

wineries were okay but he was only undertaking the 45-minute drive to Adelaide when he needed to attend a medical appointment. The last time he visited Victoria was about 7 years ago.

He was always cheery on the phone to the amusement of my step-mother who consistently told me that he was mostly the opposite during the day. He had no enthusiasm for anything and would only leave the house if prodded.

A couple of years ago he had been persuaded to use a stick when walking for support. He'd had a couple of falls in the house which convinced him. He didn't like it at all, though he did gradually get used to it.

I tried to visit two or three times a year, flying into Adelaide from Melbourne, hiring a car at the airport and driving down to stay with him. On most of these occasions I'd take him out visiting wineries, which gave my step-mother a bit of a break and got him out of the house. This was great for the two of us, but it didn't help my bank balance much as I bought quite a lot of wine over the years.

A year or so back he really couldn't even do that. The driving was okay. The trouble was getting from the car to the winery door. Stairs were a problem, uneven ground unpassable.

But we persisted in visiting restaurants and I even got him to the occasional pub.

We had our first major scare in late August 2019 when he was taken to hospital in an ambulance. He was suffering from shortness of breath and probably had suffered a small heart attack. At the time I was probably as far away from him as I could possibly be, somewhere on the north-east coast of Iceland about 100 kilometres from the Arctic Circle and all-but directly on the other side of the planet.

Luckily he pulled through. The problem seemed to be that the medication he was taking was at the wrong dosage and as a result his heart function had dropped away to be below 20%. He couldn't clear the fluid from his lungs and he was basically drowning. Oxygen and a change of medication – they dropped it completely – and he was right again in a few days and back home. He was 89.

With each weekly phone call he sounded weaker, more vague, less inclined to talk on the phone. Robyn and I visited in early November 2019. This was to be our last trip over there together until the end.

We had planned to drive over to Willunga as a family (Robyn, me and the kids) over Easter 2020. COVID-19 killed any plans of that. Through March and April his condition slowly got worse.

In early May he was short of breath and it was decided that a full scan might point out the trouble. It showed that he was having trouble with his kidneys and that there appeared to be a large mass on one lung. The doctors suggested further testing – probably an invasive biopsy though this was never verified to me – which Dad refused. He'd had enough.

At some time earlier in the year I'd told my step-mother that I was in a position to drop

everything and drive over to help out if she wanted me. She had decided to nurse Dad at home until the end so I figured she was going to need some emotion and physical support at some point. A week after the scan results were received I drove over with a note from his doctor which granted me permission to enter the locked-down state of Victoria on compassionate grounds.

A week later he passed away peacefully in his sleep. Robyn and the kids had just made it over from Melbourne three or four hours before. Dad was mostly non-communicative by that time but it seemed he was aware they were there.

That last week was difficult for all of us, especially my step-mother. But I don't regret a minute of it.

Vale Brian Robert Middlemiss 20.07.1930 – 05.06.2020

My retirement sort of snuck up on me unexpected. Timing was the main problem. I'd been talking about it with family and friends for some months – they may say years, and they'd probably be right – but I could never seem to get set on a date. I figured I didn't want to work past 65, which comes up later in August 2020, which sort of left the question of when to finish: the end of 2019?, or the end of June 2020 to co-incide with the end of that financial year?, or the start of the trip Robyn and I had planned to wrap around the New Zealand Worldcon?, or my actual birthday? Decision, decisions.

And then the problem was taken out of my hands.

In August 2019 Robyn and I travelled to Ireland, for the Dublin Worldcon, and then on to Scotland, Iceland and France getting back to Melbourne at the start of September. Prior to this trip my manager at my then job had told me that the 6-month IT contract I was then on would be my last. But rather than letting me go they would probably offer me a permanent role from the end of 2019. So when, in late September after I'd been back at work for about a fortnight, my manager asked if he could have a chat I thought he'd be talking about getting the new arrangements in place.

No, exactly the opposite.

The company – a publicly owned water company – had recently undertaken a budget review and had come to realise they were in a bit of strife. If they didn't shed some workforce and close down a lot of projects then they wouldn't make it to the end of the current financial year. I knew what was coming – they would have to cut short my current contract by two months and wouldn't be able to recruit me into any sort of permanent role.

This struck me as a failure of management oversight but there was nothing I could do about it. Contractors are always the first to be shown the door when finances run tight, it's just part of the deal. And if you don't realise that going in then you are deluding yourself.

That didn't make it any easier of course. They gave me about a month's notice, which was good of them. It was quite within their rights to give me a day. So I was back out in the market, a place that I had hoped not to visit again.

I could tell things were going badly with the Australian economy when I started looking for work. There was nothing much out there.

The first opportunity I found seemed pretty good. I thought I fitted the role to a fair degree (you're never really perfect unless you've worked in that exact position before), and the interview appeared to go well. So I waited for a decision, and none came. My agent kept pushing for an answer, and still none came. Nothing. No "yes" or "no", or an indication that they were still deciding. Nothing.

I asked around and it seems that this sort of thing is rapidly becoming the norm: "we'll only contact you if we offer you the job." It might be standard business practice but it's still bloody impolite. There is nothing personal in all this so I just didn't, and don't see the problem with giving some feedback.

I was still looking and there was still nothing out there. 2020 rolled around and with January always being a dead month for recruitment in Australia it was not until February that I was contacted about another role.

It was located in Melbourne's eastern suburbs and I'd have to drive but I figured I was getting to the point where I couldn't be choosy.

Again I reckon I fitted the role, and again the interview went well. Nothing to complain about there. And this time they came back with an answer rather quickly. They considered me a good, strong candidate but didn't think I would be a "good cultural fit".

If you're not in the workforce these days you may not be aware that this is code for "you're too old". Employers are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of age of course so they have to find another way of putting it.

And that was the final straw. I'd had enough. Hunting for a job was doing my head in, our finances were basically okay. So I decided to give it all away and retire. Whether that was the best decision only time will tell. So far, it hasn't been too bad.

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WHAT I'VE BEEN READING LATELY

Most of what I've been reading this year has been covered by discussions on the podcast (35 of 63) with a couple more to follow over the next few episodes.

I thought, though, that it might be an interesting exercise to summarise my reading for the first half of 2020. So skip this section if numbers and lists bore you.

I read 63 books in the first half of 2020, 12 more than my target (51 of 102 for the year). Of those I split the books along genre lines as follows: Literary 12; SF 33, Fantasy 5; Horror 1; Crime 5; Thriller/Spy 4; Non-Fiction 3.

The big number of SF is due to the reading requirements of the podcast. This is going to be the same for the first half of most years as I attempt to read through the major works published in

the previous year so I can nominate and vote for the Hugo Awards.

Splitting the books into type gives me: novels 42; novellas 13 (published separately); single-author collections 5; anthologies 0; non-fiction 3. Men wrote 42 of the books and women 21 (must do better there); 35 were e-books and 28 were on paper; and 14 of the 63 I'd previously read.

The single-author collection number is due to the reading of the short fiction on the Hugo ballots for the early sixties specifically for the podcast . If I'm going to be reading the individual work on a ballot out of a collection then I reckon I might just as well finish the rest of it. The lack of anthologies is due mainly to the reading done in other areas. I expect this will pick up in the second half of the year.

They are just the bland numbers; the real interest for me lies in what were the best books I read in the past six months. Documenting them now will give me the opportunity to compare these interim choices with my main ones at the end of the year. Small things etc.

The task of choosing my best books over any period has now been made a bit easier since I decided to put a value against each book. These are out of 5, with values down to one decimal place. If you want to get pedantic then I guess you could say the values are out of 50 divided by 10. That would work.

The reason behind the use of 5 (or 50 if you prefer) is that it allows me to tag each book in Goodreads.com which uses a five star system. I've been using this website for a few years now and can recommend it as a way of recording your reading history. It also does a good job of making suggestions for your future reading based on your past reading history. Not that I'm using that terribly much.

So, to the lists; top 5s with ties. These are all listed in value order, not reading order as has been my preference in the past. I'll put my value against each item as well.

Best SF (19 read)

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS by Ursula K. Le Guin (4.9)

A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ by Walter M. Miller Jr (4.8)

THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE by Philip K. Dick (4.7)

INFINITE DETAIL by Tim Maugham (4.7)

A MEMORY CALLED EMPIRE by Arkady Martine (4.6)

THE TEN THOUSAND DOORS OF JANUARY by Alix E. Harrow (4.6)

Best Fantasy (1 read)

MIDDLEGAME by Seanan McGuire (4.2)

Best Horror (1 read)

THE OUTSIDER by Stephen King (3.8)

Best YA (1 read)

VOICES by Ursula K. Le Guin (4.6)

Best Crime (4 read)

PEACE by Garry Disher (4.5)
FATHERLAND by Robert Harris (4.0)
WINGS OVER THE DIAMANTINA by Arthur W. Upfield (3.4)
UNNATURAL DEATH by Dorothy L. Sayers (3.2)

Best Thriller/Spy (4 read)
THE TANGO BRIEFING by Adam Hall (4.7)
NOVEMBER ROAD by Lou Berney (4.3)
A COFFIN FOR DIMITRIOS By Eric Ambler (3.8)
BLUE MOON by Lee Child (3.4)

Best Literary (12 read)
THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN By John Fowles (4.9)
A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY by J. L Carr (4.7)
LOITERING WITH INTENT by Muriel Spark (3.9)
VISITANTS by Randolph Stowe (3.8)
ROOM TEMPERATURE by Nicholson Baker (3.8)

Best Novella (13 read)
THIS IS HOW YOU LOSE THE TIME WAR by Amal El-Mohtar & Max Gladstone (4.4)
PROSPER'S DEMON by K. J. Parker (4.1)
SISTERS OF THE VAST BLACK by Lina Rather (4.0)
THE HANTING OF TRAM CAR 015 by P. Djeli Clark (4.0)
THE LIGHTS GO OUT IN LYCHFORD by Paul Cornell (3.8)

Best Single-Author Collection (5 read)
THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES by Arthur Conan Doyle (3.4)
EXHALATION by Ted Chiang (3.4)
THE BIG FRONT YARD AND OTHER STORIES by Clifford D. Simak (3.2)
THE DARK SIDE OF THE EARTH by Alfred Bester (3.0)
THE BOOK OF POUL ANDERSON by Poul Anderson (3.0)

Best of the Period
THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS by Ursula K. Le Guin (4.9)
THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN by John Fowles (4.9)
A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ by Walter M. Miller Jr (4.8)
THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE by Philip K. Dick (4.7)
THE TANGO BRIEFING by Adam Hall (4.7)
INFINITE DETAIL by Tim Maugham (4.7)
A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY by J. L Carr (4.7)

I've obviously got some reading to do in the Fantasy, Horror and YA categories, and I also need to find some better single-author collections by the end of the year.

More next time.

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