



Perryscope 38

PERRYSCOPE 38, November 2023, is an issue of a personalzine published mostly monthly by **Perry Middlemiss**, 32 Elphin Grove, Hawthorn, Victoria, AUSTRALIA 3122. E: perry@middlemiss.org
Available for the usual or download at 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 photo by Robyn Mills, Ballarat, August 2023.

INTRODUCTION

We're back from our tour of India (details elsewhere in this issue) and slowly getting back into the "real" world of sleeping in our own beds and not having to re-pack every second day. And that looks like it for the major travels for some time.

I'll be attending the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow next year and it's then our aim to drive around Scotland in a clockwise direction getting to as many of the island groups as we can. That will, hopefully, include the Inner and Outer Hebrides, the Orkneys and Shetland. I say "hopefully" as it all depends on the cost, availability of accommodation and the weather. The last of these we can do nothing about but keep our fingers crossed. As we'll be travelling in August and early September I'm expecting the weather will be reasonably kind to us but we have to be flexible enough to make other plans if needs be. Accommodation might also be an issue as Robyn tells me that Glasgow appears to be filling up fast and some of the smaller island communities don't have a lot by way of hotels or short-term rentals that cater for the older traveller who is usually in desperate need of washing facilities. Plan and book early is the only way. So that will be taking up a fair amount of our time over the next month or so. We are hoping to throw in a week in London at the end of our time in the UK in order to get to some of our old haunts from our time there in the early 90s, and to catch up with any friends who didn't, or couldn't get to Glasgow. As things stand it appears that we might have our two children with us in London – our daughter will be coming with us around Scotland and our son will be starting a month or so in Europe with three or four days in London at the same time as we'll be there. It's going to be odd travelling with them again.

Other than that we've only got a few small getaways contemplated for either Victoria or South Australia over the next 12 months. The travelling dollar can only go so far and a second long holiday, either here in Australia or anywhere overseas, is rather out of the question until we can get the travel funds back into something approaching reasonable shape. There's always something to look forward to.

You will, hopefully, notice that I have a new contributor this month: Martin Field. If you've been reading the letter columns of this fanzine over the past few years you will have seen Martin's name pop up from time to time. I had rather hoped that he might have been able to have something like this piece in last month's issue, sort of making it an all-music theme, but I had forgotten that Martin and his partner Lucy were cruising around the Pacific and I wrote to him way too late. Anyway, better late than never, and I hope I can persuade Martin to dig a little deeper into his memory archives in the months ahead.

WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING IN MY LIFE - A Trip to India : Initial Thoughts

Two major overseas trips in a year may seem a little excessive but I can plead special circumstances here. As I mentioned back in **Perryscope 33**, in my piece about travelling to Morocco, Robyn and I had purchased a long tour with the Australian company TripaDeal back in March 2019, for a departure date of October 2020. That original plan, of course, fell into the COVID black hole, and we were left with having to use our travel credit from that purchase on tours with the same company. Morocco took up about 2/3 of the credit so we decided to use up the rest by touring India. Our credits didn't quite cover our new plans but the extra wasn't that much.

1. Culture Shock

Again the major question we've been hearing is "Why India?" And I have to again answer, "Why not?" It's a vast country, now the most populous in the world with 1.4 billion people and counting, it has an old complex culture and we knew of a number of sites we wanted to visit. It's also one of those countries that we feel we have to get to before we get too old to handle the travel distances and culture shock.

And shock there was, though not as bad as I had originally thought it might be.



Our flight over to Delhi via Singapore was much better than our flight to Morocco earlier in the year: shorter – only about 20 hours compared to 38; and we didn't suffer any delays beyond twenty minutes or so at the start when one of the passengers was a "no-show" even

though their bags had been loaded. We were a bit worried that landing in Delhi at 5am local time was going to cause us a problem at the hotel but they allowed us to check-in early, which we put down to the tour company providing them with so much business.

The immediate shock you get in Delhi is with the amount of rubbish on the streets. India seems to have a love-affair with single-use plastic, which is then discarded – we saw a lot of people just throwing litter down on the ground without making any attempt at finding a rubbish bin. Not that we saw a lot of them either.

The other problem, mainly with Delhi, is the volume of traffic. It reminded me of Saigon or Hanoi, with the numbers of cars and scooters reversed and the whole lot multiplied by about three, or maybe five, depending on the level of chaos. I was glad I wasn't driving. Lane lines were painted on the road but these were really only of an aspirational nature. Why have three cars across the width of a road when five will fit?

But the most astounding thing was the presence of cows on the roads of suburban Delhi. I thought they would be around out in the countryside but hadn't expected to see so many in the main city wandering idly across multiple lanes of traffic, and stopping wherever they felt like. Reverence is one thing but this seemed to be pushing things a bit. We asked our tour guide about them and were told that the local farmers just let the cows roam freely between milking times. The cows, naturally, as cows do, found their own way home when required. But the question remained: so why are there so many farmers living so close to or even within such a major city? That one went unanswered.

2. The Tour

The initial 8-day tour (see map on the previous page) was intended to cover India's "Golden Triangle" of Delhi, Jaipur and Agra. There were 13 people on the tour, 14 if you add in the guide, 16 if you add in the driver and tour assistant. As we figured out from our Moroccan trip earlier in the year, they were all Australians, and all of them had travelled overseas before. Luckily enough, this time we didn't have that one person who fits the role of "tour complainer". Some things didn't work out for some people but overall everyone seemed to get along with each other and the travelling.



After the initial eight days, the tour had offered a two day extension to cover Varanasi on the Ganges River (see map on previous page again). We had been advised by friends not to miss this and we had no intention of doing so. Only five of the original 13 carried on, which seemed a little strange. We started to get the impression that a number of the others would

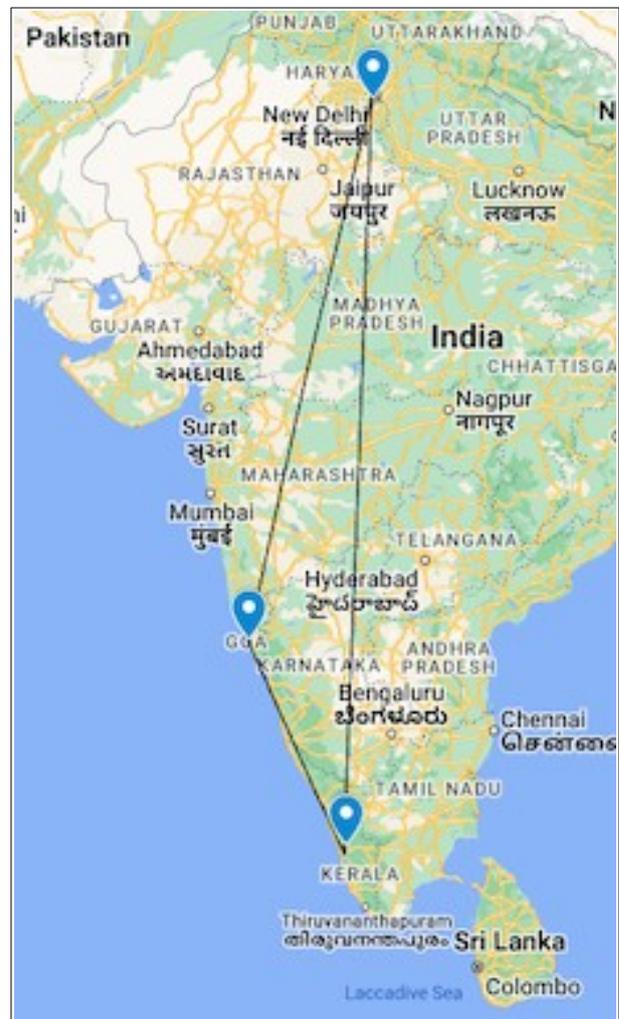
really have liked to continue on but obviously had not done the right research before booking.

The whole thing was rather hectic: when you were touring around the sights with a tour guide in a bus you are kept going from early in the morning until dark. And when you finish up for the day, or if you had a free period on one day, then it all came to a screaming halt. This was all to be expected, it just came as something of a contrast. For example, we took most of a day to get from Delhi to Varanasi (traffic, security requirements, the flight, more traffic, etc), and then a day touring in Varanasi (up at 4:00am for a 5:00am pickup and trip to the Ganges, back to the hotel by about 9am for breakfast and a rest, out again at 12noon and on the go until about 7pm), and the next day we had to laze around the hotel until lunchtime before we could head to the airport for a later afternoon flight back to Delhi. It was either feast or famine.

3. Our extensions

Ten days in a country the size of India never seemed long enough for us. We had always wanted to go to Goa (we could get into a resort there using our time-share and it struck us as a bit of a mixture of cultures that would be interesting to explore), and we had long had a desire to get to Darjeeling. The problem was: how do we fit Darjeeling, in the north-east of the country, with Goa, in the middle-west? It could be done but it would require us to take a number of flights backwards and forwards through Delhi and the connections just seemed a little disjointed. Goa was a lock, so we started to look for somewhere else to spend some time. And then we started to read, hear and see pieces about the state of Kerala at the bottom south-west of the country. Everything about the place appeared interesting: spice farms, waterways, tea-plantations. It looked the business, and the more we researched the more we realised we would be able to get from Kerala to Goa by train and then fly back to Delhi in time to make our flights home. While it might not be an exact substitute for the tea in Darjeeling, Kerala offered us enough to make the journey worthwhile.

And we are certainly glad we did. The mountains, the greenery, the vastly reduced traffic and pollution and rubbish, made the five days we spent in Kerala a very welcome contrast from the dusty and noisy mega-cities of India's north. I've been describing Kerala



to people as being the Australian equivalent of Cairns or Townsville, while the northern plateau of India is like to semi-desert of Victoria or South Australia.

4. The highlights

In no particular order:

- i. the Taj Mahal – rather an easy selection as it's one of the wonders of the architectural world: the crowds were annoying; the exterior was simply spectacular; the interior mausoleum was much smaller than I expected
- ii. the night on the houseboat on the Kerala backwaters: a peaceful glide along the canals; wonderful grilled river fish for lunch; an unexpected beer for dinner; although I would have preferred a better mooring spot overnight rather than being wedged between a half-built boat and the canal bank
- iii. floating down the River Ganges in Varanasi and witnessing the funeral pyres on the riverbank
- iv. the tea plantations around the hill stations of Kerala
- v. the train from Kochin to Goa, all seventeen hours of it
- vi. the people: we never felt unsafe and were treated with friendly politeness everywhere

5. The lowlights

Again, in no particular order:

- i. the Indian train system – it may seem odd to have this as both a highlight and a lowlight, but such is life: the train was good, the delays of 5 hours were not
- ii. the rubbish everywhere
- iii. the air pollution in Delhi, thick enough to chew on
- iv. Delhi traffic
- v. stopping at so many retail outlets while on tour

6. Conclusion

The strength of a country's attraction lies in whether or not you would return after visiting. In this case I'd definitely say "yes". I wouldn't return to where we'd already been but there are many other places in this vast country, and nearby destinations, that certainly have an appeal. It's just a matter of trying to fit it in.

Cover notes: In the middle of this year Robyn and I wandered up to the Victorian rural city of Ballarat to visit the touring pre-Raphaelite exhibition, catching it on its last day. The exhibition only took us a couple of hours so we grabbed a spot of lunch and had a drive around the city ending up at the Kilderkin Distillery. I had always wanted to visit there as they produced an Australian spirit which they had named "Larrikin Gin". Here I am in their tasting room contemplating their tasting paddle. It made an impression and I bought a couple of bottles. As you do.

WANDERINGS AND READINGS – An Occasional Column by Julian Warner

On Pen-Knives

I'm not obsessive about pen-knives but I have more than necessary. I am definitely not a collector of pen-knives. Some would have seen an image on Facebook which I filched from (I think) a posting by Winestate Magazine. It shows a standard Swiss Army knife beside a 'French Army Knife' which has no blades but multiple corkscrews. Funny idea but only the French would find much use for a corkscrew these days.

I bought a small Swiss Army knife recently — just a little blade, a nail-file cum screwdriver, and a pair of scissors. Over the many years of using various knives, I've found that a simple blade — usually for opening packages — and a pair of scissors are the items I have used the most. There are jobs that a pair of scissors can do easily where a single blade has trouble. I've never had to remove thorns from lion's paws or stones from horses' hooves, so I don't need devices to do that.

The new Swiss Army knife also has a plastic toothpick (surprisingly useful) and a largely ineffectual tiny pair of tweezers.

I had an old (K-mart? Target?) multi-purpose knife which cost less than \$5 and which supposedly did a lot of things but with inferior quality metal. That can go to the op-shop or similar.

Perry was impressed with the micro-Leatherman tool which I picked up from Tandy in the US. It has that general 'folding pair of pliers' look common to the genre but the 'pliers' are really for wire-stripping and are not good as a pair of scissors. Otherwise it has a tiny panoply of 'useful' doodads, most of which I haven't used.



Then there's the big boy, the Gerber Suspension NXT multi-tool. It's a full-sized folding set of pliers which really works as pliers with assorted blades and a decent pair of scissors. It's very effective but it's also a bit bulky for being in the pocket of one's evening wear — or any pocket really.

When I was young I used to carry around a G9 lock-knife which was also bulky and would wear a hole in the back pocket of my jeans. No longer.

Then there's the ultra-sharp knives in my desk drawer and the laundry and the shed. And the Stanley knife (box-cutter, if you're from the US). And so on.

When I bought the Swiss Army knife I also bought a LedLenser pen torch. There's quite a few torches around the house. But that's not obsessive either.

TALES FROM SWINGING LONDON by Martin Field

As a young Australian I ended up living in London from 1966 to 1969. Much of that time I spent as a road manager for The Mike Cotton Sound – the hardest working soul band in the country. That made me the hardest working roadie, Here are a few snippets from those days. I wish I had kept a diary, but I didn't. My memory is good though.

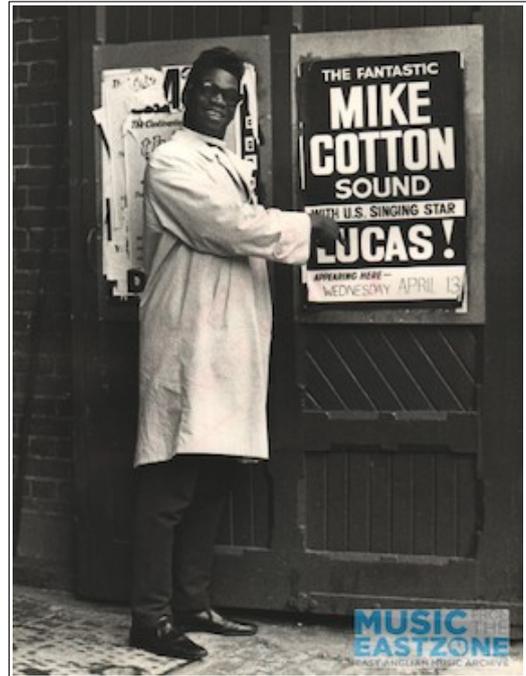
Aretha Concert

On May 11, 1968, Aretha Franklin performed the second of only two sold-out English concerts at the Hammersmith Odeon (now the Apollo). The first was at the Finsbury Park Astoria. The band I roadied for, Lucas and the Mike Cotton Sound, was her support act for both concerts. Aretha brought with her a sensational 10 piece backing band and a trio of female backing singers. I recall that her red-hot bass player used a fretless Ampeg.

At the Odeon, the stars were all mingling backstage to meet her and to watch the show from the wings. Among them Lou Rawls, Dusty Springfield, Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull, Tom Jones et al. I was introduced to Jagger and Faithfull by my friend Jim Rodford, the bassist for Mike Cotton's band. (Later The Kinks and The Zombies).

The concert was explosive and finished with a seemingly endless version of R-E-S-P-E-C-T, where Aretha was joined onstage by Lou Rawls, Tom Jones and Dusty Springfield.

I managed to get an Australian amateur photographer friend backstage (claiming he worked for a well-known Oztraylian magazine) and helped him set up a few brief shots of Aretha and her backing trio. I don't know what became of him, or the photos.



Gene Pitney



During my time The Mike Cotton Sound did two-month long tours of the UK backing Gene Pitney. On different tours Gene's support bands included chart toppers such as Status Quo, Joe Cocker and the Grease Band, The Iveys (later Badfinger) etc. On one Pitney tour (February 1969) Joe Cocker and the band were all stoned and lying on their backs on stage when the curtain went up; much to the

displeasure of the tour manager. Strangely, on the tour Joe never sang his current big hit, "With a Little Help from my Friends". He closed the set with either "Dear Landlord" or "Hitchcock Railway".

Rod Argent (The Zombies, Argent) was on keyboards for the Mike Cotton Sound on that tour. His band The Zombies had broken up late 1967. During the tour he had a telegram from Bill Graham of Fillmore East. It read, "Zombies' Time of the Season, number one on US charts. Re-unite band, play Fillmore? Name price." Rod bought champagne for the whole tour group. Cocker went into the dressing room that night, and sang "Time of the Season" to Rod, unaccompanied. As it turned out Rod didn't re-unite The Zombies until around 2000. And The Zombies didn't play at the Fillmore until 2015. They are still touring.

Beatles' White Album

Our head office was the Cana Variety Agency in Mayfair, owned by Canadian Jack Fallon. Jack was a multi-instrumentalist and came in one day and said he'd been doing some work for the Beatles. Eyebrows were raised until Jack produced a cheque for 27 pounds. "Three sessions at Abbey Road, at 9 pounds a session," he said. You can hear him playing fiddle on Ringo's song "Don't Pass Me By", on *The Beatles (White Album)*.

Then, in late 1968 Paul McCartney hired the Mike Cotton Sound as session band for Mary Hopkin's debut LP *Post Card*. We spent three weeks at Abbey Road studios during the production, and post-production at De Lane Lea Studios.

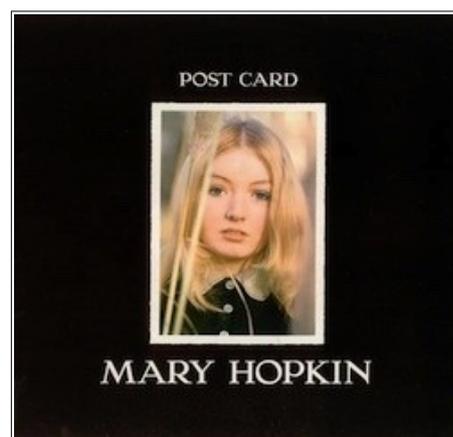
Linda Eastman (later Linda McCartney) attended many of the sessions photographing Hopkins and the studio. People such as Lulu, George Harrison would wander through and say hello.

It was a roadie's holiday — once I'd set up the gear all I had to do was hang around and make sure the band's equipment worked. And sit drinking JW Black Label by the mixing console.

McCartney was hands on. For example, although left-handed, he would demonstrate guitar and bass lines on right-handed instruments. I recall that once bass player Jim Rodford had recorded the bass track for one song McCartney had him double track the same notes for the final take.

Session bands don't often get credits on LP covers but the Mike Cotton Sound did on this one. We each received a copy when it was released.

At a party back in Australia someone used my copy as a potato salad plate – that was the end of that.



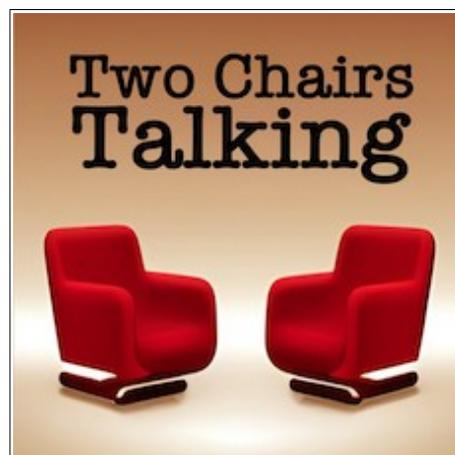
WHAT I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT LATELY

Podcasting – TWO CHAIRS TALKING, co-hosted with David Grigg

Notes from this month's podcasts

Episode 97: (10 October 2023) *Murder, magic and mutiny*

David and I discuss recent awards winners and my time as Fan GoH at the Australian Natcon before I throw a curly one at him about possible AI translations of non-English classics. We then go on to discuss a mixture of things: I talk about the new SA Cosby novel, about an Australian Vietnam War classic and the TV series ONLY MURDERS IN THE BUILDING; David discusses AMONG OTHERS by Jo Walton, an Australian fantasy novel and an intriguing non-fiction narrative by David Grann.



<https://twochairs.website/2023-09-19-1839>

You can access the current, and all past podcast episodes at twochairs.website, or you can subscribe through any podcast subscription service.

WHAT I'VE BEEN READING LATELY

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

Abbr – Aust; Australian; Edgar: Edgar Award for Best Novel; Gdn: Guardian 1000 Best Novels; Nvla: novella; Trans: translated

October 2023 books

Title	Author	Genre	Date	F	R	Pub Date	Notes
<i>So You Don't Get Lost in the Neighborhood</i>	Patrick Modiano (trans: Euan Cameron)	Literary	3 Oct		3.8	2014	Trans (French)
<i>Last Seen Wearing</i>	Colin Dexter	Crime	16 Oct	e	3.6	1976	Gdn
<i>Ogres</i>	Adrian Tchaikovsky	Fantasy	18 Oct	e	3.4	2022	Nvla
<i>Beast In View</i>	Margaret Millar	Crime	20 Oct	e	4.0	1955	Edgar
<i>The True Story of Spit MacPhee</i>	James Aldridge	Lit	23 Oct	e	4.3	1986	Aust
<i>The Mysterious Affair at Styles</i>	Agatha Christie	Crime	25 Oct	e	3.2	1920	Gdn
<i>The Grey King</i>	Susan Cooper	YA	27 Oct	e	4.4	1975	

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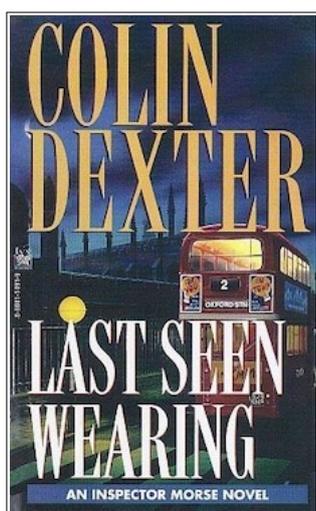
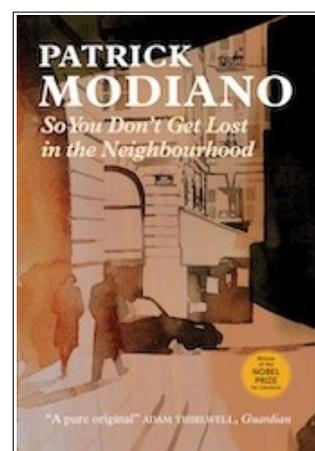
<i>Second Foundation</i>	Isaac Asimov	SF	30 Oct	e	3.0	1952	
<i>The Franchise Affair</i>	Josephine Tey	Crime	30 Oct	e	3.7	1948	

Books read in the period: 9
 Yearly total to end of period: 76

Oddly enough I was able to get a fair bit of reading done while on tour in India. I guess I can put that down to long stretches on the bus where the countryside all starts to look the same and you need some form of distraction, and periods in the evenings when the only thing on TV was the World Cup cricket with Hindi commentary.

Notes:

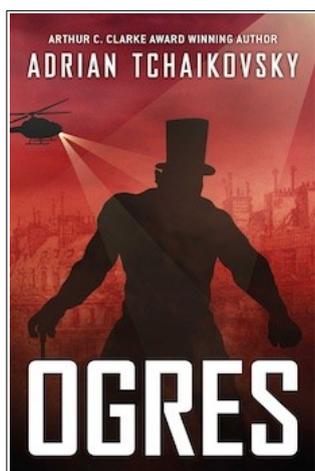
So You Don't Get Lost in the Neighborhood (2014) – This short novel by the Nobel Laureate was published in the year he won the Prize, and reads rather like a dry-run for his later book ***Invisible Ink*** (see review in **Perryscope 32**). Here an ageing isolated writer, Jean Daragane, receives a call from a man who claims to have found his address book. There is a name in the book that the man wants to investigate, but Daragane has no memory of the person. He becomes intrigued by the mystery – why did he use that name in his first novel? Why has he forgotten everything about that book? – and slowly things start to be revealed as Daragane walks through his old neighborhoods and his memory slowly returns. The art of memory, its loss and recovery, is Modiano's prime subject and it's the one he was cited for in receiving the Nobel. This is a slow, meditative look back on a life mostly forgotten and one that is coming to an end. Very interesting stuff indeed. And it makes me appreciate the later book even more. R: 3.8/5.0



Last Seen Wearing (1976) - #2 in the author's Inspector Morse series of novels. This novel appears on the Guardian List of 1000 Best Novels.

Seventeen-year-old Valerie Taylor disappeared two years before the start of this novel and Morse (along with Lewis) is given the task of following up on the mystery after a previous detective working on the case is killed in a car accident. Initially the case seems rather straight-forward with Morse assuming the girl is dead and working from that perspective. Then a letter, supposedly written by Valerie turns up and Morse has to re-evaluate. This is a very interesting police procedural showing all the wrong turns, false assumptions, and seemingly perfect solutions blown away by one extra fact that must dog such investigations. Morse is continually blinded by his attraction to, but inability to connect with, the women in the case.

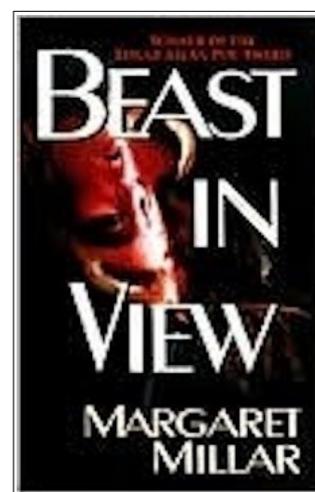
That seems to be as telling an indicator of his character as anything else. This is a step forward for Dexter and Morse as the author slowly fleshes out the character, adding more of his skills, virtues and foibles. R: 3.6/5.0



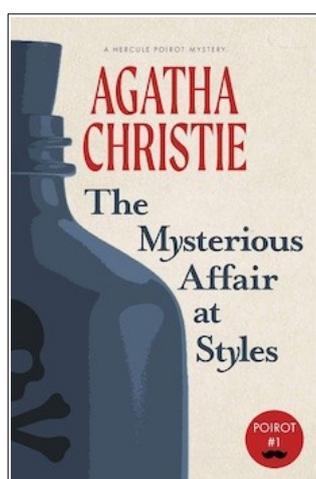
Ogres (2022) – shortlisted for the 2023 Hugo Award for Best Novella. On a future earth, humanity has been oppressed by a race of Ogres, huge beings that treat the rest of the human race like vassals in a medieval hierarchical structure. During an Ogre Landlord visit to a small village, circumstances spiral out of control when the son of the headman first hits the Ogre Landlord's son and then kills him in a fight. The young man Gerald then goes on the run, joining up with a human outlaw gang in order to survive. There is much to like about this novella, but there is way too much in it for the length. We learn of the collapse of human civilisation, the rise of the Ogres, the fall of the remaining humans, and a vast political uprising, all in the space of 160 pages. Tchaikovsky delivers another entertaining and well-written novella, but it all seems a bit rushed. R: 3.4/5.0

Beast in View (1955) – winner of the 1956 Edgar Award for Best Novel

Often cited as one of the best crime novels of the genre (it appears on both the Crime Writers and Mystery Writers of America top 100 Crime Novels lists) this novel is very deceptive: it starts well, then begins to peter out in the middle when everything seems very predictable before delivering a powerful and intriguing ending. Helen Clarvoe lives alone in a hotel, estranged from her mother and brother, when she receives a telephone call from a woman who says she knows Helen, and who then goes on to threaten her. But Helen has no memory of this caller and so she asks her financial consultant to find out who she is and what she wants. What follows is an intriguing piece of crime fiction writing that hides all of the clues to the mystery in plain sight but which are so well disguised you don't recognise them for what they really are. R: 4.0/5.0

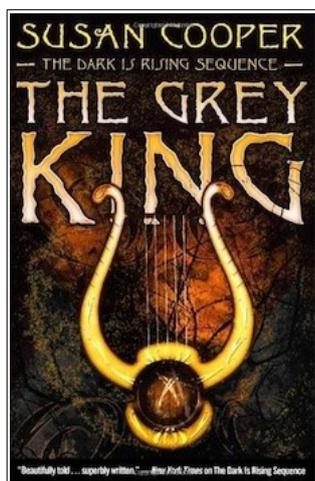


The True Story of Spit MacPhee (1986) – see major review below.



The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1920) – #1 in the author's Hercule Poirot series of novels. This novel appears on the Guardian List of 1000 Best Novels.

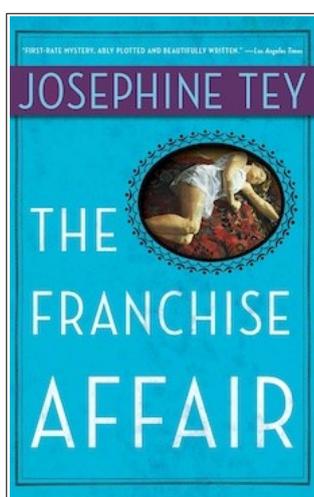
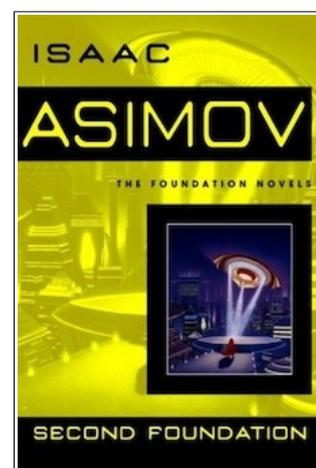
A classic “country house” mystery where all of the murders take place and where all of the possible suspects either live or are gathered together. The novel relies on its plot and the delineated character of its detective, and to a lesser extent, his side-kick Hastings for its reputation. There is little in the way of internal dialogue – other than Hastings's rather prejudicial and biased musings from time to time – and the secondary characters are all lightly drawn and easily forgotten. It's really a process of eliminating the various suspects one by one and remembering the adage, stated very early on in the book: “poison is a woman's weapon.” After seeing some recent Poirot adaptations it is interesting to go back to the initial source to see how he was introduced. R: 3.2/5.0



The Grey King (1975) – #4 in the author’s Dark is Rising series of novels. This novel won the Newberry Medal in 1976. Will Stanton, the last born of the Old Ones of the Light, is recovering from a severe bout of hepatitis and is sent to Wales to stay with his mother’s cousin to recuperate. There he meets Bran, the Raven Boy, and discovers that he has been sent to exactly the right place at the right time, a few days before Halloween, the Day of the Dead. In the Welsh valley he discovers one of the objects of power that he needs in his fight against the forces of darkness. But he is opposed by the Grey King, one of the most powerful Lords of Darkness. This is one of the great children’s book series of the latter half of the twentieth century, bringing Arthurian Mythology into a modern setting. Wonderful stuff: emotional and engaging. R: 3.8/5.0

Second Foundation (1952) - #3 of the original Foundation Trilogy, and #5 of the extended Foundation series.

Asimov’s last novel in the original trilogy is again another fix-up of one short story (“Prologue : Second Foundation”) and two novellas (**Now You See it...** and **...Now You Don’t**). Here the whole thrust of the novel is the attempt by various parties – the Mule and the survivors of the First Foundation – to discover the location of the Second Foundation. Asimov has a lot of fun throwing up a possible solution to the puzzle, and then shooting it down, and then throwing up another one, and so on. And it’s all rather amusing but starts to get a little tedious after a while. As previously the author has a lot of difficulty with female characters relying here on one precocious teenage girl to fill his “quota”. In the end it’s a puzzle story with lots of people sitting around arguing. It may once have seemed like the greatest sf story every told. Not so much any more. R: 3.0/5.0



The Franchise Affair (1948) - #3 in the author’s series featuring Inspector Alan Grant. This novel appears on both the Crime Writers’ Association (at position #12) and Mystery Writers of America (at position #81) of the Best 100 Crime Novels of all time. When a middle-aged woman and her mother are accused of kidnapping and beating a young girl they approach their country solicitor, Robert Blair, for help. Blair is originally reluctant to take on the case but soon starts to find the whole investigation a welcome change from his humdrum legal practice. Rather like Millar’s **Beast in View** here we have someone who is not used to the PI role taking it on and working through the case in a logical and entertaining manner. Although this sits within the author’s Inspector Alan Grant series he plays only a very minor role in proceedings. While it is possible to see this novel as being firmly seated in its time and locale it does have a few interesting things to say about greed and envy. R: 3.7/5.0

REVIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

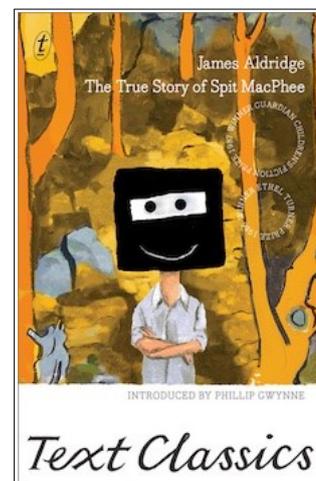
The True Story of Spit MacPhee (1986) by James Aldridge

Genre: Lit

Winner of the 1987 Guardian Fiction Prize for Children and the 1986 Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature.

Spit MacPhee is a problem, both for himself and the small fictional town of St. Helen where he lives. After his grandfather dies there is no-one left to look after the young eleven-year-old Spit and the fight that ensues over his guardianship will change not only Spit but the town as well.

James Aldridge was born in Bendigo and spent the early part of his life in Swan Hill – the town on which St. Helen is based – on the River Murray on the State of Victoria. He left Australia in 1938 to work as a news and then war correspondent and never returned to live. In this novel he returns to the town of his childhood to explore all the various cultural, religious and legal constrictions on people at that time.



In 1930 or thereabouts eight-year-old Spit MacFee goes to live with his grandfather in St. Helen. Old MacPhee is living in an old boiler on the banks of the Murray and adds an extension to the metal structure when first Spit, and later his mother, arrives. He earns an income fixing clocks and watches for various townsfolk. We soon learn that Spit's father has died in a house fire somewhere else in the state and his mother has been badly disfigured. She stays only at the "house" and doesn't talk to anyone and it's only a few months later that she also dies from the injuries she suffered in the fire. So Spit is left to be brought up by his grandfather. It seems a perfect life for the young lad as he becomes very efficient at catching Murray cod and crays on the river and earning money by selling his wares door-to-door. But his grandfather has a serious problem: from time to time he flies into a shouting fitful rage and only Spit can calm him down. One night, when Spit is 11 it all gets too much for his grandfather who burns down the house, destroying everything in it. This is the end for the townsfolk as he is taken to hospital, and it appears he will never recover.

And so begins the major part of the novel. From Spit's earliest arrival in town the local "do-gooder" Protestant has been circling around him trying to get Spit to attend church, for his spiritual well-being, and also to get the local authorities to see that Spit is transferred to a boys' home in Bendigo (about 180 kilometres away), again, presumably for his own good. But neither Spit nor his grandfather would have anything to do with this suggestion. Spit becomes friendly with a local Catholic family, eating with them from time to time, and ensuring that they always got the prime choice of his fish on Fridays. After Spit's grandfather has his final seizure and then dies in hospital the conflict between the two religious sides of the town comes to the fore as both sides seek to adopt the boy.

Aldridge has obviously written this as a semi-autobiographical novel and the love he still has for his boyhood experiences shines through the text. Spit is a larrikin, a lovable one,

who always seems to be running around wild but never gets into trouble with the police, is always polite and courteous, and just wants to enjoy himself in as carefree a way as possible. It's an idyllic life for Spit, only interrupted by the ambitions and desires of the adult world around him.

I'm sure there are going to be many people who read this novel and wonder at the religious divide that impacted small Australian communities in the early twentieth century, splitting them down the middle between Catholic and Protestant. This divide was still evident in the 1960s when I was growing up in the country, and while I noticed it start to dissipate in the 1970s it was strong enough to have an impact even then.

This is an excellent coming-of-age Australian novel that resonates with me to a large extent. Having a childhood where you were generally allowed to roam as widely as you liked is one that I will always cherish and feel grateful for. Spit's spirit and enthusiasm for life is all the supporting argument you need.

I also have to commend Chong for his cover of this novel. Depicting Spit as a young Ned Kelly was a stroke of genius.

R: 4.3/5.0

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 WATCHING LATELY

Television

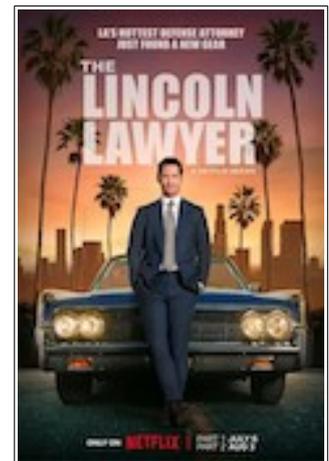
The Lincoln Lawyer (Season 2 — 10 episodes) (2023)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Courtroom drama

Mickey Haller is back in this adaptation of Michael Connelly's novel *The Fifth Witness*. He's now rather famous from the cases detailed in Season 1 but things don't start well for him as he is shown, at the start of the first episode, being beaten up in a car park. Three months earlier and Haller falls for the chef of a local restaurant who is later charged with the murder of a leading LA property developer. The two had been at loggerheads for weeks over the development of a building almost on top of the restaurant. Haller breaks off the relationship when she asks him to represent her but the evidence seems very heavily stacked against her.

Meanwhile Haller is attempting to get his rapidly expanding business in order, he's helping out other clients and trying to determine how he can set up one client, who has confessed to him that he committed a murder for which another of Haller's clients has been charged. It's all good dependable stuff; a classic US legal and courtroom drama with some nice twists and turns. R: 3.6/5.0



PERRYSCOPE Responses

It would appear that the vagaries of the international postal services has impacted a letter from John Hertz again. John wrote his letter of comment on P35 on 29th September but it didn't arrive until late October, missing the next issue.

Perryscope 35:

John Hertz: "I attended two high schools, the University of Chicago Laboratory School and then Hyde Park High School. Universities in the U.S. sometimes operate a lab school 'for the training of future teachers, educational experimentation, educational research, and professional development' says Wikipedia the great and terrible. The U. S. System of private and public schools probably needs more explanation than will do here; anyway, the Lab School was private, Hyde Park High was public; pupils in each looked down on the other. Both were in the Hyde Park neighborhood."

[**PM:** Universities in Australia, in my time, had very little to do with any public or private high schools, at least as I recall. I assume they were founded and run as an educational business that received funding from State and Federal Governments as well as from fee-paying students. There were only two universities in South Australia in 1973: the University of Adelaide, and Flinders University. Any formal collaboration between them and one specific high school might have been viewed as rather prejudicial.]

"At the Lab School, I was on the varsity debate team in my Sophomore Year (U. S. high schools sometimes have Freshman-Sophomore-Junior-Senior years, like our colleges; "varsity", annoying to Commonwealth-English users, in the U. S. has come to mean Junior & Senior years in high school or college; I was thus on the upper-level team a year early; U.S. high schools and sometimes colleges engage in formal debating competitions, as with physical games). A friend and I discovered Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* (1959) and under the auspices of the Drama teacher staged a dramatic reading of the 107th Chorus ('Light is late') with bongo drums."

[**PM:** I'll just leave that one.]

"Hyde Park High was more than 99% black. I was Senior class vice-president. I was a Lab Aide (a kind of teacher's assistant) in Chemistry and in Physics. A fellow Chemistry Lab Aide and I thought we might have discovered a new element. It could be found at the bottoms of test tubes. It didn't react with anything, including hydrochloric acid and nitric acid. We proposed to name it Crud. Unhappily we saw the abbreviations C, Cr, Cu and Cd were all taken up. Not knowing the Latin or German for "crud" we gave up.

"I haven't read *Deep Wheel Orcadia* but I have read a novel in poetry, Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which I just told John Scalzi his *Redshirts* reminded me of. *Pale Fire* may be fantasy, but — well, no spoilers."

[**PM:** I've been rather turned off Nabokov after reading *Lolita*, so it might be some time before I am tempted to give *Pale Fire* a try. I suspect Scalzi was rather bemused by your suggestion?]

Perryscope 36:

John Hertz (again): “Those who’ve seen me in person at SF cons know something of what I think about hats. I wear other hats on other occasions (this was transgressed so shockingly at Torcon III that a photo got in **Locus**). I’ve noticed the recent — last few decades — hatred of hats by men here in the States. I didn’t know it had infected Australia.”

[**PM:** Hats disappeared from most mens’ heads in Australia in the 1960s, with only the ubiquitous baseball cap making any inroads in the following decades. They are fine, in certain circumstances, but are absolutely no match for the Australian sun.]

“I wonder what J. Nicholas saw in Bulgaria. I’d probably go round to villages for their folk dances — another hobby of mine. Bulgaria, 1/70th the size of Australia, has half a dozen distinct folklore regions.”

[**PM:** Hopefully he’ll let us know.]

Perryscope 37:

Leigh Edmonds: “Your comments about your wife ensuring that you look at least a little presentable reminds me of how Valma used to keep me in line, ‘You’re not going out in THAT?’ I wonder how long it will be before the effect wears off.

“And on hats. I’ve had lots over the years, not because I particularly like them but because they are something of a necessity in these parts, The trouble is that I tended to take them off and forget them so while I am a bit envious of your Akubra, I haven’t bought one because I’d surely leave it behind somewhere. Instead, these days I’ve got something called an Evoke Australia which must be made out of recycled plastic bottles or something but springs back into shape after I’ve shoved it into my backpack so I don’t leave it behind on the train or plane. It doesn’t look too daggy so Valma might have approved, and it sure feels good shading the top of my head now the sun is starting to belt down again.”

[**PM:** I have certainly left my hat behind on occasion but tend to remember it fairly quickly and hurry back to retrieve it. The concept of a foldable hat you can stuff into a bag or a back-pocket is definitely a good one. I’m just a bit too attached to my Akubra for that.]

“Interesting comments on ‘Pump It Up’. It’s such a well constructed and performed pop song that I don’t think I’ve ever paid much attention to the lyrics before. I must listen to it again real soon now.”

[**PM:** Short, sharp and punchy.]

“Keep up the pressure on Julian to write for you. His column this issue was great, well written and interesting. As you probably saw on Facebook, I shared a very pleasant dinner with Lucy and Julian last night where the JazzLab was part of the conversation. I think I might have disappointed them both when I commented that I was becoming quite a fan of modern jazz until the Beatles came along, so I can see the attraction of the venue. Particularly if it is nearby and a good place to spend some time. While we were talking

about the place last night I was going to ask Lucy and Julian how ‘cool’ the place was (in that older sense of the word) but got distracted, probably by talk of renovations or other real world matters.

“However, while I can understand the attraction of the JazzLab and might find it interesting, a Blues club would suit me even better. There would be, of course, less flexibility in that genre, but the blues revival that began in the mid to late 1960s picked me up and carried me along in a way that jazz didn’t. I don’t know that there is a place for the blues in heaven but there surely should be.

“Thanks for your book and video reviews. I meant to tell you while in Canberra that I shared your views about *The Beast* but it is too intense for me at the moment and I had to stop watching. On the other hand, I will get back to watching *Only Murders in the Building*. Your review of the Jack Reacher stories is tempting but I am trying to bring myself at least a little up to date with stf so I’m trying to find more contemporary stuff on Audible. Your review of Nini Cipri’s work sounded interesting but it’s not on Audible, so perhaps later.”

[**PM:** I always hope people will find one or two of the books I read each month of interest. I certainly don’t expect that a lot of people will be interested in all of them as I do tend to jump around a lot.]

“I hope you are both having a good time in India. Isn’t amazing that I can send this to you as you travel in that relatively far off land. Which reminds me to congratulate you on your comments to Joseph Nicholas about his Eurocentric view of the world. To those of us in the Great Southern Land the distinction between Asia and Europe is very simple, Asia is ‘just up there’ and Europe is ‘way over there’.”

Kim Huett: “Didn’t Elvis Costello play the Weiner kid in *Straight To Hell*? I’m sure it was him singing “Salsa y Ketchup”, one of the high points of the film. It’s a pity about *Straight To Hell*; great premise, great cast, but the plot is a bit too aimless and so it drags too much too often. Best to watch *Repo Man* instead.”

[**PM:** *Straight to Hell* isn’t a film I’ve ever seen, though, from the look of it maybe I should. According to Wikipedia the song you mention was performed by Zander Schloss, bass guitarist for the Circle Jerks and the Weirdos. *Repo Man* is certainly worth checking out.]

Mark Olson: “I hope you enjoy India. I was there once, for work, visiting only Bangalore and found it to be difficult to enjoy. Our (long) days were spent at work in a modern building near the center of town, but we did get out for dinner. I found the juxtaposition of extreme poverty with high tech to be disconcerting as well as the incredible waste of people. (E.g., in spite of us not having time to get out except for dinner, we had a driver who did nothing but sit in the car.) The traffic was beyond scary. OTOH, I think what I saw in Bangalore helped me understand ancient Rome which had a similar level of crowding and equally lax building code, though Rome was, of course, considerably poorer.”

[**PM:** There is certainly a great disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in India; probably greater than I have seen elsewhere. I’m just astounded that a country of that size can work at all.]

“We managed a visit to northern Scotland with Joe and Edie after Interthingy 2 in 2005, and wound up spending several days in the Orkneys, which were wonderful. Scara Brae was amazing, and the place is littered with neolithic and Pictish sites. We visited the county fair and had the best ice cream we have ever eaten — it was (no kidding) oatmeal ice cream. Possibly the high point of the trip was a boat ride (the four of us, one other couple and the boatman, a local farmer) to The Gloop. The Gloop is a sea cave and he took us right in maybe a hundred yards to a point where the roof had collapsed letting sunlight in. We saw seals swimming around underwater and it was quite magical.

“I wish we'd had time to visit the old Royal Navy base and to get off the Mainland (which is the largest island.)

“I do strongly recommend a car on Orkney and for all the travel through the Highlands.”

[**PM:** It is certainly our intention to hire a car for our travels around Scotland next year. At this time we're thinking we'll keep the same car for about three weeks and transfer from mainland to island, and island to island by ferry. Drop off fees can sometimes be very large indeed and it's something you need to be wary of when renting. It will be far easier just keeping the one car as well.]

Kim Huett (again): “Who was it that suggested the publishers of **Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine** needed to stop featuring its namesake on the cover because they were running out of decent angles to shoot him and would soon need to resort to indecent ones?”

[**PM:** It could be said that some of them here are already bordering on the indecent, and are likely to get worse as we move ahead. But Robyn keeps taking the photos so I keep stealing them. Wait till you see next month's.]

“According to the NSW education website I checked, from 1943 to 2009 it was compulsory for NSW students to attend school until the age of 15. As my father was born in 1928 that ended his education because it was 1943 and there was a war on. According to the story he told me, one day at high school he was told to report to the principle's office. Once there he was then discovered that as he was now 15 and his mother (father deceased) had no objections he was expected to join the workforce. He then spent the next couple of years working in a shipyard building wood-hulled boats designed to carry goods up and down the NSW coast. It was a move he didn't regret as he had no particular interest in schooling and there were worse jobs to be had. In fact he seems to have had a pretty good war but I think I'll leave it there given those sort of shenanigans don't involve school.

“I think it was remiss of you to not mention there is a film of the same name based on **The Odd Angry Shot**. I saw it in the cinema many years ago and thought it rather good. And having re-watched it quite recently still think it's a decent, if understated, film about the Vietnam War.”

[**PM:** Yes, it was rather remiss of me to neglect to mention the film adaptation. I seem to recall noting it in one version of the review. Not sure why it dropped out. Old age on my part I suspect.]

Rose Mitchell: “Conflux was great fun, I hadn't comprehended how much I missed cons. It had its problems but like any good con, the Concom dealt with them swiftly and without fuss so much so the attendees hardly noticed. You used to call it: like ducks on a pond,

serenely floating around the surface, paddling like crazy under the water. I do hope the con scene is reawakening. Not that we had a big calendar here in Australia, unlike the US or UK, but usually there was 3-4 biggies, and several day events. Over the coming year we can look forward to Swancon (WA), Continuum (Vic) and Conflux (ACT) plus many other day events in between, including possibly a relaxacon in winter 2024.”

[**PM:** It goes some way to fill that longing we have to actually meet people face-to-face again. And, like you, I hope it starts to kick back off again. I may have to dip a toe, every so slightly, back into the organisational side of things to help them along. But it will be very, very slight.]

“Planetary Porn — a new term, this one got me thinking. In my day (indeed I am shaking a broly at nobody) wasn’t this called Space Opera? It seems to me that popular fiction has an inordinate amount of sub genres, each with a clever, snarky label. Why is there a need to label everything? Sort everything into neat boxes with catchy labels: Chick Lit, CliFi, Slasher and/or Splatter Horror, Competence Porn (another sub set that encompasses Space Opera, itself a slick label), Hope Porn, Cosy Crime.”

[**PM:** Rose, if I don’t label it how can I shake my fist at it? There may be other definitions to follow. I’m sure Space Opera will be in their somewhere. Where would sf be without it?]

“The last 3 categories seem to be where I am doing most of my reading at the moment: not too complex, not a lot of thinking involved, everything turns out warm and fuzzy and makes me feel happy at the end. This feeling soon dissipates of course once the real world intrudes. Having said that I’m a bit over it all now especially after the last Chambers, **Prayer for the Crown Shy**. I still fall back on **Midsomer Murders** for a bit of mindless fluff and illogical plotting set in bucolic countryside and have just inhaled the latest Rivers of London novella set in Wisconsin with a lady FBI agent hunting down naughty wizards and American Demi-monde. And have waiting on order from the local library, the next instalment in the Thursday Murder Club which it seems will be waiting quite a while for it: 68 or of 92 reservations.”

[**PM:** Richard Osman has certainly shown that there is a huge market for cosy murders, if done right. The **Midsomer Murders** television series seems to have been running for decades now. I doubt there is a working actor in Britain who hasn’t appeared in it at sometime or other.]

John Hertz (and yet again): “The definition of ‘planetary romance’ in The Larrikin’s Dictionary of Science Fiction calls to mind **The Wanderer** (F. Leiber, 1964).

[**PM:** And many other novels as well I suspect. I just didn’t think of them.]

“People whose interest in J. R. Oppenheimer has been sparked might read **The Berlin Project** (G. Benford, 2017).”

Barbara O’Sullivan: “I’m a big Elvis Costello fan too-have seen him twice in concert. Not sure if you ever saw his fantastic TV talk show series, **Spectacle**, some years back.”

[**PM:** I should check it out.]

I also heard from: David L. Russell; Heath Row; Julian Warner; Nic Farey; and Marcin Klak; thank you one and all. ♦