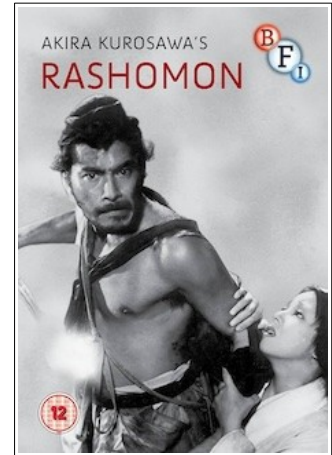
Platform: Cinema

Genre: Drama

[Japanese with subtitles. This film won the 1951 Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, it appears on the list of 1001 Films You Must Watch Before You Die, and is 42nd on **Sight and Sound** magazine's 2022 list of the best films of all time.]

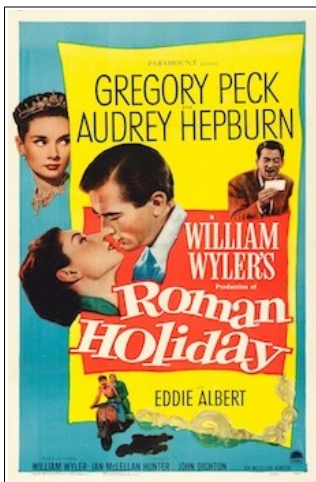
Kurosawa's *Rashomon* is rather simple in concept and scope, yet very sophisticated in its story-telling techniques.

The screenplay is based on Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's short story "In a Grove", and tells the tale of an encounter between a bandit and a samurai and his wife in a forest. What we know to be true is as follows: the bandit confronted the couple in a forest, the samurai is killed and his wife is sexually assaulted. But how that all came about and why is a matter for conjecture, and the variations of the story are what makes this film one of the greats.



The film starts with two men taking shelter from a rainstorm. They are talking but appear very glum. They are joined by a third man who wants to know what ails them, so they begin to tell their stories. The woodcutter (Takashi Shimura) tells of finding some objects of women's clothing on the forest floor which leads him to the body of the dead samurai; he then ran off for the police. The priest relates that the two have just come from the trial of the bandit (Toshiro Mifune), and he tells the stories told by the bandit, the woman victim and, oddly, the dead samurai who relates his tale via a psychic medium brought into the court for that purpose. So we get four stories, four different versions of what happened in the forest. All four are very different and it slowly becomes apparent that each "witness" has adapted and amended their version to suit their own purposes.

Do we ever learn the true version of what happened? Does it really matter? The beauty of this film is in the slow exploration of the various stories which make up this rather bleak tale. A masterpiece. R: 4.6/5.0



### **Roman Holiday** (1953)

Platform: DVD

Genre: Romantic comedy

[This film appears on the list of 1001 Films You Must Watch Before You Die.]

In her first major film role Audrey Hepburn plays Crown Princess Ann (from an unnamed country) who is undertaking a whirlwind goodwill tour of Europe. By the time she gets to Rome she is tired of the whole thing and wants to do something different. So she sneaks out of her country's Ambassador's residence for a night on the town. Unfortunately she has been given a sedative earlier that evening so she falls asleep on a park bench where she is rescued by American journalist Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck). He takes her back to his apartment where she sleeps through to after noon the next day. When Bradley gets to work that morning he finds out that the Princess is reportedly "indisposed" though he recognises her picture in the paper as being of the young girl on his couch. Bradley and his photographer friend Irving Radovich (Eddie

Albert) then concoct a plan to show Ann the sights of Rome so they can write and shoot an exclusive, and lucrative, story about the girl's day.

As expected, things begin to change during that day. Ann gets a haircut and starts to become freer and freer from her royal restrictions as the day progresses. And Bradley starts to see that she is just a girl wanting to have some fun in her life and his thoughts of a lucrative payday slowly recede. There are some problems with the film, especially with the age difference between Peck (playing mid-to-late 30s) and Hepburn (playing 19 or 20), which in this day and age looks a little suspect, and we don't get very many scenes inside Roman buildings (permission problems perhaps?) But all that aside it is still an enjoyable romantic comedy. It also seems odd to see Rome so bereft of tourists. I'm sure this was probably the case in the early 1950s, it just looks deserted.

It is also interesting to note that Dalton Trumbo was one of the film's original screenwriters but at the time of shooting was blacklisted so he was "fronted" by Ian McLellan Hunter. Trumbo's name was finally added back to the film's credits from 2003. R: 3.3/5.0

### ***Ikiru*** (1952)

Platform: Cinema

Genre: Drama

[Japanese with subtitles. This film appears on the list of 1001 Films You Must Watch Before You Die.]

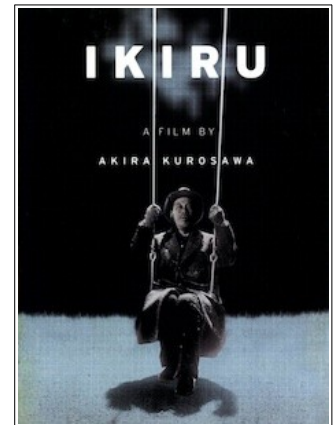
With this tale about an ageing bureaucrat in post-war Japan, Akira Kurosawa produces a complete change of everything: pace, setting, and theme. It sits between two of the director's formidable *jidaigeki* samurai dramas, ***Rashomon*** and ***Seven Samurai*** and it is a major achievement.

Kanji Watanabe (Takashi Shimura) is a career public servant, manager of a team of paper-shufflers, who sort and file and stamp lots of paperwork, but who seem to achieve absolutely nothing. Watanabe has been working in this same department for nearly thirty years without taking any time off. He is widowed and has nothing else in his dull and mindless life except the endless stream of files and forms.

One day he doesn't appear at his desk and we see him at a hospital where he learns he has stomach cancer, though the doctor only tells him that he has an ulcer and that he should eat only food that is easily digestible. Watanabe is completely devastated and doesn't know what to do. He stays away from work, goes out eating and drinking each night. One day he is tracked down by a woman from his office who needs his signature to approve her resignation. He readily supplies that and his conversations with her that day and over the next few days inspire him to re-evaluate his life.

Back at the office he decides to push through the construction of a park and children's playground in a Tokyo suburb. Against the objections of everyone in his department and in all other departments, all the way up to the deputy mayor, he persists.

Cut to six months later and we are at Watanabe's funeral. His brother and sister-in-law, members of other departments and members of his team are assembled to remember the man, and the conversations that follow show Kurosawa's script expertise. The construction of the park is mentioned and the deputy mayor, of course, takes sole responsibility for its success. However, after he leaves, the others discuss Watanabe and what he was up to. Slowly the real truth behind his actions over the past six months come to light and, in a series of flashbacks, attendees at the funeral tell their stories and we finally learn what Watanabe has achieved, and how.



Takashi Shimura's performance here is exemplary. We feel his pain, from his cancer diagnosis and from the realisation that he has achieved nothing in life. And we see that glimmer of hope rise in his eyes as he finds a path forward. A path that leads him to a fitting end to his life.

This film was remade in 2022 as *Living*, with Bill Nighy in the lead role and the screenplay based on Kurosawa's, adapted by Kazuo Ishiguro. R: 4.4/5.0

### **Casino Royale** (2006)

Platform: Amazon Prime

Genre: Action Spy

[This film is part of the James Bond franchise.]

The owners of the James Bond franchise decided to re-boot the series with this film in 2006, based on the first Bond novel by Ian Fleming, featuring Daniel Craig as James Bond. It was a series of good choices. The story is fine and Craig is — and here I'm going to get in a lot of trouble — the best actor to take the role so far. He's got the physique, the bearing, the eyes and enough of that supercilious English attitude that the part needs. He's just better than all the rest (okay, Connery runs him a close second but...). And it's good to see Judi Dench back as M.



The film starts with a decent chase sequence in a small African country with Bond pursuing a potential bomb-maker across a city and into another country's embassy. All very naughty of course. There's lots of shooting, jumping, running, crashing of large industrial equipment into half finished buildings, and fight sequences on top of cranes. Par for the course, but well-handled. Bond gets into trouble for the embassy fracas, and is sent on holiday, which he uses to pursue a clue he found among the bomb-maker's effects.

You get the feeling that the bulk of this film was used as set-up for the main mid-film sequence involving a high-stakes poker game. That's okay; we have to look on this film as an "origin story" and accept all the little story and plot quirks along the way as they are there to "re-build" the character of Bond: cars, girls, guns and martinis.

The weirdest thing about the film is the level of the technology on display. Mobile (cell) phones are in use though they seem to be on the cusp of the smart-phones introduced around 2007. So it actually becomes an interesting historical film in tech terms. Were they really so primitive?



I liked this. It is well put together and as long as you accept it for what it's attempting to do you should enjoy it. R: 4.0/5.0

### **Greyhound** (2020)

Platform: Apple TV+

Genre: War

The film is based on the C. S. Forester novel *The Good Shepherd*, which tells the story of US Navy Commander Ernie Krause (Tom Hanks) on his first assignment commanding a US destroyer group of four which is escorting a fleet of 37 merchant and troop ships sailing between the US and the UK in February 1942. In order to make the crossing the fleet must cross the notorious North

Atlantic which, apart from the bad weather, is heavily patrolled by German U-Boats which are wrecking havoc on such convoys. Specifically they have to cross the “Black Pit”, an area of ocean that is outside air cover from either side of the crossing. That section takes five long days.

This is a fast-paced action film that seems to put you right into the midst of the battle between the destroyers and the submarines, concentrating, for the most part, on Krause and his ship, **Greyhound**. Hanks, who wrote the screenplay, is the centre of attention but changed the relationship between Krause and his wife from one of divorce to deep affection and love. You have to wonder if this is Hanks trying to protect his reputation, or maybe he just didn’t feel comfortable adding another level of internal strife and conflict to his character’s story arc. Anyway, Hanks plays Hanks, as he does so well, and if you are after a film that continues his journey to becoming America’s “Dad” and “stable base” then you won’t be disappointed in this one.

Oddly enough the film was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Sound. The sound might have been okay but the music was way too loud in some places, so loud it drowned out the dialogue for me in some very tense and hectic scenes when the dialogue was really all that was needed. The stress in the men’s voices was enough to let you know what was going on. R: 3.3/5.0

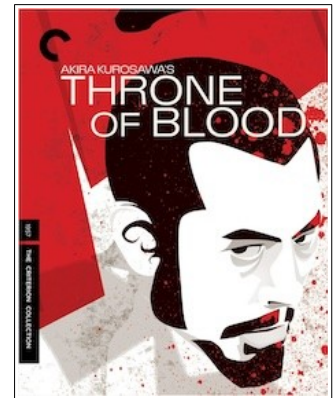
### **Throne of Blood** (1957)

Platform: Cinema

Genre: Drama

[Japanese with subtitles. This film appears on the list of 1001 Films You Must Watch Before You Die.]

In feudal Japan Generals Miki (Minoru Chiaki) and Washizu (Toshiro Mifune) have achieved a great victory for their feudal lord Tsuzuki, and are summoned to be rewarded at the Spider’s Web Castle. While travelling through the Spider’s Web Forest they become lost and finally stumble on a small hut in which a spirit begins to foretell their future. Miki will become Commander of the Lord’s First Fortress, and Washizu will become Lord of the Northern Garrison, effectively second-in-command to the feudal lord himself. According to the spirit both of these will happen later that day, and sometime in the future Miki’s son will become the feudal lord. Neither Miki nor Washizu think much of these prophecies but when both are promoted as predicted that same day Washizu’s wife begins to manipulate her husband into fulfilling the second part of the prophesy by firstly killing Tsuzuki.



If all of this plot sounds familiar it’s because this is Kurosawa’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s play **Macbeth**. He had planned on making this version in the 1940s but was put off by the Orson Welles adaptation released in 1948.

There are changes from the original play of course, mainly around Washizu’s death scene and it is missing some of the long soliloquies that allow the viewer to track his slow psychological change from loyal vassal to murderer and usurper. I suspect this was due to the length of the film (105 minutes) rather than anything else.

Mifune is wonderful again in the lead role showing a lot more nuance to his performance that he displayed in either **Rashomon** or **Seven Samurai**. And again Kurosawa utilises his regular ensemble of actors with Takashi Shimura and others putting in appearances. It’s just another masterpiece. R: 4.2/5.0

### PERRYSCOPE Responses

#### Perryscope 47:

**Graham Peters:** “Your mention of Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* reminds me that tastes in literature have changed dramatically over time. I am not sure it is kind to view Shute from the perspective of a creative writer. Rather, I am amazed that a successful engineer, and ruthless businessman, of Shute's calibre had the creativity to write at all. The premise of his stories is creative, but the dialogue and human interactions are pretty wooden, reflecting a ‘very engineer’ perspective.”

[**PM:** I can see that it is rather unkind to consider Shute a “creative writer” but he does set himself up as such. The basic premise for *On the Beach* is a good one, I just don't think he extended himself overly in writing the characters. And I can only go with the impact a novel has on me, or not, and can't read too much into the author's intentions. They can be so very off the mark.]



“Nevil Shute Norway was the founder of Airspeed, which developed the Oxford, a highly successful plane for its time, but were dependent on Wolseley engines. Ultimately, Airspeed was hobbled after Lord Nuffield, refused to do business with the Air Ministry, which wished to impose Chartered Accountants upon his business with an Intention To Proceed for development of a new and very advanced engine. Nuffield told Shute ‘I sent that I.T.P. thing back to them, and I told them they could put it where the monkey put the nuts!’

“Probably his best book is his partial autobiography *Slide Rule* which oddly does not appear in many listings of his work. It opens with him telling of a 1953 heart attack, suffered whilst driving on the Mornington Peninsula (to return an unwelcome kitten gifted to his children). That presaged his own ultimate death aged only 60, from a heart attack in 1960. It is (mostly) a personal retelling of his experience in the aviation industry between the two wars. He planned a subsequent work *Set Square* which was to continue where *Slide Rule* left off. There are also fragments of his life experience scattered through other works including *Trustee from the Toolroom*.

“Shute had a real downer on Britain, post WW2 and relocated to the Mornington Peninsula. His anti-socialist sentiments pepper several works, most obviously *In the Wet*, which is worth a read, but dates badly. It is set in, I think, 1983, and has the oddity of featuring Robert Menzies and Arthur Calwell as older statesmen of Australian politics.”

[**PM:** Menzies would have been 88 or 89 if he'd lived till 1983 (he died in 1978) and Calwell would have been 87 (he died in 1973). I would have hoped that both would have hung up the boots by that time. Having octogenarian politicians in Parliament would do none of us any good. As you say, an “oddy”.]

“Worth a little more reading.”

[**PM:** I will get to a few more of Shute's over time.]

**Mark Olson:** “I'm impressed with the distance you travelled and the number of places you visited in Scotland. Wow. We did two short (by your standards) trips around the country, but never managed to get to the western isles at all. I can't imagine a 6-week trip, as I'm getting very ready to go home by week 3.”

[**PM:** I am now moving very much in that direction.]

“I recall well the one-lane Scottish roads and the pleasures of navigating them, especially the dance when you meet oncoming traffic. I was looking for exotic and I got it there. I agree that it’s very tiring — and remember, that we’re driving on the wrong side of the road, which add to the tension. I’ve decided that I won’t be doing any more long drives in drive-on-the-left locales — just too much effort — though I’ll probably be OK in drive-on-the-right places with sane traffic/drivers. OTOH, I don’t know how else to see places.”

“Apropos of your review of *On the Beach*, the late John Douglas convinced me to read Neville Shute and I have not been disappointed. I particularly liked *The Trustee from the Toolroom* and *Round the Bend*.”

[**PM:** If you aim to get of the “beaten track” then driving a car is probably the best option. As I’ve noted I probably will be driving in foreign locales again at some point, I just have to temper my ambitions.]

**Bernadette Gooden:** “Glad to see you reading one of my favourite Aussie writers.

“If the world was slowly ending and you could do nothing about it I wonder how most people would react. Would they spend their last weeks in paroxysms of rage and rebellion to no avail or would you quietly pursue your life, your pleasures and your humanity to the end?”

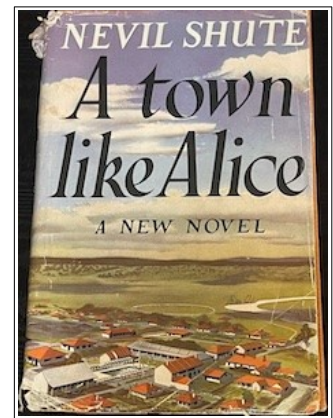
“Something that is just as relevant now as it was during the Cold War.”

[**PM:** I am sure that the bulk of people would do just that, but I’m also sure that one or two would go off the rails. Shute doesn’t give any time to any of them, not even mild anger.]

“Can I highly recommend *A Town Like Alice*? Another book where humanity wins against inhumanity. Both are books written in another era when the Second World War was a lived and survived reality.”

[**PM:** Yes, that is certainly on my list of books to read.]

**Mark Nelson:** “Lovely cover photograph of your doppelganger and yourself. Though you appear to be a little undressed.



“I’ve always enjoyed travelling by ferry. Not that I’ve done it that often. Luckily I’ve never been on a ferry that’s been in a big swell. The first ferry trip I remember was in 1986, from Liverpool to Belfast; where I was heading for a house con. That’s a trip that doesn’t cross international borders. There’s a few places on the coast where you can catch a ferry from England to the continent. I wonder if there’s any such ferries from Scotland?”

[**PM:** It looks like the nearest ferries to Europe leave from Newcastle, where you’d catch a ferry across to the Netherlands.]

“There’s only been one time when I’ve been overseas and felt poor. That was in 2001 when I travelled via San Francisco for work. At the time the Australian dollar was buying 50 American cents. Everywhere seemed expensive, even places in China Town. I only remember eating in China Town.”

[**PM:** I've been in the US when the Aussie dollar was sitting at less than \$US0.50 and that felt a bit difficult. I didn't want to give the impression here that I was feeling poor, just that everything seemed very expensive. I see a subtle difference there.]

"I've never tried a deep-fried Mars Bar, though it's well known as a Scottish delicacy. There is a stereotype of Scottish cooking that involves deep frying any and everything. If I were travelling to Scotland I'd like to make a bee-line for Islay. In our family my wife's the driver, so I wouldn't be faced with the problem that you had. OTOH, I would be faced with the problem of persuading her that we should go to Islay so that I could spend my time visiting distilleries. And there's a limit on how many bottles you can bring back with you to Australia."

[**PM:** I believe you are allowed to bring 2.5 litres back into Australia from overseas. Which basically translates to 3 bottles of wine (at 750ml a bottle) or 3 of spirits (at 700ml each.) So you have to be rather picky.]

"Returning to the theme of eating in Scotland. The last time we went to the UK (2014) we had a strange experience in Edinburgh. We arrived shortly after the restaurant had opened, within 15 minutes. I ordered an entree from the specials menu. Not available. My wife ordered a main from the specials menu. The same story. How do you run out of specials within 15 minutes of opening? I'd ordered mussels in a tomato sauce as a replacement entree. It was nice. But it had been plonked down into the plate with no attempt at removing the splashes of tomato that were all around the bowl. Presentation? Mark that at 0/5. All very strange. I was going to write this up on trip advisor, but didn't.

"Talk of Scottish whisky brings to my mind my first ever conference. This was the Fire Chemistry Discussion Group (10th Meeting), held at the University of Edinburgh from 29-30 March 1994. As it was my first conference it was also my first experience of an after-dinner speaker. Truth be told, there have not been many subsequent after-dinner speakers. I can only recall two and they were both very disappointing. (I've made it a point that for any conference that I've organised not to have an after-dinner speaker.)

"But that first after-dinner speaker. That was a delight. Some guy from the Scottish whisky industry who talked about the history of Scottish whisky. At regular points he would throw his arms up in the air and say 'but you can't appreciate this point without tasting the whisky'. That was the cue for his lovely assistants, two fine Scottish lasses, to walk around the tables pouring a sample of the particular whisky under consideration. Not a small tasting sample either. This happened about seven or eight times during the talk. Finishing his talk, he left all the half-drunk bottles for the conference delegates to polish off. He also took his two assistants with him. But he left the bottles. (I was more interested in the latter.) Once the bottles were drained, the few remaining delegates trotted along to a local pub where we had one more whisky before returning to our University of Edinburgh digs. I slept very soundly that night, not getting up in time for the walk to the top of Arthur's seat.

"It was I suppose inevitable that every other after-dinner speaker would pale into insignificance when compared to this one.

"How did you pass your time on your flights to England and back? I ask, because you mentioned that you only 'read seven books in a two-month period'. When I was single I looked forward to long haul flights as a way of reading a large number of pages. Now that we have a two-year old there's very little opportunity for reading on a flight, even at home the opportunities are greatly reduced."



[**PM:** Generally I try sleep as much as I can, to watch a movie or two, and read a book. I did all of those things and finished most of the novel I started on the flight over. I just didn't have the desire to read any more than that. Once the holiday started I was into the Worldcon and then driving for much of the rest of it. A combination of lack of time and exhaustion meant I didn't read as much as I thought I might.]

“The decrease in the opportunities for reading on long haul flights started after marriage, but before becoming parents my wife would interrupt my reading to inform me that I needed to put my book down and watch what she was watching on the in-flight entertainment system. On one occasion what she wanted me to watch was **Good Omens**. So that's one positive outcome of travelling with your spouse.

“Bruce's list of magazines that he has read, off and on, was interesting reading, particularly his comments about where he bought them from. This reminded me that when I lived in Auckland (Nov 1997 — July 1998) there was a shop on Queen Street which only stocked magazines and foreign newspapers. They had a wide range of publications that I imagine would have been very difficult to source elsewhere in New Zealand. Has there ever been an equivalent shop in Melbourne or Sydney? On subsequent trips to Auckland the magazine shop was still going. I've not been back since before COVID, so no idea if it has survived into the present.”

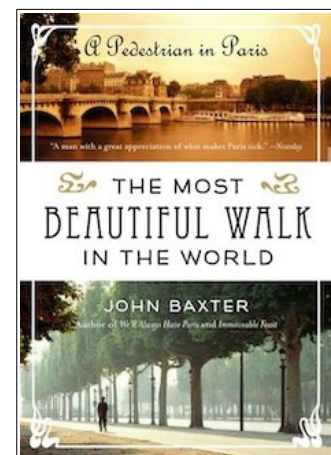
[**PM:** There was McGill's Newsagency on Elizabeth Street for a long time and I seem to recall another one on Elizabeth Street after McGill's had closed down. But I'm not the one to ask.]

“I hadn't heard that the cross-channel hovercraft has 'long since been retired from service'. Joining Concorde as another memory of my childhood that has vanished. I travelled on neither, but they both looked a cool way to travel in the 1970s. (The nearest I will get to flying them now is to build a lego set.) In 2024 I think that travelling by ferry is a cool way to travel. Is this a regression?”

[**PM:** I'm very pleased to be travelling by ferry rather than hovercraft. Once on the latter was enough.]

**Leigh Edmonds:** “It is tiring just looking at your map of where you went on your Scottish adventures in **Perryscope 47**. It looks like one of those 'once in a lifetime' experiences and will probably be better to look back upon than to have driven. Since, as you say, a lot of what you experienced could only be seen by car there was no other option. Even so, it makes the idea of spending a week or two on a cruise liner instead sound rather attractive.

“Thanks for all the reviews. Again you make me feel rather uncultured since the only book I've read in the past month — and I'm only half way through it — is John Baxter's **The Most Beautiful Walk in the World**. I have absorbed a bit more in the way of audio books and have only just emerged from the 1960s after listening to **The Einstein Intersection** (somebody will have to explain to me what the title had to do with the story itself). I'm gradually moving into the current century by starting on the Kim Stanley Robinson **Mars** novels so I may arrive in 2025 by about 2030.



“That's a lot of letter writing from the Archbishop!”

[**PM:** For those not aware of this, Leigh is referring to Bruce Gillespie. I'm not sure who first bestowed this nickname on Bruce though I think it happened in the pages of Nic Farey's fanzine **This Here...** It seems entirely appropriate.]

"I haven't seen the Brannagh version of *Henry V* but have seen the Olivier version a couple of times, once at school in the early 1960s when the entire school was herded into the hall to see it. I know what you mean about mannered and idealized but I expect that is what the British public wanted to see when the film was released in 1944 or 1945. By then they would have had more than enough of gritty mud, blood and guts in their every day lives. So I suppose you could say that the Olivier film is a product of its times. Thinking about the two movie versions makes me wonder what the play would appear like on the stage and perhaps any of your readers who have seen it in that format might like to inform us."

[**PM:** That argument makes some sense to me. And I should always think of when a film was made to fully understand it.]

"Here's an opportunity for me to disagree with Bruce, again. How dare he inform me that I can only listen to music through a decent amplifier and speakers. This when I'm listening to a Shostakovich string quartet on my beautiful Sony noise-cancelling headphones in the train coming back from Melbourne. As for the amplifier, it happens to be my mobile phone playing a.mp3 file. It might be slightly better if it was a wav file but what I have is far superior to having to listening to a carriage load of noisy people on a noisy train. Of course that's not accurate these days when at least half the people on the train are being entertained by their phones one way or another.

"I'm with Joseph when it comes to organizing travel photographs. It's best done on the day or it might never been done at all. I've recently been trying to make sense of the hundreds of photos Valma and I took on our travels, made more complex because we both had cameras on some trips. In the end I gave up and just scanned the lot to be sorted and organized in my dotage.

"David [[Grigg]] and I were talking yesterday about travel within Australia since traveling overseas is becoming more gruelling and unpleasant. There is lots of good stuff to see here but there is also a lot of not so interesting stuff to see in getting to the interesting places. Going by train would be good but there are not many good train services, though I would recommend the Indian-Pacific, if you can afford it. The trouble with flying is that you end up seeing only the edited highlights of the country. This leaves us with cars as the best way to get around to see the country and that takes a lot of time and energy. Perhaps not as much as being stuck on a single lane road in Scotland behind a heard of sheep (though it is just as possible to be stuck behind a mob of sheep on the Newel Highway, for example). And then there's the endless frustration of being stuck on the Brand Highway in Western Australia behind a convoy of grey nomads with their huge caravans tootling along at 70 with not a passing lane in sight and road trains coming in the opposite direction. Me, I'm waiting until virtual reality makes it possible to go anywhere without leaving my lounge chair. Maybe not as authentic, but it's the only way I'm going to see Venice or the Grand Canyon, that's for sure."

[**PM:** Robyn and I are talking about train and road travel for sometime in the future. We will do both, just not so long driving again. We have travelled from Adelaide to Darwin on the Ghan, and have every intention of taking the other two big Australian train journeys. It's just a matter of when.]

**I also heard from: Nick Farey; Cath Ortlieb; Gary Mason; Julian Warner; Jerry Kaufman;** (with news of a new film adaptation of Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*); **Martin Field;** thank you one and all. ■