

Perryscope 41



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Cover photograph by Robyn Mills, Hanoi, Vietnam, October 2018.

INTRODUCTION

With this issue I finish my annual reviews of my reading and watching from 2023. I have to admit that while the “reading” part of it (as outlined in **Perryscope 40**) was okay, the “watching” side wasn’t that good. I speak, of course, in terms of quantity rather than quality. The standouts for the year were truly excellent and I can’t recommend them highly enough. But that can wait for a bit later in this issue.

From comments I have received, both written and verbal, about **Perryscope 39** (which, you will no doubt recall, was my trip report on our travels in India) it seems that the approach was appreciated and achieved what I set out to achieve. It wasn’t quite what I wanted, and I believe I know why, so I’ll be aiming to rectify those problems when I produce something similar for my Scottish travels later this year. In the meantime, I am hopeful that I will be able to get material together from my “recent” travels in Canada and Morocco. Expect something similar to **P39** for both of those. When? Don’t ask silly questions.

In other news you will discover that David Grigg and I have decided to suspend our long-running podcast (5 years!), so the notes on page 13 about episode 100 will be the last; at least for the foreseeable future.

I’ve also written a piece for a new fanzine being produced by Leigh Edmonds. As **P41** goes to press (you know what I mean) Leigh’s issue has not been presented to the public, though I have seen a copy as a contributor. I’ll provide a link and some notes next issue.

Leigh and I have also been involved in another episode of the FANAC Zoom Series of Fannish History. This one is titled “Wrong Turns on the Wallaby Track: Australian SF Fandom 1960-75” which you can find if you hunt around on YouTube. This, you will be unsurprised to discover, is really all Leigh’s work. My role was to appear as host, provide a very brief intro, and then act as sheepdog, steering Leigh back on track when he strayed (rarely needed) and asking questions posed by the audience. This is the second part of Leigh’s history with the first covering the years from the start of Australian sf fandom in the 1920s and 30s up to the end of the 1950s. It’s not for everyone but it is certainly a comprehensive look at the subject. And, yes, there is a book coming; two actually. I look forward to reading them.

Cover notes: “A man in his element”: Robyn and I attended a cooking course in Hanoi in 2018, part of which involved cooking some marinated chicken over a charcoal barbecue. Someone, of course, had to make sure everything cooked evenly. That would be me then. Smug, again.

BEST FILM/TV OF 2023

Before compiling this list of my best viewing of film and television for 2023 I could safely have predicted that it wouldn't turn out to be high in numbers. And I would have been right. There are probably excuses, though those are only ones I tell myself. I just need to do better.

FILM

Films watched: 22

By any measure 22 films in a full year is a rather meagre total. I know I travelled a bit more than usual last year but that hardly seems like a reasonable excuse for why this number is so low. I have no reasons for it, but I will be changing things to ensure it isn't as low again. You will see in this issue – in the film reviews section – that I've now started to tabulate my film-watching to better track what I've seen and where I'm up to in the year. It seems to work well for me for books so I don't see why the same approach won't work for film. I really should be aiming for at least one film a week, or about 50 for the year. Hopefully this coming year's tally will be much higher than the total for 2023.

- | | | | |
|---|--|----------|-----|
| 1 | <i>Oppenheimer</i> directed by Christopher Nolan (2023) | Cinema | 4.5 |
| 2 | <i>John Wick : Chapter 4</i> directed by Chad Stahelski (2023) | Cinema | 4.4 |
| 3 | <i>Supernova</i> directed by Harry Macqueen (2020) | SBS | 4.3 |
| 4 | <i>Napoleon</i> directed by Ridley Scott (2023) | Cinema | 4.3 |
| 5 | <i>Will You Ever Forgive Me?</i> directed by Marielle Heller (2018) | Disney + | 4.2 |

Notes on the winner:

Oppenheimer was certainly the stand-out film of the year for me. I appreciated its scope, its expectation that the audience would follow its non-linear style, the superb acting by Cillian Murphy and Robert Downey Jr and their supporting cast, and its relevance to today's political scene. It also re-inforced my view that director Christopher Nolan is better at adapting an existing screenplay rather than utilising his own.

And ***John Wick : Chapter 4*** was the action/thriller flick of the year – no question. Almost balletic in its action sequences it strikes a fine balance between taking itself too seriously, and not seriously enough. It's hard to see how anyone other than Keanu Reeves could have imbued the main character with as much gravitas and quiet resolve and intelligence. You would have to see the others in the sequence, however, to get the full backstory. It's worth it.



Honorable mentions:

None.

TELEVISION

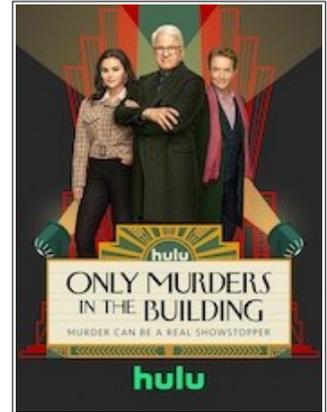
Series watched: 19

It is indicative of where my attention lay in 2023 when I see that figure of 19 above. Down from 42 in 2022. I have a feeling that I was starting a lot but not finishing much. What was that classic teacher's report line: "Needs to pay more attention, and could do better." Cliched, but probably very apt for this situation.

TV Comedy:

Programs watched: 1

- 1 ***Only Murders in the Building*** Season 3 Disney + 4.3



Notes on the winner:

I suppose you could stretch this category a bit and add in a couple of others from my watched list, and you might even move this one to the Crime category, but I won't and I didn't.

I was gratified to find that the writers here had been able to keep the series fresh, by introducing some new and interesting characters.

It's good fun stuff and, as I've probably said before, it is good to see Steve Martin playing a role where he doesn't try to "ham it up" in every scene.

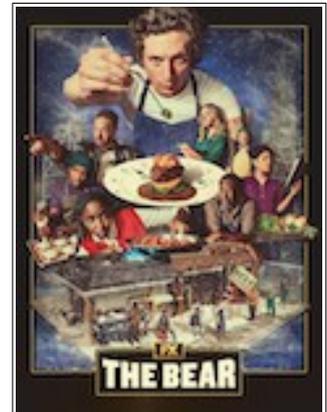
Honorable mentions:

None.

TV Drama:

Programs watched: 17

- 1 ***The Bear*** Season 2 Disney + 4.8
- 2 ***Slow Horses*** Season 2 Apple 4.5
- 3 ***Barry*** Season 1 Foxtel 4.3
- 4 ***Succession*** Season 4 Foxtel 4.0
- 5 ***Bosch : Legacy*** Season 2 Foxtel 4.0



Notes on the winner:

The Bear was the stand-out TV show for me during 2023.

Definitely worth a re-watch, though I will start from Season 1. The fact that it is on Disney surprises me most of all.

Honorable mentions:

Deadloch Season 1 (4.0)

Jack Ryan Season 1 (4.0)

The Maikanai : Cooking for the Maiko House Season 1 (4.0)

WHAT HAS IMPACTED MY LIFE – Shakespeare and C. J. Dennis

Back in the 1960s the works of William Shakespeare were a fundamental part of the English Literature curriculum at high schools in South Australia. Which is hardly surprising and certainly well justified.

In my second year of high school (the equivalent of Year 9 for 14-year-olds) I had my first taste of the playwright when we studied his play *Twelfth Night*. In today's movie terms I guess it would be labelled a "rom-com". I remember nothing about it except the opening line: "If music be the food of love, play on". And why that sticks in the memory I have no idea.

The next year, Year 10, we delved into *The Merchant of Venice*, and, in the year after that, we finally got into a play with some teeth, *Richard III*. Here at last was something I could relate to: blood, death, murder, and intrigue, all the good dramatic ingredients. Similarly in Year 12, my last year in High School, when we were offered *Antony and Cleopatra*, which added the intriguing ingredient of black humour to the mix.

The major problem we had as students between the years of 1969 and 1972 was that there was no way to experience the play in the classroom other than to read it out loud. Each school was allowed to choose their own Shakespearean plays to teach so, with the large number on offer, it would have been impossible for any local drama groups to cover all them. You might have been lucky if you had studied something like Hamlet, or Macbeth as there were, most likely, some form of production of them in Adelaide at some time during the year. But our teachers chose differently (unwisely?). Their explanation was that it was always better to offer the external examiners (as we would have in Years 11 and 12) something different to consider. It was better to have an examiner reading, say, the first or fifth exam essay about the problems of Marc Anthony, Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, rather than the two or three-hundredth essay about a depressed Dane or a regicidal Scot. It made some sort of sense.

It would have made more sense if we could have seen a production on stage, or on film or television, but in those days there was no way to replay tv broadcasts (or at least none in our school), and the school never seemed to have the idea of arranging a film screening at a local cinema. Even associated literary works were ignored. I can think of no reasons why we weren't informed about the existence of the crime novel *The Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey, for example, when we were studying *Richard III* other than disdain, ignorance or neglect. And why not an explanation of the politics behind the two main plays. It was almost as if the Shakespearean scripts had no actual connection with historical figures at all. My appreciation of the plays may well have been enhanced if I had known that Shakespeare was writing *Richard III* at a time when Elizabeth was Queen, (continued page 7)



Anthony Sher as Richard III (1984)

THE PLAY by C. J. Dennis (Chapter 5 of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*)

"Wot's in a name?" she sez... An' then she sighs,
An' clasps 'er little 'ands, an' rolls 'er eyes
"A rose," she sez, "be any other name
Would smell the same.
Oh, w'erefore art you Romeo, young sir?
Chuck yer ole pot, an' change yer moniker!"

Doreen an' me, we bin to see a show—
The swell two-dollar touch. Bong tong, yeh know.
A chair apiece wiv velvit on the seat;
A slap-up treat.
The drarmer's writ be Shakespeare, years ago,
About a barmy goat called Romeo.

"Lady, be yonder moon I swear!" sez 'e.
An' then 'e climbs up on the balkiney;
An' there they smooge a treat, wiv pretty words
Like two love-birds.
I nudge Doreen. She whispers, "Ain't it grand!"
'Er eyes is shinin', an' I squeeze 'er 'and.

"Wot's in a name?" she sez. 'Struth, I dunno.
Billo is just as good as Romeo.
She may be Juli-er or Juli-et—
'E loves 'er yet.
If she's the tart 'e wants, then she's 'is queen,
Names never count... But ar, I like "Doreen!"

A sweeter, dearer sound I never 'eard;
Ther's music 'angs around that little word,
Doreen!... But wot wus this I starts to say
About the play?
I'm off me beat. But when a bloke's in love
'Is thorts turns 'er way, like a 'omin' dove.

This Romeo 'e's lurkin' wiv a crew—
A dead tough crowd o' crooks called Montague.
'Is cliner's push—wot's nicknamed Capulet—
They 'as 'em set.
Fair narks they are, jist like them back-street clicks,
Ixept' they fights wiv skewers 'stid o' bricks.

Wot's in a name? Wot's in a string o' words?
They scraps in ole Verona wiv the'r swords,
An' never give a bloke a stray dog's chance,
An' that's Romance.
But when they deals it out wiv bricks an' boots
In Little Lons., they're low, degraded broots.

Wot's jist plain stoush wiv us, right 'ere to-day,
Is "valler" if yer fur enough away.
Some time, some writer bloke will do the trick
Wiv Ginger Mick,

Uv Spadger's Lane. 'E'll be a Romeo,
When 'e's bin dead five 'undred years or so.

Fair Juli-et, she gives 'er boy the tip.
Sez she: "Don't sling that crowd o' mine no lip;
An' if yeh run agin a Capulet,
Jist do a get,"
'E swears 'e's done wiv lash; 'e'll chuck it clean.
(Same as I done when I first met Doreen.)

They smooge some more at that. Ar, strike me blue!
It gimme Joes to sit an' watch them two!
'E'd break away an' start to say good-bye,
An' then she'd sigh
"Ow, Ro-me-o!" an' git a strangle-holt,
An' 'ang around 'im like she feared 'e'd bolt.

Nex' day 'e words a gorspil cove about
A secrit weddin'; an' they plan it out.
'E spouts a piece about 'ow 'e's bewitched:
Then they git 'itched...
Now, 'ere's the place where I fair git the pip!
She's 'is for keeps, an' yet 'e lets 'er slip!

Ar! but 'e makes me sick! A fair gazob!
'E's jist the glarssy on the soulful sob,
'E'll sigh and spruik, an' 'owl a love-sick vow—
(The silly cow!)
But when 'e's got 'er, spliced an' on the straight,
'E crools the pitch, an' tries to kid its Fate.

Aw! Fate me foot! Instid of slopin' soon
As 'e was wed, orf on 'is 'oneymoon,
'Im an' 'is cobber, called Mick Curio,
They 'ave to go
An' mix it wiv that push o' Capulets.
They look fer trouble; an' it's wot they gets.

A tug named Tyball (cousin to the skirt)
Sprags 'em an' makes a start to sling off dirt.
Nex' minnit there's a reel ole ding-dong go—
'Arf round or so.
Mick Curio, 'e gits it in the neck,
"Ar rats!" 'e sez, an' passes in 'is check.

Quite natchril, Romeo gits wet as 'ell.
"It's me or you!" 'e 'owls, an' wiv a yell,
Plunks Tyball through the gizzard wiv 'is sword,
'Ow I oncored!
"Put in the boot!" I sez. "Put in the boot!"

"Ush!" sez Doreen... "Shame!" sez some silly coot.

Then Romeo, 'e dunno wot to do.

The cops gits busy, like they allwiz do,

An' nose eround until 'e gits blue funk

An' does a bunk.

They wants 'is tart to wed some other guy.

"Ah, strike!" she sez. "I wish that I could die!"

Now, this 'ere gorspil bloke's a fair shrewd 'ead.

Sez 'e "I'll dope yeh, so they'll *think* yer dead."

(I tips 'e was a cunnin' sort, wot knoo

A thing or two).

She takes 'is knock-out drops, up in 'er room:

They think she's snuffed, an' plant 'er in 'er tomb.

Then things gits mixed a treat an' starts to whirl.

'Ere's Romeo comes back an' finds 'is girl

Tucked in 'er little coffing, cold an' stiff,

An' in a jiff,

'E swallers lysol, throws a fancy fit,

'Ead over turkey, an' 'is soul 'as flit.

Then Juli-et wakes up an' sees 'im there,

Turns on the water-works an' tears 'er 'air,

"Dear love," she sez, "I cannot live alone!"

An' wif a moan,

She grabs 'is pockit knife, an' ends 'er cares...

"*Peanuts or lollies!*" sez a boy upstairs.

First published in THE BULLETIN, 16 July 1914



and that she was the grand-daughter of Henry VII who defeated Richard at the Battle of Bosworth, and that Marc Antony was a relative and supporter of Julius Caesar before he became his rival in love. Shakespeare's historical plays didn't exist in a vacuum, though for us they might as well have.

We did actually get to see one Shakespearean production on stage in our final two years at high school – I cannot remember which one – but that only succeeded in showing what sort of total disconnect our teachers had with their students and their experiences. We were taken to see a production of *The Tempest*. Not a bad play, in fact a quite interesting one. The difficulty we had with it was that it was a play that we weren't studying, and therefore didn't know the story or the context, and the production was in French, a language of which only a few of us had more than a rudimentary knowledge. If our school and teachers had decided to find the best way to turn us off Shakespeare they would have struggled to find anything better. It was a complete waste of time; two hours (though it seemed like a whole day) that I will never recover.

As you will gather from my commentary above, I didn't study Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at school, and I have never read the play. But I do know that basic story; that would be a little hard to miss if you have paid any attention to modern culture. If it's not Dire Straits singing about them ("A lovestruck Romeo sang the streets a serenade"), it's Franco Zeffereilli's adaptation in 1968, or Baz Luhrmann taking a shot at it in 1996. I may not be aware of the full details of the plot, the names and connections between the warring families, but the basic plot about a domed love-affair between two teenagers from families who hate each other is rather well-known.

So when I first encountered C. J. Dennis's allusions to the play in his verse novel *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* I was knowledgeable enough to be able to appreciate the basic thrust of what he was aiming at. In the author's poem *The Play* (see previous pages), Dennis has his hero Bill, the actual sentimental bloke, take his girl-friend Doreen out on a date to see the play. At first all seems well, Bill is happy that Doreen has agreed to accompany him and that he finds himself in a rather posh theatre ("A chair apiece wiv velvit on the seat"). But it doesn't take long for Bill's true nature to betray him. As the drama progresses and he gets more and more engrossed in the play he starts to see parallels between his life and experience, and that of Romeo, the Capulets and the Montagues ("I'xcep' they fights wiv skewers 'stid o' bricks.") He gets annoyed with Romeo for leaving Juliet to head out to fight her cousin Tybalt, though that changes when the fight actually begins and he starts to yell out to the stage ("Put in the boot!" I sez. "Put in the boot!") much to the annoyance of other members of the audience ("Ush!" sez Doreen... "Shame!" sez some silly coot.).

This is all good stuff, funny, and also emphasising how Shakespeare's work can speak across the years to an uncouth son of the Melbourne streets, such as Bill. If I had studied the play at school I would have loved to have been presented with this work, yet somehow I'm very sure it would never have been mentioned. It would have been the perfect connection between classic Australian literature and the play that seemed to have little connection to a naive, immature fifteen-year-old in Adelaide.

An opportunity lost.

THE MOOCH OF LIFE – Typos and Other Errors

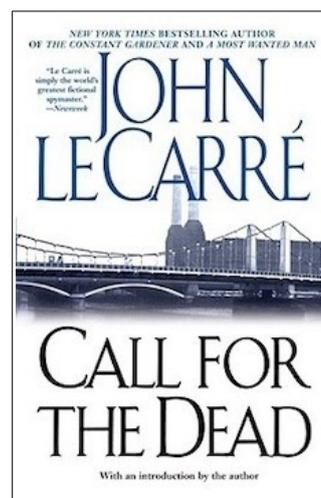
Every so often, in an email or an apa mailing comment, I get people noting the typos and grammatical errors I commit here in the pages of **Perryscope**. For the record, I am aware of the difference between "desert" and "dessert", between "peal" and "peel" and when to use "my brother and me" and "my brother and I". The problem I find is the sometimes confusing disconnect between the brain and the typing fingers. I don't touch-type – never learned – and persist with a three or four-fingered technique which occasionally leads me into trouble. I always seem to type "from" as "form", and "been" as "bene", for example. So proof-reading has me looking for these common mis-typings rather than concentrating on looking out for the more glaring mistakes. Will it improve? I certainly hope so, though I can only promise to do better. In the meantime, if I were you, I would just ignore them and move on. It's what I generally do.

WANDERINGS AND READINGS – An Occasional Column by Julian Warner

When writers go...elsewhere

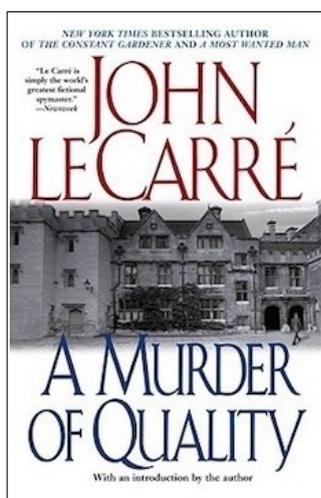
I've read a few novels lately which are all examples of writers going to places which we don't necessarily associate with them. The novels are two of Le Carré's pre-fame George Smiley stories, an Upfield and a Michael Innes.

For anyone who has read all or most of Le Carré, you would know that Smiley's first two outings, *Call for the Dead* and *A Murder of Quality* were in standard detective style, with Smiley's association with 'the Circus' providing background and colour. It was his third book, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, which established Le Carré's preeminence as a writer of spy stories. We mostly know Smiley from the Karla trilogy, which set him up as an expert mole-hunter.



Apart from being largely retired and taking on detective work in his spare time, Smiley is a rather different creature in the first two books. He is described as 'toad-like' and expensively but sloppily dressed. Once Alec Guinness took on the film character, all of that disappeared to leave us with a more suave and grim Smiley.

Detective Smiley knows how to display the social niceties but is still not posh. He keeps encountering people who try to embarrass him by recalling his failure to hold on to his society wife. He remains humble and doesn't seek to take revenge on his antagonists. That lack of vindictiveness stays with him for I think, all of the Smiley novels.



A Murder of Quality seems to borrow from the novels of Michael Innes and Edmund Crispin in portraying a cloistered society where the murderer can only be one of the inside 'set'. In this case, it is a very old-fashioned exclusive school, which allows for Innes-esque obscure eruditions from the masters. The book also uses various other standard tropes of the genre, like the grumpy but indefatigable local police.

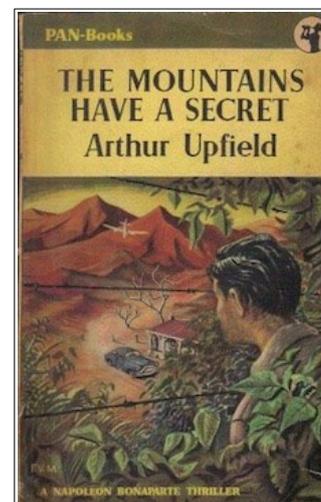
I could conjecture that Le Carré started off as a detective story writer who then branched off into his foreshadowed world of spies.

Both *Call for the Dead* and *A Murder of Quality* have been filmed but not with any sense of continuity with Le Carré's other books.

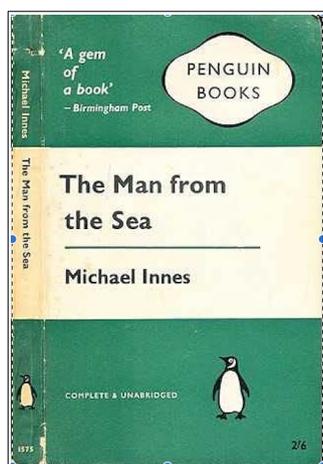
If you haven't read either of these two books, I'd recommend them but with the caution that this is a different Smiley to what you might expect.

As a footnote (?) I'd add that my copy of *Call for the Dead* is in Penguin's latest (2023) version of the green crime paperback, in a slightly larger size than the classic series.

The Mountains Have a Secret by Arthur Upfield is only a slight departure from the Bony norm. I rather like the cover on my 1954 Pan edition of the book. Detective Napoleon Bonaparte — 'Bony' — doesn't often spend time in Victoria but that's not the departure in this case. He's on the trail of two disappeared hitch-hikers and a subsequently murdered detective. He doesn't even know if the events are related but they both happened near the Grampians, that sandstone range west of Melbourne. Bony does his usual detective work, disguised as a travelling land-owner and asking lots of questions at the hotel where the two female tourists were last seen. He makes himself unpopular and is asked to leave but returns to gather information even more stealthily. Bony calls on his skills as a 'half-caste' aboriginal person which is all very entertaining but I am mystified (and equally so in some of the other books) as to how Upfield has his remaining cast of characters acting colour-blind as if he was as white as them. In other books there are some references to prejudice but in the Victorian context, the lack of it is remarkable.



The ending to the book, which gets a few earlier hints, takes a decidedly Bulldog Drummond or Edgar Wallace turn. Although Bony succeeds in the end (he always does), there are some very unsatisfying aspects to how the plot resolves. These days you would think it was a cliff-hanger pointing to a sequel but any sequel to this would be entering Indiana Jones territory. I suspect that Upfield over-reached himself here.



The Man from the Sea by Michael Innes is a decided departure from his academic detective norm. It starts with a near-nude man emerging from the sea in Scotland (but nothing to do with the 2018 Japanese film of the same title — or the Agatha Christie novel of the same title for that matter). From that point on, we are in a pretty standard adventure story with dastardly villains, hiding, chases, scenery, plot twists, Lairds, lasses and apparent comedy relief characters. Any number of writers have done this stuff and similarly you can see many films of this ilk. Bereft of opportunities to have his characters spout esoteric wisdom, 'classic' poetry and Latin and Greek phrases, Innes instead has Scots who use a vernacular which is arch and antiquated. This is not a bad book but it is a bit of a surprise if you like Innes' detective stories with

John Appleby.

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.

MORE TALES FROM SWINGING LONDON : A roadie remembers by Martin Field

Lucas and the Mike Cotton Sound were playing at Klooks Kleek, a popular venue in West Hampstead. Towards the end of their performance, Geno Washington (of the Ram Jam Band) and Jackie Edwards (who wrote the Spencer Davis hit, "Keep on Runnin'") jumped on stage and joined Lucas and the band in a long version of "Stand By Me". The jam was enlivened with inspirational interplay of chat between the verses. Like, "Y'know Lucas, when a woman lets you down...." Brilliant.

Then there was a week's residency at the upmarket club, Le Titan, in Rome. After the band had finished playing one night, a big guy (bodyguard?) in a suit started to walk towards the band members who were heading backstage to the dressing room. I stopped him and asked what he wanted. He said, "I'm with a lady who would like to meet the guitarist." He pointed out this beautiful blonde, I told him to wait and went to ask the guitarist if he wanted to say hello. He did. And ended up living in Rome as a result. She was a well-known movie star as it happened.



Pictured above (from left): Mike Cotton, Jim Rodford, Derek Griffiths

Late at night, people would come back to the hotel for a drink and a smoke. One was an Arabian, who invited us around to his place. "It's not much, but we'll have good food." It was one of many invitations from locals and we knocked most of them back, including his. Some time later, back in London, the band's manager Dave Backhouse contacted us and said some guy from Arabia says he met you in Rome and wants to catch up. We said no. A

little while later there was a story in the Times about an Arabian diplomat in town for government talks, a royal. Yes, there was a photo of our friend from Rome. When he said his place in Rome wasn't much...

What follows is an excerpt from Micky Moody's autobiography, *Playing with Trumpets* (Moody became guitarist with Whitesnake etc.)

“Martin was an Australian hippie who had it well sussed, He'd landed a job where he could wear his hair half-way down his back, dress scruffily and indulge in a, near as damn it, rock and roll lifestyle, He wasn't a musician, he was the next best thing—a roadie. I had no idea as to how long he'd been employed by Lucas and the Mike Cotton Sound, but the fact that he referred to his masters as 'Lurid and the Quite Rotten Sound' indicated a certain air of familiarity. He lived in a bedsit in large semi-detached house in Hornsey, north London. Martin informed us that a room in the same building was available for occupancy the following week, and were we interested. If so, we could sleep on his floor until we received the keys to our independence. Yes! And my first gig as a Mike Cotton man was in two days time.”

And a reminiscence sent to me by trombonist John Beecham (Mike Cotton Sound, The Kinks etc.).

“The Mike Cotton Sound were accompanying Solomon Burke at the Flamingo. His performance that night was sensational, and of course having those 2 fantastic singers singing backup was just wonderful. Jack Fallon arranged that short trip which also included an attendance-record-breaking gig at the Marquee, and Ready Steady Go TV show. At the end of the tour, he and Jack Fallon met up at the Albemarle Street office and Jack paid Solomon the agreed fee, which surprised him.

“Apparently, in the US, it was rare for him to be paid what he'd been told he'd get. He also told us that when red-necked policemen stopped him when he was driving his Cadillac in the South, on the grounds that a black man must have stolen a car like that, he found it easier to say that he was delivering it for his boss.”

“Crime novels neither solve nor resolve anything. They expose and then dissolve. Yet the compulsion to retrace your steps does not go away. The best are doors perpetually ajar. You go there for the music, or the architecture, or the eternal suggestiveness of shadows and alleys and empty hotel rooms. You go to eavesdrop on the pauses or maybe to have conversations with people who aren't there anymore: the people in the book, or the people with whom you once relished long conversations about the book. If the appetite for crime is an appetite for a particular kind of form—a form that eternally promises pleasure (even if the pleasure masquerades as murder)—it feels in the end like an appetite for the absence by which form is haunted, like empty closets and cupboards through which you rummage for lost signs.”

“A Craving for Crime” by Geoffrey O'Brien, *NYRB*, February 8, 2023, pp 30-32

WHAT I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT LATELY

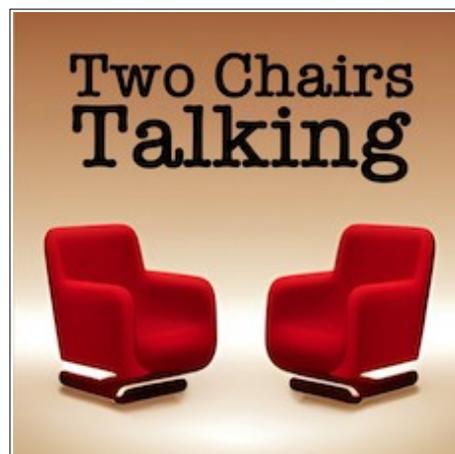
Podcasting – TWO CHAIRS TALKING, co-hosted with David Grigg

Notes from this month's podcasts

Episode 100: (17 January 2024) *We score a century*

Our last podcast, at least for the foreseeable future. This episode we talk about our favourite books of 2023 across a number of categories.

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; Gdn: Guardian 1000 Best Novels; Pult: Pulitzer Prize;

January 2024 books

Title	Author	Genre	Date	F	R	Pub Date	Notes
<i>Trent's Last Case</i>	E. C. Bentley	Crime	Jan 3	e	3.7	1913	Gdn
<i>I am Legend</i>	Richard Matheson	Sf	Jan 5		3.8	1954	Gdn
<i>Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi</i>	Geoff Dyer	Lit	Jan 7		3.4	2009	
<i>The Man with the Silver Saab</i>	Alexander McCall Smith	Crime	Jan 9		3.4	2021	
<i>Where Eagles Dare</i>	Alistair MacLean	Thriller	Jan 14		3.2	1967	
<i>Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont</i>	Elizabeth Taylor	Lit	Jan 14	e	3.8	1971	
<i>The Bridge of San Luis Rey</i>	Thornton Wilder	Lit	Jan 21		3.5	1927	Pult
<i>March Violets</i>	Philip Kerr	Crime	Jan 24		3.4	1989	
<i>The Conversion</i>	Amanda Lohrey	Lit	Jan 29		4.0	2023	Aust
<i>The Murder on the Links</i>	Agatha Christie	Crime	Jan 31		2.7	1923	

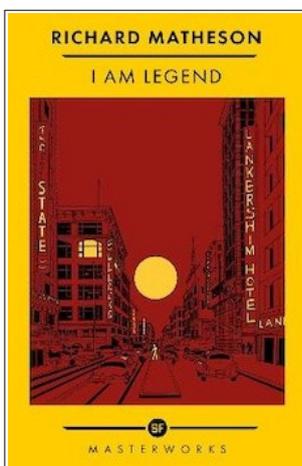
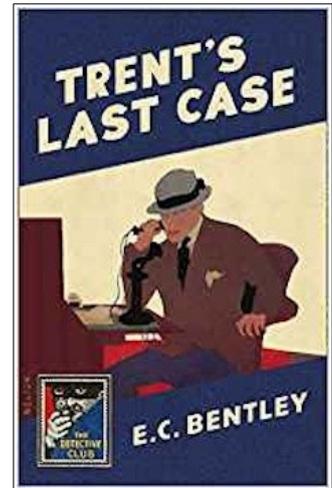
Books read in the period: 10

Yearly total to end of period: 10

Notes:

Trent's Last Case (1913) – This is #1 in the author's Philip Trent series of novels. It appears on the Guardian Best 1000 Novel list, and on both the Crime Writers and Mystery Writers of America top 100 Crime Novels lists.

Philip Trent is a journalist and amateur detective who has made a name for himself helping solve a number of mysteries that have baffled both police and public. When his newspaper sends him to investigate the murder of wealthy businessman Sigsbee Manderson he is, at first, stumped like everyone else. But he slowly puts together a solution, which seems to fit all the facts as presented to the reader. The trouble is it implicates the widow in an affair and given Trent has already fallen for her, he decides to put his solution aside rather than risk her reputation; no-one liked the dead guy anyway. A year or two later and a chance encounter proves to Trent that his view of the matter was wrong, and that it was actually a suicide after all (though the reasons behind that are frankly preposterous). And then to have that answer overturned in the last few pages. This is an ingenious crime mystery in the classic style and was written by Bentley as an antidote to the novels featuring all-knowing detectives that were popular in the early 20th century. I suspect the publication of this novel opened up the crime novel and allowed it to stretch its wings somewhat. R: 3.7/5.0



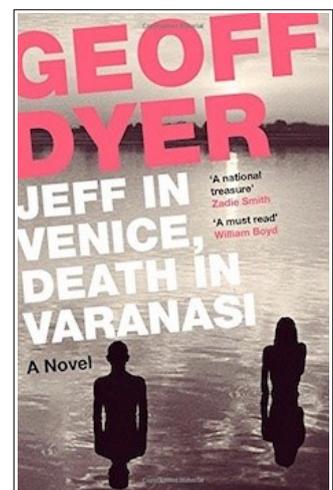
I Am Legend (1954) – This novel appears on the Guardian Best 1000 Novel list.

Richard Neville is living in Los Angeles in 1976, the last man left alive and uninfected after a deadly plague has ravaged Earth's life-forms, leaving some humans "alive" as vampires. We all know the plot here as it has been filmed at least three times but it is interesting to read the source material. Matheson's shortish novel hits all the points you'd expect – the problems of loneliness, madness, depression, undue short-lived elation and longing for human contact and sexual release – are all handled pretty well. He teeters on the edge of being too fixated on some topics for a while but turns away before they get too over-bearing. And the setup towards the

end, where first Neville encounters a dog who appears to be immune before his meeting with a lost woman, is expertly handled. You can almost see this as a mixture of horror and sf and writers such as Stephen King have called Matheson an "inspiration". Certainly worth reading if all you've done is watch the film adaptations.

R: 3.8/5.0

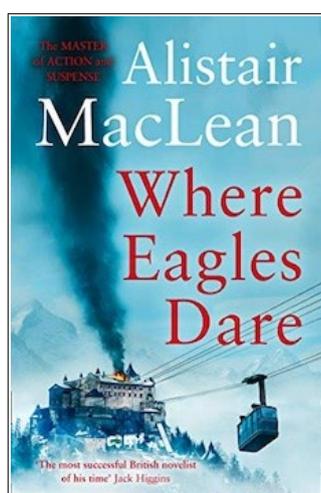
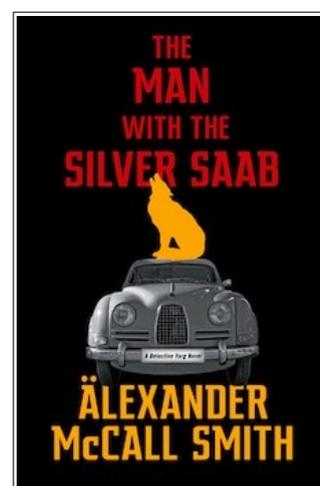
Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi (2009) – Ostensibly a novel but actually two inter-connected novellas following the same character, Jeff Atman. In the first Jeff (not Geoff? I'm sure it means something, though I don't know what) is working as a freelance



journalist when he is sent to Venice for the opening of the Biennale. What follows is a hedonistic account of drink, art, crowds, and drugs, combined with a rather tender and romantic love affair Atman has with the very desirable Laura. It's a holiday fling, but, for the reader, Dyer seems to dangle the carrot that the two will meet again; spoiler, they don't. In the second story Jeff is again on assignment, this time in Varanasi. He does his exploring, files his copy but then decides to stay on for a while; a while that stretches through to the end of the book as he slowly becomes more and more assimilated, eventually shaving his head and wearing only the Indian *dhoti*. I had high expectations of this book after the first novella but found that it petered out in the second, becoming rather self-indulgent. I'm sure if you had detailed knowledge of both *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, and the significance of all of the various Varanasi ghats and festivals then this book would be a wonder. Unfortunately I have only a vague memory of the first and not enough of the second, and don't feel compelled enough to change that. R: 3.4/5.0

***The Man with the Silver Saab* (2021)** – This is #3 in the author's Inspector Ulf Varg series of novels.

Varg is back with another perplexing and unusual case in his Department of Sensitive Crimes in Malmo, Sweden. An esteemed art critic comes to Varg with a strange story, someone is trying to undermine his reputation as an art expert, changing the text of an article he wrote for an art journal, and making him look like a fool when a painting he originally identified as genuine turns out to be a fake; or was it? Varg takes his usual tempered approach to his detective work, gradually sifting through the possibilities and suspects, offending no-one. Along the way he finally decides to give up his longing for his married colleague Anna and meets someone new. But his main area of interest is his deaf dog Martin who has his nose ripped off by a squirrel in the park. Has it really been stitched back on properly? This is all good light stuff, a perfect antidote to any other weightier material you might be reading. R: 3.4/5.0

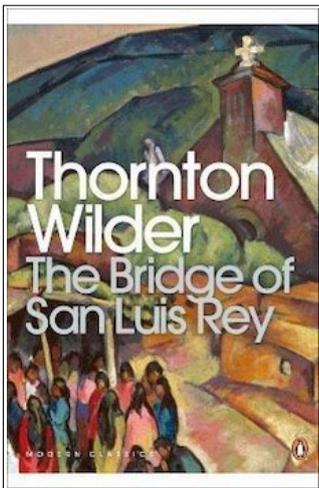
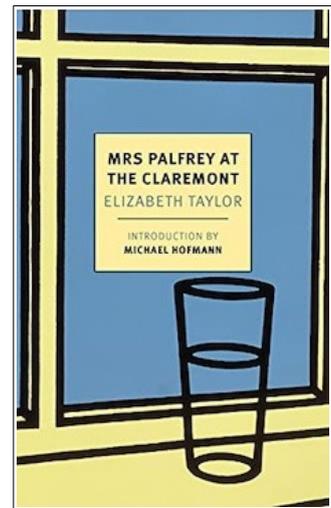


***Where Eagles Dare* (1967)** – This is another of MacLean's books about secretive British Commando missions against German forces in World War II, and pretty good it is as well. You've probably seen the film, featuring Richard Burton as Smith and Clint Eastwood as Schaffer, who lead a team of seven into Germany to rescue a very important British Army General from the Gestapo. (And if you haven't seen it, then why not?) This General holds the whole of the Allies' plans for the invasion of Normandy in his head and it is vital that he is saved from questioning. As expected there are spectacular feats, close-calls, freezing weather, gullible Germans, massive explosions, a car chase (well, actually a bus chase), lots of gun battles, and a plot that keeps you wondering if you missed something along the way, with its twists and turns. MacLean was a master of this sort of stuff and while the prose seems more than a

little trite and cliched in parts he knows how to keep the tension and suspense dialled way up and how to keep you turning the pages. And you can't ask for much more than that from a thriller. R: 3.2/5.0

Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont (1971) – This novel was shortlisted for the 1971 Booker Prize. It also appears on Robert McCrum’s list of the Best 100 Novels.

The recently widowed Mrs Laura Palfrey goes to stay at the Claremont Hotel, on Cromwell Road in South Kensington. She is now on a limited income and she needs help with her living requirements. She had initially thought of Brighton or Bournemouth but she chose London as it would settle her nearer her grandson and closer to the heart of the city. Unfortunately, it becomes clear as the novel progresses, that her grandson does not come to see her and she does not go out much. Then, one day out for a walk, she falls on the pavement and is helped by Ludo, a young man who is an aspiring writer. The two become friends and Mrs Palfrey starts introducing him to the other residents of the Claremont as her real grandson. This was the last of Elizabeth Taylor’s dozen or so novels to be published during her lifetime and it is a small gem. The Claremont, as she depicts it, can be thought of as heaven’s waiting room, people come here in their last few years before they are carted off to a hospital or the funeral home. There are many sombre and sad scenes in this book but as a depiction of old age and the ageing it is a wonder. R: 3.8/5.0



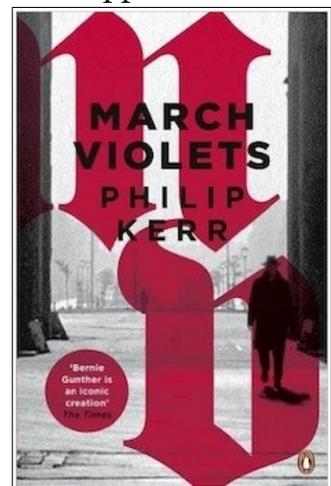
The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) – This novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Best Novel in 1928.

I remember this novel being on the wider reading list for my final year high school English class. I didn’t read it then, and I’m glad I didn’t, as it would not have been my idea of a novel. The basic concept is as follows: a wicker bridge at San Luis Rey in Peru collapses in July 1714, taking five people to their deaths. A local priest, Brother Juniper, decides to determine why God “chose” these five, and the novel consists of details about the accident, a history of each of the five lives, and a final outcome for Brother Juniper and his written account. To me it reads like an early experiment with the novel form, being a series of inter-connected stories rather than a story with a fully connected dramatic arc. It seems you either like this one a lot or not at all. It appears on the

Time All-Time 100 Novels list but not on the Guardian 1000 Novels list, for example. R: 3.5/5.0

March Violets (1989) – This is #1 in the author’s Bernie Gunther series of novels.

In Berlin in winter 1936 a man and a woman are found shot dead in their bed, and then set alight. The couple are connected to a wealthy industrialist, and through him, to the Nationalist Socialist Party. The police are struggling to find a solution to the crime so the industrialist calls in ex-policeman Bernie Gunther, now a PI, to investigate the fire for insurance purposes, though, of course, he really wants to find out what really happened. As do a lot of other people, including Heinrich Himmler. This is an interesting time



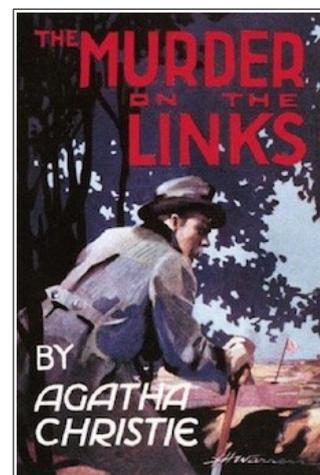
and place in which to set a PI novel, and, as you'd expect, the political and social situation in Berlin and Germany has a major bearing on both the crime and the investigation. This first novel shows signs of the author trying a bit too hard to find his voice, over-doing the hardboiled similes and metaphors and info-dumping his knowledge of Berlin streets, but it shows a lot of promise and will be worth following into the rest of the series. R: 3.6/5.0

The Conversion (2023) – See major review below.

The Murder on the Links (1923) – This is #2 in the author's Hercule Poirot series of novels.

Hercule Poirot receives a cable from France with a call for help and demanding his immediate attendance. He sets off, with his sidekick Hastings in tow, and arrives at his destination outside Paris only to find that his correspondent is dead, murdered of course. Poirot's reputation has preceded him and he is invited to help out with the investigation. In this novel Christie fleshes out Poirot's character and mannerisms giving him his signature line "The little grey cells" (mentioned once in the first book but much more often here). In addition there is a veiled critique of the Sherlock Holmes style of detection with Poirot ridiculing a French detective who uses the technique of meticulous forensic examination of the crime scene, while he focuses on creating a solution based on the available facts.

Unfortunately not all these "available facts" are actually available to the reader as Poirot has a tendency to head off on his own, without the narrator Hastings, in order to follow up a conjecture. The plot here is rather convoluted, as usual. Poirot knows more than anyone else and Hastings is an idiot, as usual, and everything is tied up neatly at the end. R: 2.7/5.0



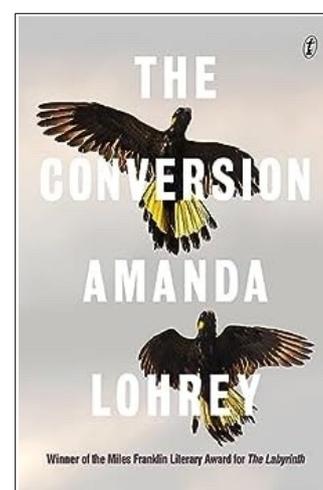
REVIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

The Conversion (2023) by Amanda Lohrey

Genre: Literary

Amanda Lohrey's previous novel was the Miles-Franklin Award-winning ***The Labyrinth*** (which I reviewed in **Perryscope 12**). While this one doesn't reach the heights of that book it is certainly of interest, and can be seen as exploring similar themes.

Nick and Zoe, a Sydney-based couple in their early 60s, are contemplating a "tree-change" by moving to a town in a lightly-disguised Hunter Valley. Nick in particular, is smitten with the idea of converting an old church in a small town into a domestic dwelling. Zoe isn't so sure and stalls both the move and the purchase. Some months later, Nick is dead and as a result Zoe has decided to make a complete change in her life. And the first order of business is to purchase the church and work on the renovation.



The title of this novel has many meanings. There is the major implied conversion of the church from an empty shell into a liveable home, but there are a number of other conversions being undertaken here: Zoe's conversion from happily married woman to slightly disillusioned and bereft widow; her conversion from city dweller to country life; and various other characters also make their own minor "conversions" during the course of the novel.

But at the art of the novel is the conversion of the church. It is a difficult job and one that Zoe feels, at the start, rather overwhelmed by. How does she partition the area to make it workable? Does she put in a mezzanine area to make use of the high space under the roof? What can be done with the stained glass windows? They let in little enough light during some periods and too much in others. Curtains? Blinds? Rip them out? And the large altar, dominating the space, what about that?

As she progresses through the conversion the reader is gradually made aware of the circumstances behind Nick's death, what led up to it and how it occurred. Some of this information is provided her memories of their discussions about the church, and some when her son and then a mutual friend come to visit.

It is possible, and maybe well-justified, to see the conversion of the church as a metaphor for Zoe's understanding of her marriage, and her growing acceptance that, for all his faults, she did love Nick. When the altar is finally removed you are left with the feeling that Zoe has reached another major turning point in her life. And so it transpires.

In the hot, dry landscape a fire starts in the large property neighbouring the church yard. When it is finally extinguished the church still stands but the interior and stained-glass windows require extensive cleaning. Another turning point and time for another major decision in Zoe's life. While I was reading the novel I was a little annoyed by Zoe's prevarication and then with the final decision she makes here. In retrospect I can see that she really has little choice in the matter, though this annoyance may be why I dropped the rating a few points..

Lohrey writes in a clear, natural style. The prose is remarkably easy to read and you never feel you are in any doubt about the character's actions. Their motivations and intentions, on the other hand, are generally only implied. The author wants you to do that part of the work for yourself. And so you should. It takes an old hand to be able to write something which, on the face of it, can be considered rather pedestrian, and yet which contains a lot of depths that can only be seen if you allow the fiction to flow over you. And that's just what you see here.

R: 4.0/5.0

"This is the human paradox of altitude: that it both exalts the individual mind and erases it. Those who travel to mountain tops are half in love with themselves, and half in love with oblivion."

Mountains of the Mind by Robert MacFarlane, p. 157

WHAT I'VE BEEN WATCHING LATELY

January 2024

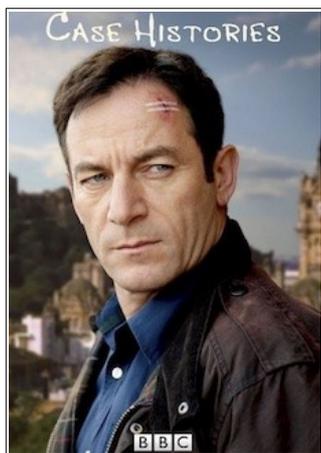
Television

Shetland (Season 8 — 6 episodes) (2023)

Platform: Foxtel/Binge

Genre: Crime police procedural

Three seasons of this show in about a month! But at least this one feels like a newish start. Jimmy Perez is gone and DS McIntosh has been promoted to acting DI (a role she really doesn't want as it would mean she would have to leave Shetland). That's the background. The main area of investigation involves a young woman who returns to Shetland from London and shortly thereafter goes missing. It's thought that she's somehow stolen some money from a criminal gang in London who have sent a couple of hard men after her. In response the London Met sends DI Ruth Calder to Shetland to help with the investigation. Calder has history with the island as she lived there until she was in her late teens when she left after a dispute with her father, a local clergyman. There is a lot going on in this script – sheep mutilations, family disputes, clandestine affairs in the past causing possible births, drug-dealing – and it all comes together in a quite agreeable bundle at the end. The stories have certainly moved away from the original Ann Cleeve's novels and I was worried that the absence of Perez might turn me off. But this one was intriguing enough to look for the next season, whenever that is released. R: 3.8/5.0



Case Histories (Season 1 — 6 episodes) (2011)

Platform: DVD

Genre: PI Crime

Ex-army, ex-detective Jackson Brodie (Jason Isaacs) is now a Private Investigator living and working in Edinburgh. He usually takes on small cases which then tend to become very much bigger during the investigation. This first season covers the first three books in the series by Kate Atkinson, each book covering two one-hour episodes. Book 1 (***Case Histories***) deals with: a thirty-year-old cold case of a missing young girl; a grieving father's attempt to find the man who killed his daughter in his own office; and the missing niece of a woman Brodie meets in a bar. Book 2 (***One Good Turn***): while out jogging one morning Brodie spots a woman's body floating in the water off-shore. He is unable to retrieve her and the police are sceptical about it all. Then he sees the woman walking on an Edinburgh street, and he finds himself involved in an international sex worker exploitation scheme, among other things. Book 3 (***When Will There Be Good News?***): While he is investigating a straying wife Brodie is involved in a train accident while attempting to rescue a woman stuck in a car on the tracks. A young woman gets him to hospital and after she finds out who he is she hires him to track down a missing mother and baby. This is a very good tv series, humorous and

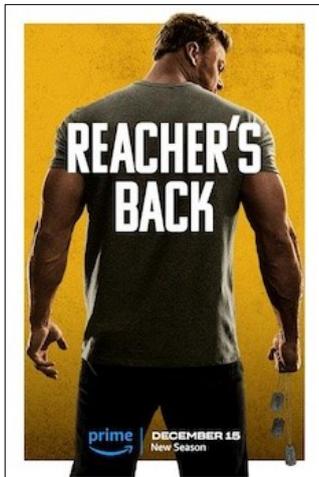
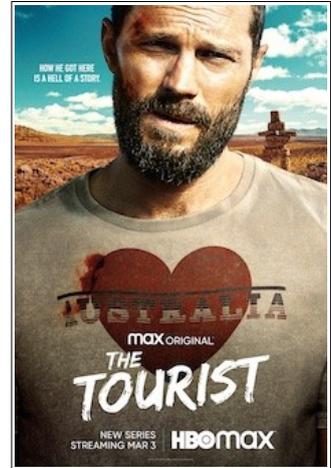
emotional, engaging and intriguing.; good scripts and good acting. Recommended. It's just a pity there is only one more season. R: 4.4/5.0

The Tourist (Season 1 — 6 episodes) (2022)

Platform: DVD

Genre: Crime thriller

Episode one starts with a man driving a car in the Australian outback being pursued by a large semi-trailer. He thinks he has evaded it until it rams into him, side-on, from a dirt road. He then wakes up in hospital with no memory of his own name or anything prior to the accident. He finds a small slip of paper in his clothing with details of a meeting time and place. Soon after he arrives there the spot is blown up by an improvised bomb. He escapes with the waitress and slowly starts trying to piece his life back into some sort of order. As he starts to find out more about himself, including his name, he finds himself mixed up in an international drug smuggling ring, running from the police and other gang members. I was rather dubious about the amnesia angle here but it works and is used to good effect. There are some well-handled unexpected twists and turns in the plot and it will keep you guessing until the end. Although filmed in South Australia this is an international co-production with the lead cop from the Icelandic drama **Trapped** making an appearance. Worth your time. R: 4.0/5.0



Reacher (Season 2 — 8 episodes) (2024)

Platform: Amazon Prime

Genre: Action thriller

This second season is based on the Lee Child novel, **Bad Luck and Trouble** (2007). Reacher is contacted by a member of his old Military Police unit after two other members are found dead, apparently murdered. Dragging in two other members – the only ones they can contact – Reacher and his team stumble on a high-level international arms deal that threatens the safety of every plane in the sky. There are a lot of guns in this season, and a lot of shoot-outs, which isn't the reason why I watch this show. It all got a bit much towards the end and started to become repetitive – 4 against 10 or so, and the same result: 4-0. Yes, Reacher and his team get beaten up, stabbed, and shot but it

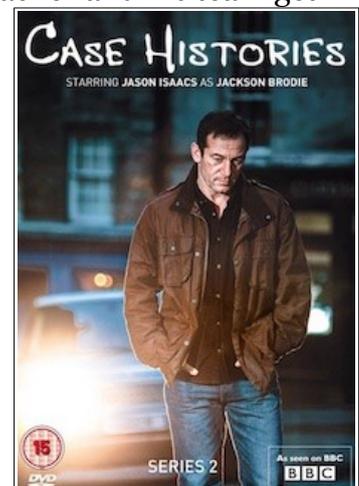
doesn't seem to have the same impact as when he is on his own. R: 3.8/5.0

Case Histories (Season 2 — 3 episodes) (2013)

Platform: DVD

Genre: PI Crime

Jackson Brodie is back with another three stories, with only the first of these "Started Early, Took My Dog" being based on a novel by the original author Kate Atkinson. The other two are based on original screenplays. As usual Brodie is looking for missing people, or trying to solve murder cases that have gone cold. And, also as usual, he ends up getting beaten up, ignored,



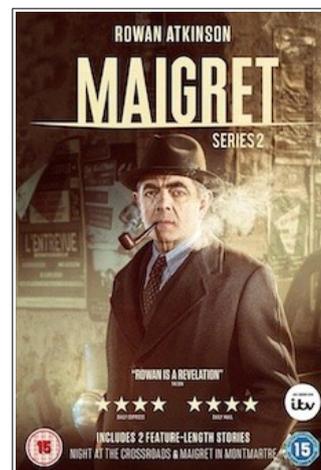
hassled by everyone (police and love interests alike), and generally broke and alone. This is all good stuff with Jason Isaacs perfect in the role. He was filming this in between bouts as Lucius Malfoy in the Harry Potter films. The three episodes here are all 90-minute TV movies which can make the stories feel a little rushed but they are certainly worth viewing and a welcome addition to the first series. R: 4.2/5.0

Maigret in Montmartre (Episode 2 of Season 2) (2017)

Platform: DVD

Genre: Police procedural

This version of the Georges Simenon novel *Inspector Maigret and the Strangled Stripper* (1950) was released as the second episode of season 2 of the Maigret series from ITV featuring Rowan Atkinson in the lead role. When two women are found strangled on the same night in Paris, supposedly by the same man, yet in two different locations, Maigret has to dig into the connections between the two. This will take him into a sleazy nightclub, and involve him with an even sleazier manager, drug-taking aristocracy, and rent boys all centred around the district of Montmartre. This is considered one of the best of Simenon's stories and has been filmed a number of times previously. I've heard a few people mention that they dislike Atkinson in this role but I think he handles it very well; comedians are generally very good when they try dramatic roles. We watched this after we realised we had missed it first time round. The plot is detailed and, for once, Maigret isn't sure at the beginning who the murderer is. This and the others in this series are recommended. R: 4.1/5.0



Film

Codes – P: platform (C for cinema, blank for home); R: rating, out of 5.0.

Abbr – 1001: 1001 Films You Must See Before You Die; AA BP: Academy Awards Best Picture; Hugo – Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation

Notes: I've decided that the only way I can adequately keep track of the films I watch, and then hopefully ensure I watch a few more this year, is to use the same table structure as I do for books. I have no idea if it will work but it's worth a try.

January 2024 films

Title	Director	Genre	Date	P	R	Rel Date	Notes
<i>Avengers: Infinity War</i>	Anthony & Joe Russo	Marvel Superhero	Jan 8		4.0	2018	1001
<i>Avengers : Endgame</i>	Anthony & Joe Russo	Marvel Superhero	Jan 10		4.0	2019	1001
<i>Godzilla Minus One</i>	Takashi Yamazaki	SF Monster	Jan 16	C	3.8	2023	Japanese (subtitles)
<i>The French Connection</i>	William Friedkin	Crime	Jan 21		4.2	1971	AA BP; 1001
<i>Galaxy Quest</i>	Dean Parisot	Sf	Jan 26		3.7	1999	Hugo

Films watched in the period: 5

Yearly total to end of period: 5

Avengers: Infinity War (2018) and ***Avengers: Endgame*** (2019)

Platform: Disney +

Genre: Marvel Superhero

Whether you like these movies or not you have to give the Marvel Cinematic Universe points for their audacity in the build-up to these films. Across three “phases” each of 6 films (now collectively referred to as the “Infinity” phase), over ten or so years (2008-2019) the film-makers built up their characters (Iron Man, the Hulk, the Black Widow, Thor, the Avengers, Dr Strange, Black Panther, etc etc), weaving them in and out of conflict until they finally reached this pair of films dealing with the cosmic threat of Thanos, who acquires the means to destroy half the life in the universe with just one snap of his fingers. Comic-book, simplistic stuff? Sure, but spectacular and highly enjoyable just the same.



I suspect that the success of the venture was more than partly due to the casting: Robert Downey Jr as Iron Man – contentious at the time but we can now see what he can really do in ***Oppenheimer***; Chris Evans as Captain America – after featuring as the Human Torch in a rather forgettable version of the ***Fantastic Four***; Mark Ruffalo as the Hulk – after the studios had tried Eric Bana and Edward Norton in the role; Chris Hemsworth as Thor – and who knew he had such comic timing; and as well all the rest of the other



characters. The studio spent a lot of time and effort getting the casting right and it shows. As does the whole rest of the film-making process: direction, costuming, script, etc etc.

I doubt whether these films could have been made much earlier as the ability to develop and combine the special effects just wasn't fully available, or affordable previously. Yes, the films are special effects heavy, but it takes a lot of film-making skill to be able to combine those effects with real-life action to get the final result as displayed here.

There were certainly a few duds along the way (***Thor: The Dark World*** being certainly one of them) but these came in the middle of the sequence and didn't undermine the momentum of the whole process.

Marvel may well have run its course now though. The following Multiverse Saga of films just doesn't seem to have the spark of these earlier ones. Maybe it's becoming old-hat now, maybe we're getting over the whole superhero genre of films. If so, then I'm not surprised. It has seemed as if we've been swamped with these films for 10 years. So it may be time to move on, but we can still look back at these exceptionally constructed pieces of cinema art.

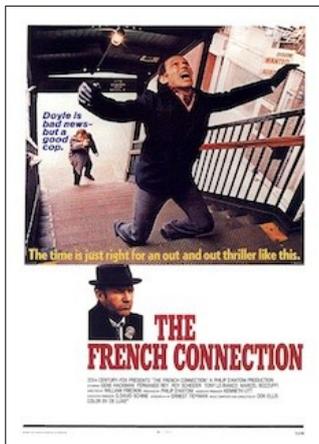
R: 4.0/5.0

Godzilla Minus One (2023)

Platform: Cinema

Genre: SF Monster

This is basically Godzilla’s origin film, hence the title indicating a prequel. Here the monster is first encountered at the end of the Second World War on Odo Island in the Pacific. After wrecking the island and killing most of the Japanese servicemen there it disappears. Following the American atomic bomb tests in the Pacific it resurfaces, now much, much bigger and starts attacking shipping and heading towards the Japanese main islands. Two survivors from Odo Island join an attack on the creature and, of course, mayhem ensues. There is something every different in Japanese monster movies, compared to their Western counterparts. The Japanese seem to understand the Jungian aspects of the creature and can use it as a metaphor for the fight of the “common people” against forces greater than them, eg the government. R: 3.8/5.0



The French Connection (1971)

Platform: Disney +

Genre: Police Crime

This film won Best Picture at the 1972 Academy Awards, and it appears on the list of 1001 Films You Must See Before You Die. Popeye Doyle (Gene Hackman) is the quintessential NY narcotics cop in the early 1970s who, along with his partner Cloudy Russo (Roy Schneider) stumble on some small-time crims, who, in turn, lead them to a large international drug smuggling ring out of France. The film is shot in a grainy documentary style. You don’t feel much sympathy for any of the characters here and the New York locations look grim and uninviting. The director, William Friedkin, has indicated that he based the style on the film *Z*, a

French film by Costra-Gravas. Everything about this is interesting: the direction, the performances by Hackman and Schneider, and the famous car chase through the streets of New York. Certainly worth a re-watch. R: 4.2/5.0

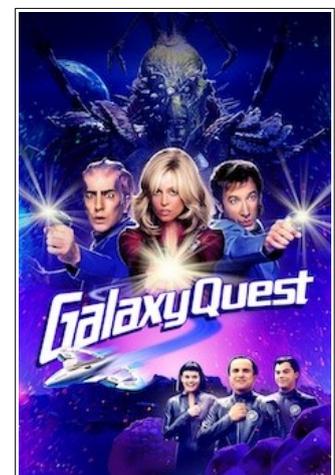
Galaxy Quest (1999)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Science Fiction Comedy

Winner of the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation in 2000.

Known as the best “non-Star Trek” *Star Trek* film ever made this is a helluva lot of fun. The stars of a Star Trek-like television program are contacted by an alien race while attending a fan convention. The aliens consider the program an “historical document” and want the actors (Tim Allen, Sigourney Weaver, Alan Rickman, Tony Shalhoub and Sam Rockwell among others) to help them defeat another alien race which is trying to wipe them out. Misunderstandings and hilarity ensue. There was a distinct possibility here that fun could have been severely poked at the fans



and the genre, but that doesn't happen. Both are an integral part of the story and without them the whole thing would have fallen into a gigantic hole. R: 3.7/5.0

PERRYSCOPE Responses

Perryscope 38:

Kim Huett: “You are indeed correct about it being Zander Schloss who sings the weiner song in *Straight To Hell*. Uncertain memory had me thinking it was Elvis Costello because to me he certainly looks like Costello. I'm not good when it comes to faces though so I might be the only one who can see any similarity. The fact that Costello was cast in a different role in this film didn't help resolve my confusion either.”

Perryscope 39:

Leigh Edmonds: “A quick letter of comment to let you know that I've received the latest **Perryscope** which is your most colourful yet. I've dipped into it and enjoyed reading your simple but often eloquent description of where you went and what you saw. Very nicely done indeed. You've set me something of an example about what I might do on my trip USAwise.”

[**PM:** I've tried various methods of writing trip reports of this type and have come to the conclusion that the writing is okay, it's the downloading, sorting, checking, selecting, re-sizing and positioning the pictures that takes the most time. I've decided in future to put that part of the process to one side. Writing up a day's events is always best undertaken as soon as possible. It's the small conversations and observations that are lost otherwise.]

Mark Olson: “Finally, a cover portrait which captures the inner man!

“Very interesting about your trip to India. I was in Bangalore once, for work. The traffic terrified me – I arrived about 4 am and the road to the hotel was nearly empty, so the taxi driver drove me direct to the hotel. Meaning not stopping for red lights or stop signs or cross-traffic or anything. He *did* honk a couple of times before he barrelled across each intersection. The only time we got away from work/hotel was for dinner one evening. The traffic was wall to wall (not 'curb to curb', since they were driving on the sidewalks) and the only thing that prevented mass death was (a) no one could move quickly and (b) everyone seemed relaxed and genial. (Unlike me.)”

[**PM:** I think the only thing Indian traffic has going for it is that they drive on the same side of the road as we do in Australia. It is chaos.]



“I never had the time to go shopping that trip, but just a year or so ago we were with a group at a fairly high-end rug merchant in Turkey and got the full treatment. The show they put on seemed to be entirely spontaneous but couldn't have been. We were seated along the walls (lined with carpets) of a large room. As the salesman talked, a couple of guys came out and with dexterous flicks of their wrists unrolled carpet after carpet until the floor was covered 5-10 deep. It was beautifully choreographed and they made quite a few sales in our group. (I'm happy to say that we were immune, mainly because we have wood floors and like them.) The selling was artistry of a kind and skill that I never see in the US.”

[**PM:** That pretty much describes the process in India as well. But it was something that my wife and I were expecting as it is similar to what we had previously experienced in Australian rug shops, especially those that sell Persian rugs. We have a number of “hall runners” in our house — long, narrow rugs about 3 metres long and 1 wide — that we use to cover the polished floorboards in our house. These Persian rugs were purchased in local Melbourne rug stores that used the same selling technique.]

“I sympathize with you having a cooking class which wasn't hands-on. Priscilla and I love cooking classes and we found a place in Boston where it's 100% hands-on. They're run after hours in a gourmet food shop's prep kitchen and nothing's shiny as it's a working kitchen. A dozen people sit around a table with stoves and equipment all around, and the cook/teacher has us do everything from prep to cooking to eating. (It's always evenings, so they start with bottles of wine and snacks and then with eating whatever we prepared.) Great fun and good eating. We've never tried this while travelling.”

[**PM:** I can certainly recommend taking cooking courses while in a foreign country. We usually find it very enjoyable part of the travel experience. I can't see us doing so in Scotland later this year though. I'm not sure I really want to know how to cook a deep-fried Mars Bar.]

Martin Field: “..enjoyed your comprehensive travelogue – you both must have been exhausted at the end of the trip.” [**PM:** Oh, yes.]

“We did a similar Tripadeal tour of India – that ended as Covid was taking off – some anxiety there. Overall, Tripadeal does what it offers to do at a very good price. However, it's a pity they don't warn travellers about the about the time wasted at hard sell carpet/jewellery/perfume, etc. factory outlets.”

[**PM:** The tour guides generally pitch these as being an introduction to a local cultural tradecraft – carving, weaving, painting etc – which quickly morphs into a sales pitch. Being in a group meant that we didn't feel as though the pitch was directly solely at us. Much easier to ignore it in that circumstance. It's also easiest going in not to be wanting to buy anything. If they get a faint sniff you're interested in anything then watch out.

Barbara O’Sullivan: “Really enjoyed your Indian travelogue. The format worked well—very engaging pics and commentaries. (Much taken with shot of you in traditional garb!)

“Seems like a tour is advised when exploring most of this exotic place. I’ve heard/read disturbing tales from other people who made their own way and experienced culture shock re poverty, beggars, pollution, Delhi Belly, etc! Glad that you and Robyn managed to avoid much of those!”

[**PM:** We stayed remarkably well. Robyn used to joke that we were lined up to be clean and sanitary all the way through the tour until the last day when she had booked us a food street walking tour in Delhi, just before our long flights home. We were expecting an out-of-stomach experience of one sort or another on the flight home, but we made it through unscathed.]

“Closer to home, I can recommend a visit to Ballarat. Recently checked out The Art Gallery again, which is apparently the oldest in Australia. One of the current, free exhibitions (finishing on Sunday 11/2/24), Significant Others, is well worth a look. [**PM:** Missed that one.] Features works by John Brack and his wife, Helen Maudsley, Hans Heysen and his daughter, Nora Albert Tucker and Joy Hester, to mention just a few.

“The Botanical Gardens are also delightful. The path with busts of Australia’s Prime Ministers is fascinating. (‘Scomo’ yet to be immortalised in bronze—the pigeons can hardly wait, no doubt!)”

[**PM:** And not just the pigeons I suspect.]

Rose Mitchell: “Really interesting edition Perry. Congratulations Chong what a brilliant idea!

“While I followed your Facebook posts on your adventures on the Subcontinent, it was fascinating and most enjoyable viewing your photos in a single issue. Gandhi’s Memorial Park an entire area was a memorial to him and his work. It looked quiet and peaceful. How fitting instead of a statue that will inevitably be overlooked or ignored in future generations, 100 years or so. Or possibly even desecrated for some infringement against a future generation’s sensibilities. Although, Cancel Culture might be cancelled in the future.

“Your turban — I have no words. I guess it was already made up and plonked on your head. It was a bit like a chef’s hat.”

[**PM:** It was rather like that, and yes, it was just plonked on my head, and scrunched down to fit. I have, what I like to call, a large macro-cephalic index. Some people — it may well have been you! — wanted me to bring it back home, but it was only ever going to be a one-off garment wearing exercise. And as I’m attempting to buy less rather than more stuff these days, I was quite happy to hand it back. I reckon they chose the largest jacket they had in stock and it was only just big enough.]

Perryscope 41

“The architecture was spectacular and must have been breathtaking in real life. I like the photo of the Taj Mahal in the distance (p10) it looked ethereal. How did you do with the language?”

[**PM:** Everyone either spoke English or we had guides who could translate quickly for us. It’s what you pay for – the guide I mean.]

Perryscope 40:

Leigh Edmonds: “Thanks for **Perryscope 40** and its remarkable cover, clever rather than a personal statement for once, though I wonder what the rocks would say if they could.”

[**PM:** Let’s not speculate on that. I suspect they might not have been too impressed with this bunch of idiot tourists hanging around.]

“Best Books of 2023’ had me intrigued, not so much by what you had read but the statistics that went with them – though you made me think I must have another look at *Slaughterhouse 5*.”



“What interested me was the balance in your reading between old stuff and new releases. I wondered if you were trying to keep up to date with the new material or you were trying to focus on reading the best of the older stuff, given that you mentioned lists of books to be read before expiration. There is always the desire to look at what everyone else is talking about which means being current, but there is always the sneaking suspicion that while you’re doing that you’re missing out on the best of what went before. Of the current stuff a goodly proportion is always a disappointment but some good new work usually emerges. On the other hand, the passage of time and the evolution of a canon (and I think we probably each have our own) winnows out the less than great writing.”

“So I wondered if you had a deliberate approach to this or you just plucked books off the shelf as whim – guided by your masterplan goals – took you. I noted that you’ve given publication dates for your ‘best of’ and I wondered if they could tell me anything. Unfortunately only 32 of the 90 books you read are listed with dates but that might still be a statistically interesting sample. (To save you the effort I’ve done the analysis for you. I read this issue on the train back to Ballarat after lunch with David and Sue and ran out of other things to do. If I’ve got something wrong in the calculations you should blame a jolt on the train, not my ability to count.)

“Of the 32 books you rated among ‘The Best’, ten were written in the 2020s, five in the 2010s, two in the 2000s, one in the 1990s, none in the 1980s, three in the 1970s, three in the 1960s, none in the 1950s or 1940s, two in the 1930s, one in the 1920s, one in the 1890s and one in the 1880s. I’m not smart enough to work that out as percentages but I’m sure some of your readers can. If we want to judge modernity by centuries then you read 17 published in the 21st Century, 14 written in the 20th Century and 2 in the 19th. This seems to indicate a distinct preference for more modern books, particularly since we have only

seen about 23 per cent of the 21st Century (see, I can do some percentages).

“How do you plead? Guilty or Not Guilty?”

[**PM:** I suspect a bit of both. There are a lot of major gaps in my reading as I never really tackled the classics when I was younger. Now that I have more time, and hopefully more life experience, I can go back and read them with some level of understanding.

But it's not just the classics that I read in this way. I'm also looking at improving my reading of older crime, mystery and sf novels from the past, ones that I missed and others that I had read previously and wanted to read again one more time. I don't deliberately set out to read something from a particular decade though I can see how it might appear that way. Sometimes you'll see a batch of sf novels from the 1960s read closely together, and that was due to the reading requirements for the podcast. Similar events might occur in the future as I do research for other things.

The modern novel, of whatever genre, has really only been in existence for about 150 years. I read the newer stuff to keep up with modern trends, and I read the older stuff to provide me with a means to appreciate the newer stuff, and work between the two. In other words I'm looking for influences between books and authors. Some people might refer to this as research. I see it as just a by-product of what I want to read at any given moment.]

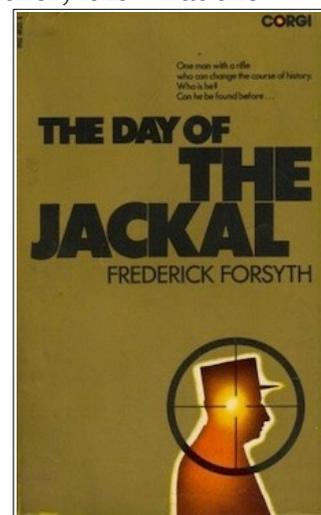
“In the meantime, I enjoyed Julian's piece. It has done for me what a good review should do, tell me whether or not to waste my hard earned on something. In this case Julian had stopped me from wasting my money on something I would neither like or appreciate. Good for him for doing the work for me.”

[**PM:** He has quite wide-ranging tastes and a lot of knowledge when it comes to music and he really should be writing about it more often. Every nudge is useful.]

“Young Geoff Dyer has clearly got some strange ideas about history, judging from your little paragraph from him in page 19. History isn't what happened either, it is what the historian who wrote the history thinks happened, which is almost the same as fiction more times than it should be.”

[**PM:** And there we have it, out of an historian's mouth no less.]

Kim Huett: “It's been many years since I read *The Day of the Jackal*, and a number of books like it, but I recall enjoying it immensely. Mostly for the world building, in this case all the detailed explanations as to how the characters went about doing everything they needed to do. The fact that it is a well written and detailed description of how to do things you yourself have never attempted can be quite fascinating. Who doesn't love looking below the surface of our world, even the apparently mundane bits?



“This is why I've been kicking around the idea that Stephen King's novel, *Salem's Lot* could be rewritten as a vastly better book by using the format employed by *The Day of the Jackal*. Just how would a vampire and his familiar flee Europe to avoid discovery and just how would they prime a small town in Tasmania to ensure it became their private preserve without any outsiders noticing. “And how would the protagonists go about thwarting such plans. The chess match between these two opposing forces would interest me far more than King's superficial depictions of small-town life in Bumfuck, Nowheresville.”

[**PM:** I have always had a fond memory of reading *Salem's Lot*, given it was the first of that author's I had come across. Haven't read it for a while. Maybe I should go back and look at it again.]

Rose Mitchell: “I had just finished browsing **PS39** and composing some comments, when plonk, **PS40** arrives in my In-box.”

[**PM:** That was just a product of me taking so long to get **P39** out into the real world. It's good to have the photos in with the text but it sure takes a while to select, re-size and then position them.]

“It seems you and I have similar reading tastes but then I remembered that **Perryscope** and **Two Chairs Talking** is my main source for recommended reading.

“I nominated *Mountain in the Sea* and *Sea of Tranquility* for the Hugos last year. I was pretty keen to see how the Chinese would treat *Mountain* considering that one of the main characters was a Mongolian HI-Tech Warrior, trained by Tibet, the dominate global super power. He only left out the Urghers for a trifecta that would piss off the CCP. I was surprised to see it on the long list of nominees, and equally perplexed that *SoT* didn't make it to the 1st 15. The *Every Version of You* I picked up after seeing Grace Chan at Conflux last year. Very good debut novel showed lots of potential.”

[**PM:** Yes, I look forward to following Chan's work as well. Hopefully she'll have something out in the near future.]

“Such in-depth analysis, so self aware and setting achievable goals for reading for enjoyment.” [**PM:** I fear you may have confused me with someone else.]

“Garth Spencer's comments threw me: I had to go back and look up what I rabbit on about regarding **PS37**. But yes, Perry you are indeed right about my intentions: far too old for con running game nowadays.” [**PM:** Absolutely.]

I also heard from: **Chong** (who liked the P39 cover); **David Grigg**; **Lucy Sussex**; **Edie Stern** (who also liked the P39 cover); **Nic Farey**; **Rob Gerrand** (who noted: “It's helpful to remember that just as Europe and China are a collection of many different geographies and cultures, so is India.” - very true); **Jerry Kaufman**; thank you one and all.

