

PERRYSSCOPE 15

PERRYSCOPE 15, October 2021, is an issue of the personalzine published, whenever the mood takes him, by **Perry Middlemiss**, 32 Elphin Grove, Hawthorn, Victoria, AUSTRALIA 3122. E: perry@middlemiss.org Produced initially for ANZAPA (the Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association) and then anyone else unlucky enough to receive it. Also available for trade or download at efanazines.com with thanks to Bill Burns, and FANAC.org with thanks to Joe Siclari and Edie Stern. Unless otherwise specified all material is written by me.
Cover by Chong.

INTRODUCTION

This issue's cover is probably the best that Chong has produced for me. He drew this while we were chatting after a lunch of noodles in Glenferrie Road, and he's captured the current "mad scientist" or "finger-in-a-light-socket" look very well. If you want to see what else he's been working on lately you can go to his Instagram account (search for him under "w.h.chong"). There you'll find some other drawings of me among many, many others.

oooOooo

I was very saddened to hear news of the death of Judith Hanna (1954-2021) during this past month. She was someone I'd known on and off over the past forty or so years. She was an Australian science fiction fan who lived in a number of places in Australia, the last being in Sydney, before moving to London in the early 1980s to be with Joseph Nicholas. She'd met Joseph (as had I) when he travelled to Australia in 1981 as the GUFF candidate, representing European sf fandom. I don't remember ever meeting her in Australia before she moved away but got to know her more after she and Joseph married and after Robyn and I moved to London in the early 1990s.

She was always a joy to meet and talk to. She is a great loss.

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WHAT'S HAPPENING IN MY LIFE

A Reader's Journey : 3. The Booker Prize

Sometime in the early 1980s I got it into my head that I needed to expand my reading tastes. I wanted to get some idea of what modern literature was up to, and decided, for some reason, to fixate on the Booker Prize based in the United Kingdom. Maybe it was because Tom Keneally had become the first Australian to win the prize for his novel **Schindler's Ark** in 1982, or maybe it was for some other long-forgotten reason.

Before long I was scouring newspapers, magazines and reference material attempting to get a full listing of all the shortlists for the award. This was not as easy as it sounds in the years prior to the world wide web. Somehow or other I get the bulk of the material together and

started reading through the winners and some of the finalists, when I could find them. The inaugural winner of the award, ***Something to Answer For*** by P. H. Newby, was notorious for being very hard to find. It was out of print for many years after its win in 1969, popping up in a paperback edition in 1993 and then not re-surfacing again until around 2008. I didn't find a copy to read until 2019.

The Booker prize is an odd award. Sometimes it will pick out some absolute gems and other times some total duds (see the piece that follows this). But it certainly introduced me to some interesting, and often neglected, authors from the British Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland. Most that I had never heard of previously.

I'm thinking specifically of authors such as Penelope Lively, Julian Barnes, Penelope Fitzgerald, William Trevor, Ian McEwan, Timothy Mo, A. S. Byatt, Graham Swift, Kazuo Ishiguro and Roddy Doyle, among many others. Some of these won the award, and others tended to be eternal nominees.

The allure of the prize started to wane for me after 2013, when the administrators decided to broaden the base of nominees to include writers from anywhere in the world, so long as the book was in English and published in the UK in the year under consideration. I thought this was a stupid idea then, and I still think it's a stupid idea now. Books by US authors seemed destined to dominate, and, while they have only won two of the prizes presented since 2014, they do seem to be dominating the lists of finalists. I never understood the reasoning behind the change – the US National Book Award will never change their citizenship criteria – and can only assume it is for marketing and publicity purposes. The trouble is that great authors from “lesser” publishing countries like New Zealand, Australia, Pakistan and the Caribbean now stand little chance of making the final nominees list.

For a number of years in the middle 1990s I maintained a website dedicated to the prize but haven't updated it in some time now. The Wikipedia pages are far more comprehensive than mine were ever destined to be.

My fascination with the award is fading now, and that is a sad thing. I still keep an eye on it but not with the same level of interest as previously.

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Back in 2006 I got into an online discussion on the weblog “Campaign for the American Reader” regarding the Booker Prize and some of the “bad” novels that had won it over the years. There was one year in particular that irked me: 1986. I felt compelled to write about it. It appears I was a lot more caustic back then. That piece follows:

Leaving aside minor judging glitches such as 1991, when Ben Okri's magic realism beat out the better "real realism" of Rohinton Mistry, the major Booker Prize gaffe occurred in 1986 when Kingsley Amis got the gong. I like to think of this as the Booker's “Henry Fonda” year.

In 1981 Henry Fonda was the ageing doyen of a famous acting family and near the end of his career when he appeared in “On Golden Pond” with his daughter Jane and

Katherine Hepburn. Fonda was nominated for a Best Actor Award in a relatively weak year (Dudley Moore?) which had one stand-out performance, that of Burt Lancaster in “Atlantic City”. I don’t know what odds were given on Fonda going in to the ceremony but having seen both films that year I thought Lancaster was a shoe-in. And then sentiment over-ruled logic and Fonda was given the Oscar, for a performance which reeked of sentimentality and which was carried by Fonda's two female co-stars. Fonda died within a few months of the award ceremony.

In 1986 Kingsley Amis was on the Booker list for the third time and hardly likely to win for his novel *The Old Devils*. Beloved by the old school of British critics, Amis had produced little of worth since his debut, *Lucky Jim*, in 1954. He had never won anything and the prospects of him ever doing so looked decidedly thin. His time was past and he was falling out of favour as authors such as his son Martin, Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan were in the ascendant.

1986 Booker Prize Shortlist
Winner: *The Old Devils* by Kingsley Amis
The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood
Gabriel’s Lament by Paul Bailey
What’s Bred in the Bone by Robertson Davies
An Artist of the Floating World by Kazuo Ishiguro
An Insular Possession by Timothy Mo

I’ve only read four of the six novels included on the 1986 Booker shortlist and can safely say that, of the four, the Amis ranks a very distant fourth. Best of the lot was Paul Bailey’s *Gabriel’s Lament*, a semi-autobiographical novel depicting the damage that fathers can inflict on their sons. Somehow or other, the Booker judges in 1986 thought Amis’s novel the best of the year: better than the Bailey, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro. And this leaves out novels by Robertson Davies and Timothy Mo which I haven’t read. Both, I suspect, in a class above Amis’s phoned-in effort. It was a strong year, yet we are left with a novel about middle-class, middle-aged has-beens drinking themselves to death. A novel about Amis and his friends, presumably.

A major mistake.

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[This is the third article in this continuing series titled “A Reader’s Journey”. Part 1, titled “Spreadsheets Everywhere” appeared in **Perryscope 4**, November 2020, and Part 2, titled “Short SF&F” in **Perryscope 6**, January 2021.]



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.

WHERE I'VE BEEN

This is a city named after a cook. Maybe you didn't know that. Ho Chi Minh was a very fine, classically trained culinarian. Prior to helping found the Vietnamese Communist party, he worked at the Carlton Hotel in Paris, for no less a chef than the great man himself, Auguste Escoffier. It is said he was a favorite of the old man. He worked as a saucier there, later as a cook on transatlantic liner, then as a pâtissier at the Parker House in Boston. He was – the Commie thing aside – one of us. Like it or not: a guy who spent a lot of hours standing on his feet in busy hotel and restaurant kitchens, a guy who came up through the ranks the old-school way – a professional. And yet he still found time to travel under a zillion aliases, write manifestos, play footsie with the Chinese and the Russians, dodge the French, fight the Japanese (with U.S. help, by the way), beat the French, help create a nation, lose that nation, and organize an ultimately successful guerilla war against America. Communism may suck, but old Uncle Ho was one interesting guy.

– *A Cook's Tour: In Search of the Perfect Meal* by Anthony Bourdain, p55

I first visited Vietnam in the middle of 2012 with my wife Robyn and two children, Catherine and William. We utilised a pre-arranged tour which provided us with guides in each city we visited as well as the associated travel between them. We started in Ho Chi Minh city and ended up in Hanoi. Our timing was a little tight so we were left with only one full day at the end of the tour to wander around Hanoi checking out the sights; one of which was Ho's mausoleum. Robyn was desperate to see him lying in mummified state as she had already seen Mao in Beijing in the 1980s with her mother, and we later saw Lenin in Moscow in 1992. Ho would complete her set of the Big Three.



We asked at the front desk of our hotel about the best way to get to the site and how much the price would be. "Oh, I wouldn't go today," they said. "Why not?" "It's Sunday and all the locals go along to see him." Can't be that bad we thought, might as well give it a try.

A short taxi ride later we turned up to see a long queue of people stretching back from the mausoleum around the block. The minimum wait would be over two hours. It was hot and humid and we were tired after a draining trip so we skipped it.

But Robyn kept on talking about missing out, so, when we were planning our Asian trip in 2018 we made sure we gave ourselves a free day, off weekend, when we could wander through and see the old bloke. This time we were in luck. The queue was short and kept

moving forward so we only had 10-15 minutes from the time we got our tickets until we were outside the room where Ho lay in a glass coffin. No cameras, keep moving, no stopping. Everyone sort of slow-shuffled their way around three sides of the coffin so we were able to get a good long look. I thought about a sneaky phone camera shot but the guards were wise to that sort of thing. They looked small but I figured they were pretty serious with their “I’m-so-bored-I-just-want-to-belt-someone” look.

At the end of it all Robyn was happy. It took us six years, but she finally got to see him in the flesh – so to speak.



WHAT I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT LATELY

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

Notes from this month's podcasts

Episode 61: (14 September 2021) *The joining of three tides*
David and I discuss what we do outside of the podcast – in his case he talks about the fortnightly book newsletter he produces, and I talk about **The Alien Review**. Then we start our discussion of the finalists for the Hugo Best Novel Award for 2021.



Episode 62: (28 September 2021) *Lord of the Underworld*
This episode we discuss crime fiction with David looking at novel series by Garry Disher and Candice Fox, which I review a couple of international award winners (**Ordinary Grace** and **We Begin at the End**), and also re-visit an old Lord Peter Whimsy mystery.

You can access the current, and all past podcast episodes at twochairs.website (please note the recent change in url), or you can subscribe through any podcast subscription service.



Back in my working days I always said that you could only start work on a new project when you've got the right acronym for it. The following note from Wikipedia explaining one astronomical project might be stretching things a bit far:

“In astronomy and observational cosmology, the BOOMERanG experiment (Balloon Observations Of Millimetric Extragalactic Radiation ANd Geophysics) was an experiment which measured the cosmic microwave background radiation of a part of the sky during three sub-orbital (high-altitude) balloon flights. It was the first experiment to make large, high-fidelity images of the CMB temperature anisotropies, and is best known for the discovery in 2000 that the geometry of the universe is close to flat, with similar results from the competing MAXIMA experiment.”

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BOOMERanG_experiment

WHAT I'VE BEEN READING LATELY

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

Abbr – Aust: Australian; anth: anthology; Edg: Edgar Award; Gold: CWA Gold Dagger Award; Loc SF: Locus SF Award; Neb: Nebula Award; nvla: novella;

September 2021 books

Title	Author	Genre	Date	F	R	Pub Date	Notes
<i>The Devil's Advocate</i>	Morris West	Lit	Sep 3		4.2	1959	Aust
<i>World's Best Science Fiction Third Series</i>	Ed Donald A. Wollheim & Terry Carr	Sf	Sep 9		3.0	1967	anth
<i>Network Effect</i>	Martha Wells	Sf	Sep 12	e	4.2	2020	Neb/Loc SF
<i>A Cook's Tour</i>	Anthony Bourdain	Non-fic	Sep 13		4.5	2001	
<i>The Physicians of Vilnoc</i>	Lois McMaster Bujold	Fantasy	Sep 15	e	3.2	2020	nvla
<i>Orbit One</i>	Ed Damon Knight	Sf	Sep 17		2.9	1966	anth
<i>Ordinary Grace</i>	William Kent Krueger	Crime	Sep 20		4.5	2013	Edg
<i>The Book of Dragons</i>	Ed Jonathan Strahan	Fantasy	Sep 21		4.0	2020	Aust/anth
<i>The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club</i>	Dorothy L. Sayers	Crime	Sep 22		3.8	1928	
<i>We Begin at the End</i>	Chris Whitaker	Crime	Sep 27	e	4.0	2021	Gold
<i>A Traveller's Life</i>	Eric Newby	Non-fic	Sep 27		3.2	1983	
<i>Spy Story</i>	Len Deighton	Spy	Sep 29		3.3	1974	

Books read in the month: 12

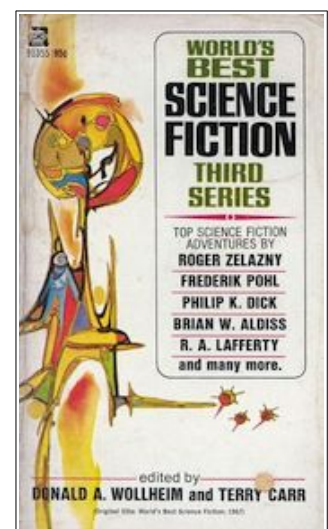
Yearly total to end of month: 76

2021 reading targets met this month: 14 Crime novels

Notes:

The Devil's Advocate (1959) – see major review below

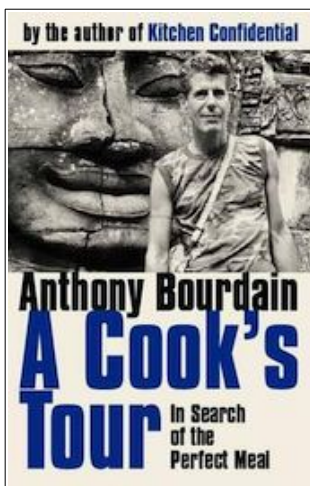
World's Best Science Fiction Third Series (1967) – The second of the anthologies of best sf stories of 1966 that I'm reading as research for a future podcast episode. Twelve stories, of which I thought six were better than average: "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" by Philip K. Dick; "Light of Other Days" by Bob Shaw; "Nine Hundred Grandmothers" by R. A. Lafferty; **Behold the Man** by Michael Moorcock; "Day Million" by Frederik Pohl; and "The Wings of a Bat" by Pauline Ashwell. Only two stories by women and all, bar the Pohl, from the usual major American and British prozines. This is a rather safe, conservative anthology which



really only gives a one-sided view of science fiction in 1966. It's saving grace lies in being the first US publication of the Moorcock novella, which would subsequently lead to its winning a major award the following year (see below). R: 3.0/5.0

Network Effect (2020) – Winner of the 2021 Nebula and Locus SF Awards for Best Novel, and a finalist for the 2021 Hugo Award. This is the fifth entry in the author's Murderbot Diaries series, though the first full length novel. All the previous works have been novellas (okay, there have been a couple of short stories as well), with the first of these, **All Systems Red** (2017), winning the Hugo, Nebula and Locus Awards, and the second, **Artificial Condition** (2018), also winning the Hugo and Locus Awards. The narrator of the series is a Security Unit (SecUnit) who calls itself a Murderbot. This is a constructed being: part human organic material and part machine. Prior to the first novella in the series the SecUnit had hacked and disabled its governor module which allowed it to be instructed and controlled by humans. In this novel Murderbot is providing security for a research expedition that includes the daughter (Amena) and brother-in-law of Dr. Mensah, the woman who first engaged it in **All Systems Red**, and for whom it holds the highest regard. The expedition's space ship is attacked by a hostile transport vessel and while the rest of the crew escape in a lifeboat, Murderbot and Amena are forced to board the vessel. This is a complex, detailed piece of military-flavoured space opera set in the far, far future when humans have explored the bulk of the galaxy. It will appeal to fans of any of those subgenres of sf. Probably best to read the first novella before tackling this novel however. Coming to this first-up might leave the reader a little nonplussed about who the character is and how they got that way.

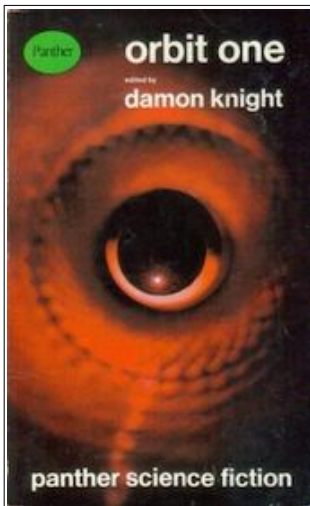
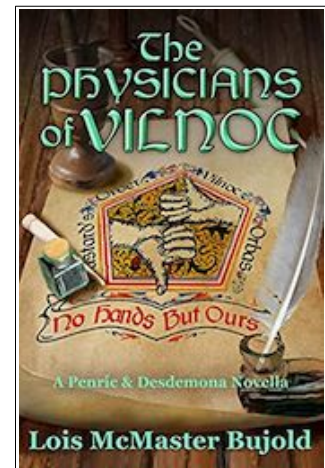
R: 4.2/5.0



A Cook's Tour : In Search of the Perfect Meal (2001) – You can read this book as a companion piece to the author's 2002 Food Network TV series of the same name. That's probably the first time I saw Bourdain, the tall, lanky, punk chef from **Kitchen Confidential** that I had read in the early 2000s. In a recent promo on Australian television for repeats of his last few TV series, Bourdain points out that he isn't a journalist: he sees things, he talks about them, he's a storyteller. And this book will show you that he is just that, and an excellent one as well. Here he tells us about Vietnam, Portugal, Cambodia, Vietnam, France, England and Vietnam using his signature style that will be familiar from his TV voice-over narration. And, yes, if it looks like I'm repeating myself by re-naming Vietnam above that's only because Bourdain loved the place so much. He keeps going back to the country, loving the freshness of the food, the laid-back approach to life, and the people. A number of times he talks about buying a plot there, somewhere, and just settling down to enjoy himself. Unfortunately that wasn't to be. If you like Bourdain's work, as I do, then you'll love this. If not, then I'm not sure there's much hope for you. R: 4.5/5.0

The Physicians of Vilnoc (2020) – Number 8 in the author’s Penric and Desdemona series of fantasy novellas.

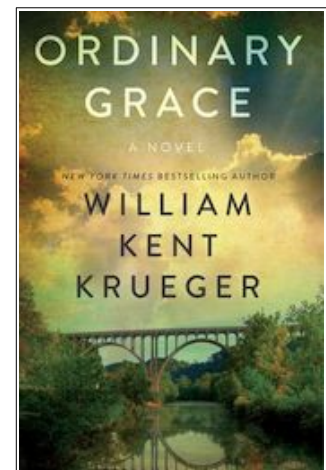
Set in the author’s World of the Five Gods where people worship one of the Father, Mother, Daughter, Son and Bastard, Penric is a cleric/physician who one day happens to be on hand when a magician dies and then subsequently becomes the host for the demon Desdemona. The series follows his adventures as he tries to come to terms with “Des”, along with her other 10 dead hosts – people and animals. Here Penric is called to attend a fortress which has been struck with a deadly infection, known as the bruising disease due to its effect on the victim’s skin. Initially overwhelmed by the work he has to do he is finally joined by a demon-infested physician which gives him enough time to finally discover the source of the infection and affect a cure. These are amusing fantasy novellas without being anything startling, though Bujold is enjoying exploring the interplay between Penric’s male self and his female internal demon. R: 3.2/5.0



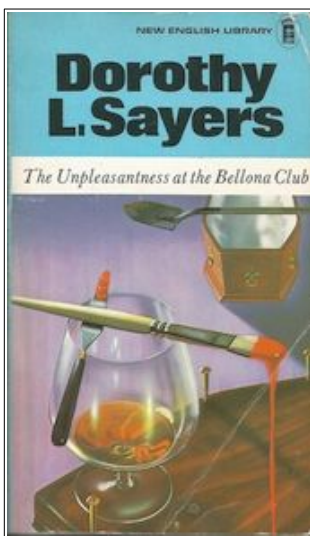
Orbit One (1966) – The first of what would end up being twenty-one volumes in this original anthology series. The stories are all of average quality or above with the stand-outs being: “The Disinherited” by Poul Anderson; “Splice of Life” by Sonya Dorman; **Kangaroo Court** by Virginia Kidd; and “Staras Flonderans” by Kate Wilhelm. So, 4 out of 9. Also with 4 of the 9 stories by women, indicating a slow changing of the old masculine guard. This anthology also contains the 1967 Nebula Award winner for Best Short Story, “The Secret Place” by Richard McKenna, which is a rather light story with little new to say. An average volume of stories. R: 2.9/5.0

Ordinary Grace (2013) – Winner of the 2014 Edgar, Barry and Anthony Awards for Best Crime Novel.

Thirteen-year-old Frankie Drum, and his younger brother Jake, live in the small town of New Bremen, Minnesota; the time is summer 1961, and the Minnesota Twins baseball team are just starting their inaugural season. The two boys find the body of a young boy who has been killed by a train, and later the body of an itinerant man who just seems to have died from natural causes. After, the summer moves on and all is rather calm until the boys’ older sister Ariel goes missing. Told from the point of view of Frankie, looking back some forty years after the events depicted, this novel is a glorious piece of writing. The description of the town, its inhabitants and their interactions is wonderfully handled and the prose flows with an ease that is to be admired. The crimes in the novel, and their resolutions, seem almost secondary to the world being created, but they are mostly solved in a logical, timely and respectable manner. A wonderful crime novel and a wonderful literary novel as well; making for one of the best types of combinations. R: 4.5/5.0



The Book of Dragons (2020) – A massive anthology of dragon stories and poetry edited by Australian Jonathan Strahan. Here you will find dragons that are mechanical, magical, intelligent, imaginary, Asian, old, dying, European, invasive, in human form, and pest-like, among many other things. The full run of the various forms are displayed here in this anthology which is beautifully illustrated by Rovina Cai. There are too many good stories here to list them all but I did have a special liking for those by Brooke Bolander, Ken Liu, K. J. Parker, Peter S. Beagle, Kate Elliott, Michael Swanwick, Sarah Gailey and Scott Lynch. Which, by my count, puts it into the higher end of single-topic original anthologies. R: 4.0/5.0



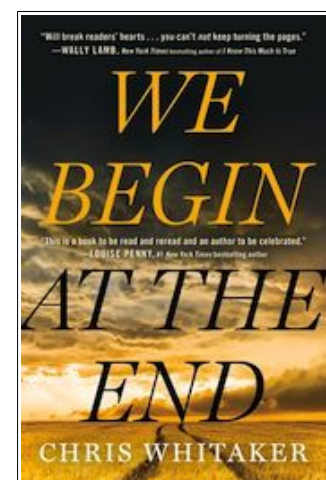
The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club (1928) – Number 4 in the author’s Lord Peter Wimsey series, or number 5 if you add in a collection of short stories.

The “unpleasantness” of the title is the death of General Fentiman in his favourite chair in the reading room of his club. Lord Peter Wimsey is a member and just happens to be there when it is discovered that the General has died. The General’s doctor is called, death pronounced, and arrangements made. But Whimsy isn’t so convinced that the 90-year-old died of natural causes and sets out to investigate. It then becomes clear that the General’s wealthy sister also died that same day and now there is a dispute over the respective times of death as that will impact on the wills of the two parties. By halfway through the book Whimsy seems to have it all wrapped up with a perfectly logical explanation of the facts to that

point when further evidence comes to light throwing the whole investigation wide open again. This is an enjoyable crime novel from the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction. Interesting, if rather light. R: 3.8/5.0

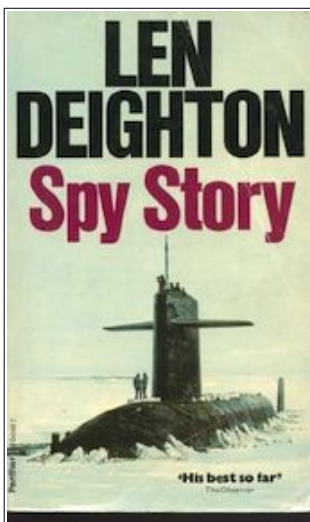
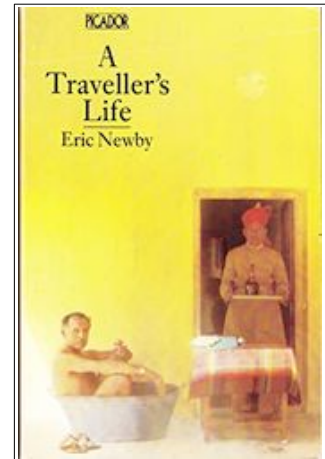
We Begin at the End (2021) – Winner of the CWA Gold Dagger Award, the Theakston Crime Award and the Ned Kelly Award for Best International Crime Fiction.

In the small Californian town of Cape Haven Vincent King has returned home after spending 30 years in jail – 10 for the manslaughter of young local girl Sissy Radley and an extra 20 for the murder of a prison inmate. His childhood friend Walker (known as Walk) is now the town’s Chief of Police. A short time later, Star Radley, Sissy’s older sister, is found murdered in her family home and it appears that Vincent is again the guilty party. Star’s children – 13-year-old Duchess and 5-year-old Robin – find themselves in peril with Duchess convinced that she is being hunted by Dickie Darke, the local real-estate mogul who has gone missing. So the book follows Walk’s search for the truth as he starts to unlock all the inter-connections between the town’s residents,



their histories, crimes and foibles, along with all of his own history. Overall it is a good novel that might have been excellent, if not for some rather cliched descriptions of California and Montana, and the author's unfortunate over-use of aptronyms for his characters' names. Still worth your time as a reader. R: 4.0/5.0

A Traveller's Life (1928) – This collection of travel pieces by Eric Newby (1919-2006) acts as a sort of informal autobiography. Each chapter represents a special point in the author's travelling life, from his earliest adventures with his parents in their touring car and with his nurse in the pram, to his involvement in the Last Grain Race between Australia and the UK, to being a POW during World War II, to becoming travel editor of the Observer and finishing up by leaving that role in 1973 because “the mechanism of travel had changed out of all recognition.” This was a man who was born into a degree of affluence and used that as an entree into the world of travel in the mid-twentieth century. This book is a look into that world, one that none of us will ever be able to experience again. R: 3.2/5.0



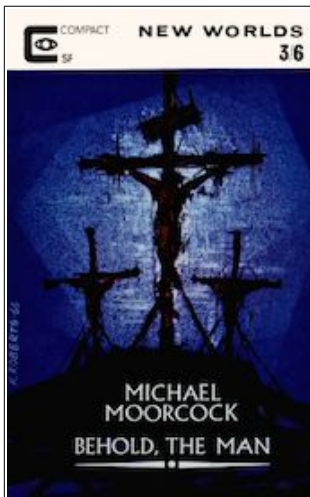
Spy Story (1974) – Number 6 in the author's “Secret File” series, sometimes also referred to as the Harry Palmer series. Our unnamed hero (this time assuming the alias of Pat Armstrong) has been seconded to the Studies Centre in Hampstead where he is assisting a series of submarine warfare games. It slowly becomes clear that a senior Soviet submarine Admiral wants to defect in order to obtain a kidney transplant. “Armstrong” gets dragged into the plot to procure and cover up the defection, and finds himself in some physical peril as a result. This novel displays all the hallmarks of Deighton's prose: mis-directing plotlines; clipped dialogue; jagged drama flow (at times it reads as if every third or fourth sentence has been removed); first-person narration; and ever-fluid interpersonal relationships. Most of the time you get the feeling that narrator doesn't know what is going on any more than you do. Which is about all you can expect from a spy novel. R: 3.3/5.0

Other short fiction

The Alchemist (1966) by Charles L. Harness

This novella was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Novelette and the Nebula Award for Best Novella for 1966.

A long tedious story about the development of new chemical products in a corporate laboratory setting. The story is unengaging, the characters lecture the reader and each other and everyone is depicted as stupid. It's hard to see how anyone could possibly see this as award material. [Note: The fact that the story appears in the two different award categories is purely a product of the award structures of that time.]



Behold the Man (1966) by Michael Moorcock

This novella won the 1968 Nebula Award for Best Novella.

Originally published in the British prozine *New Worlds* this novella didn't become eligible for a Nebula until it was published in the US in 1967 in Wollheim/Carr anthology of the *World's Best SF of 1966* (see above). In 1976 Karl Glogauer takes a journey in an experimental time machine back to the year 29 A.D. The machine malfunctions on arrival and is damaged, leaving him injured and delirious. Taken in by John the Baptist Karl mends slowly and then sets out to find a Nazarene named Jesus. What he finds is not the Jesus of myth and the New Testament but a man disabled in mind and body, unable to function outside the confines of the house of Mary and Joseph. Karl is deeply committed to the concept of a "Jesus" of history and quickly commits to a course of action that will

rectify the problem he has discovered. One of the all-time great sf novellas, which would have had a major impact on publication. Later expanded into a novel of the same name.



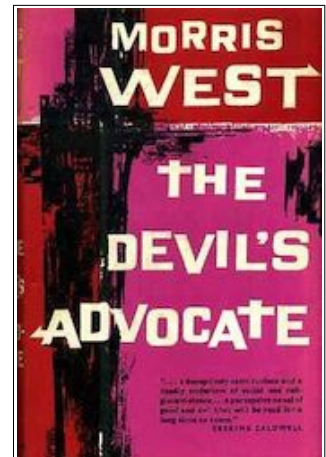
REVIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

The Devil's Advocate (1959) by Morris West

Genre: Literary

Winner of the James Black Memorial Prize in 1959.

Morris West (1916-1999) was an Australian writer who is probably best known for his novel ***The Shoes of the Fisherman*** (1963), which was later made into a major film. That book forms part of his Vatican trilogy (along with ***The Clowns of God*** (1981) and ***Lazarus*** (1990)), and this novel might also be considered to be thematically linked to those three, dealing, as it does, with Vatican administration and canonical law.



Father Blaise Meredith is a tired and lonely English priest who has spent his career as a cleric toiling away in the Vatican, ending as Auditor to the Sacred Congregation of Rites, which is principally involved in the canonization of saints. Meredith has just been diagnosed with a terminal case of stomach cancer and is contemplating a quiet end to his life back in England when his supervising Cardinal presents him with the chance to act as "devil's advocate" in the investigation of a possible canonization in Calabria, in the south of Italy. A local man, Giacomo Nerone, was executed by Communist partisans at the end of the Second World War, some sixteen or so years before, and now the local bishop is reporting that a petition has been received from the local priest requesting an investigation into several alleged cures of a miraculous nature that are attributed to his influence.

Meredith travels south by train, firstly to the residence of the Bishop where he finds a kindred religious spirit, one that he had sought for many years. But his time there is short and he continues on to the small town where it has been arranged that he will stay with the

local Contessa in some degree of comfort. It soon becomes apparent to Meredith that part of the reason behind the canonization is the ambition that acquiring a saint will bring much-needed prosperity to a poor and impoverished rural community. He is already aware that the Vatican is keen on supporting the local Christian Democrats in the upcoming election which would be greatly helped by the recognition of a local saint. He also begins to understand that the local characters all have reasons to manipulate him for their own ends. Meredith discovers that Nerone was actually an English deserter who had an illegitimate son by a local woman, and was revered by the local community for keeping them alive and safe during the German occupation. Many in the village have feelings and past interactions that they want to be kept secret and it is Meredith's job to get their trust and then to undercover all that he can about the candidate.

West's cast of characters is wonderfully drawn: Paolo, the son of Nerone who is on the verge of manhood and confused as to his life's direction; the young widowed English Countess Anne Louise de Sanctis who longs for a son and who may have had a liaison with Nerone; Aldo Meyer, the town doctor, who carries a love for Paolo's mother which will never be reciprocated, and a deep pain caused by his involvement in Nerone's death; Nicholas Black the English painter, staying with the Contessa, who is homosexual and is pursuing Paolo for his own ends; and the local priest Don Anselmo Benincasa, who is surrounded in scandal and believes that Meredith is secretly there to investigate him as well.

But it is Meredith's struggles with his own faith, the temptation to succumb to Nerone's influence in the hope of a medical miracle of his own, and the dawning of a new understanding of his own life that form the thrust of this novel. West, rather like Graham Greene, is very good at examining the churning inner conscience and soul of a man as he tries to come to terms with his own imminent demise, and the role that his faith has in his life.

You need to be aware, however, of a streak of homophobia running through this book. Whether the language and sentiments expressed by some characters towards Black is a reflection of West's views is hard to say. He puts the words into the mouths of the most religious characters which makes it easier to dismiss them as standard religious bigotry, though it doesn't lessen their impact.

Apart from that last criticism West has fashioned an excellent character and cultural study of people and communities under pressure, both religious and political.

R: 4.2/5.0



WHAT I'VE BEEN WATCHING LATELY

Television

Midnight Diner (Season 1 – 10 episodes) (2009)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Comedy Drama

This is first season of the Japanese comedy drama series **Midnight Diner**, the fourth season of which I reviewed last month. The Master (the chef of the diner) is the only character to appear in each episode though some of the diners appear here in more than one. It is here that we first meet Mr Chu, an amiable older character always wearing a blue cap; Kosuzu, the homosexual cross-dresser who runs a successful bar nearby; Ryu Kenzaki, the Yakuza boss who forms an unlikely friendship with Kosuzu; and the Ochazuke Sisters, who provide a running commentary on the goings-on in the diner.

Wonderful stuff, full of pathos and emotion, some happy and some sad. Certainly worth pursuing. R: 4.5/5.0



The Chair (Season 1 – 6 episodes) (2021)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Comedy Drama

Set in the fictional Pembroke University Sandra Oh plays Ji-Yoon Kim, the first non-white, non-male Chair of the English Department. Almost before she has had a chance to get her feet under the desk one of the English language lecturers throws a Nazi salute in class in order to emphasise a point, and the university campus erupts in protest. The fact that the two are nearly romantically involved does not improve matters in the slightest. Added to this is the new Chair's requirement to trim the staff list, especially those long, long-term professors who are teaching classes of single digit student numbers. Funny and emotional, you just wish each episode was longer than

the half-hour allocated. R: 4.4/5.0

Line of Duty (Season 1 – 5 episodes) (2012)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Crime Drama

Detective Sergeant Arnott (Martin Compston) refuses to be involved in a cover-up after a counter-terrorism raid goes wrong and an innocent man is killed. He is recruited by an anti-corruption unit and assigned to investigate Detective Chief Inspector Tony Gates (Lennie James) who has come under notice. The series follows the slowly unravelling investigation into Gates, his involvement with a business woman who is later murdered, her dealings with a local drug-ring and the murders of several street drug-dealers. The story is a slow-burn until the final episode when everything seems to come together rather quickly, maybe too



quickly. Other than that this is an entertaining series and it will be interesting to see how it progresses over subsequent seasons. R: 3.8/5.0

Anthony Bourdain : Parts Unknown

(Season 1 – 8 episodes) (2013)

Platform: Amazon Prime

Genre: Documentary Food

Bourdain moved his travelogue documentary series to CNN in 2013 and started a long run there with this new title. In this series he travels to Myanmar, Koreatown in Los Angeles, Columbia, Quebec, Tangier, Libya, Peru and Congo, only one of which I have been to. Bourdain follows his usual line of investigating the cultural and political situations in the countries and cities he visits via the local food. It

doesn't bother him if he's eating street food off small plastic chairs, fine French dining in high-class restaurants, home-cooking in the kitchen of a local home, or in a temporary cabin on a frozen river. It's all the same with him. And it's all characterised by his frenetic gonzo style of narration. Wonderful stuff. R: 4.6/5.0



Samurai Gourmet (Season 1 – 12 episodes) (2017)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Comedy Food

Takeshi Kasumi is a retired Japanese gentleman who has left his job as a corporate man after many years. At a loose end he decides to start eating out in different restaurants for lunch and occasionally dinner. He is generally accompanied by an imaginary samurai warrior who he attempts to emulate in what food he eats. Early on he discovers the joys of a beer over lunch. Kasumi is a man after my own heart, finding new interests and enjoying the people he meets (mostly) and the food he eats (nearly always). It appears that this is the only season to date, at least that is all that is available on the Netflix platform. R: 3.7/5.0

Time (Season 1 – 3 episodes) (2021)

Platform: Foxtel

Genre: Crime Drama

Sean Bean plays Mark Cobden, a teacher in England who is jailed for four years for dangerous driving: he killed a cyclist while driving under the influence. The other main character is Stephen Graham as prison officer Eric McNally. As Cobden tries to settle into and understand prison life, McNally is blackmailed by one of the prison's most dangerous prisoners and has to make some serious, career-threatening decisions. Written by Jimmy McGovern, probably best known for ***Cracker*** which featured Robbie Coltrane in the lead role in the 1990s, this is an excellent



depiction of life behind bars. All of the minor characters are deftly fleshed out and the performances are engaging. Probably not for the faint-hearted.

R: 4.3/5.0

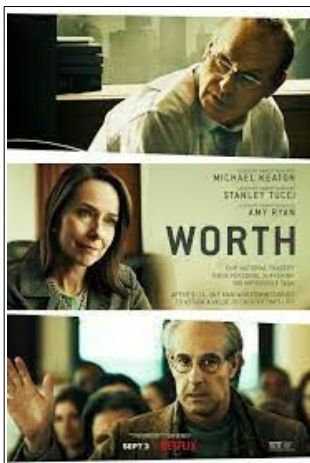
Film

Oxygen (2021)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: SF Drama

The person Mélanie Laurent portrays is basically the only character in this claustrophobic sf thriller originally filmed in French and released on Netflix dubbed into English. A woman wakes in a capsule with no memory of how she got there, or even who she is. The capsule's controlling AI, which refers to itself as MILO (Medical Interface Liaison Officer), informs her that her oxygen levels have been depleted but refuses to open the pod without an administrator's code. Using MILO's interface she is able to access internet information that identifies her as Dr Elizabeth Hansen, a cryogenics expert. The film follows her attempts, in close to real-time, to extract information from MILO, contact the outside world for help, and determine how she can stay alive. Apart from the beginning, when she doesn't ask the one series of questions you'd expect of her, the script is taut and the acting precise. A remarkable job is done of the cramped space of the set, which is the size of a standard kitchen table. Long-time sf readers will probably guess the solution ahead of time, and the post-solution explanation contains some startling scientific and design errors. Apart from that this is a diverting story and better than most. R: 3.4/5.0



Worth (2020)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Drama

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, Congress appoints Kenneth Feinberg (Michael Keaton) to lead the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. Feinberg is a renowned attorney and negotiator whose basic task is to determine how much each life lost in the attacks is worth, in financial terms, to the victim's relatives. Opposing him is Charles Wolf (Stanley Tucci), a community organizer who is mourning the loss of his wife in the attacks. At first Feinberg aided by his firm's head of operations, Camille Biros (Amy Ryan), takes a strictly rules-based approach which he slowly comes to realise is inadequate to the task. The film

concentrates on the victims and their stories as well as Feinberg's steady transformation towards compassion. A rather emotional experience the film shows that corporations will follow the path of greed, and governments the path of expediency, leaving the "common man" floundering unless they are assisted by someone willing to just listen. R: 4.1/5.0



PERRYSCOPE Responses

Perryscope 13:

David M. Shea: “When I said about Le Guin’s *The Beginning Place*, “There is more than one road to the city”, that was not a generic observation. It was a quote, the very last line of the story. It’s about the archetype of the transcendent experience: a person goes through some process and comes out the other side. Sam at the end of *Lord of the Rings*, after all he’s seen and been through, returns to Bag End, kisses his wife, and says, ‘Well, I’m back.’ It is not yet time for Sam to face his next transcendent choice. (Assuming you have read the Appendices at the end of the story, you know that many years later, after Rosie dies, Sam gives the Red Book to his daughter – and goes off again to the Grey Havens.)”
[**PM:** I must admit that the quote eluded me. It is some years since I read the Le Guin book, and even longer since I read *LoTR*. My concept of the Tolkein is, I have to say, now fully coloured by the Jackson film version, whether I like that or not. Will I get back to reading *LoTR* again? I suppose I should, though I don’t think I have a copy in the house.]

“Chapter 7 of *The Wind in the Willows*, Rat and Mole searching for the lost otter child, find Pan safeguarding the child, and in terrible ecstasy bow and worship. And then the ‘kindly demigod’ makes them forget, so their simple lives will not be overshadowed by that moment. The end of Heinlein’s *Have Space Suit – Will Travel*. The end of Norton’s *Dread Companion*. Cherryh’s Morgaine trilogy (*Gate of Ivrel*, *Well of Shiuan*, *Fires of Azeroth*) is a variant form, in that Nhi Vanye, can never go back, he can only go on.

“There is a reason why, when soldiers come home from a war, they have a difficulty adjusting to civilian life. Some changes can never be undone. (Transcendent experiences do not necessarily have to be good experiences... The Bible is full of the other kind.)”
[**PM:** If you strip away the unwanted connotations of the word “hero” in Joseph Campbell’s work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* this is pretty much what he is talking about. Namely, that people – fictional or real – are transformed or changed in some way by their experiences. This is one of my main criteria for assessing a work of fiction – are the characters changed by what they experience in the story? If not, then you only get a lesser work, no matter how eloquent the language or complicated the plot. We can learn how to handle our own transforming experiences by living other lives through the fiction we read.]

John Hertz: “Crops have been scanty across the field. Clubs, cons, fanzines, filksinging; the Masquerade at cons. But we can’t reap where we haven’t sown.

“We moan ‘Young people today will never be interested in fanzines as we have known them’, and ‘the current appetite is for something else entirely’.

“It’s a proud and lonely thing to be a fan.

“But we do little to make new friends.

“As soon as I say that, terrible visions arise of glad-handers and slick salesmen. Away with such demons.

Perryscope 15

“I’ve told how, at a U.S. Worldcon, a party of folk in the lobby boticed my Jane Dennis shoulderbag from the Honolulu Westercon with a tropical scene in which she’d found space to lay in a flying saucer.

“What’s that’ they asked. ‘Science Fiction,’ I told them; ‘the World Science Fiction Convention is here this weekend.’ ‘Really!’ they said. No poster on an easel nor anything else in sight said so.

“They all had laptops. They couldn’t find it. I – whose lack of involvement with such media you well know – had to find it for them.

“As a teacher of mine once said rehearsing a dance troupe coming downstage i.e. toward the audience, ‘Let them in on the joke.’”

[**PM:** I have to disagree with a lot of this. Every generation of newcomers encountering an existing community for the first time always makes the same complaint: that not enough is done to make them welcome. Actually what they are really saying is something like: “I couldn’t get into the inner circle quickly enough.” It was the same for me back in the ‘70s, and I suspect it was the same for everyone that came after me. And yet, here we are, interacting with the fandom that seemed exclusionary way back when. So how did that come about? By the newcomer showing an interest and a willingness to learn, to start at the bottom and to make mistakes, to take the time to learn the social conventions and to engage with the people in the group. When I first encountered fandom I was intimidated by the likes of John Bangsund, John Foyster and John Berry, yet, over time, I got to know them all to one degree or another. I’ve never come across anyone in fandom who was not prepared to “let me in on the joke”, but, like the dance troupe, I had to make the move forward. The door is unlocked, you just to have knock, open it and say hello.]

Perryscope 14:

Tineke Hazel: “As you know, like Martin Field, I am also a great fan of the Patrick O’Brian series starting with *Master and Commander* and have read them all at least four times. There is something new to be discovered each time you re-read them as it was a great era for discovering new species of birds and animals in foreign parts. However I thought Crowe made a very good Aubrey in the film but was not impressed with the actor who played Maturin. He was a grotty, skinny little man in my mind, with untidy habits in clothing and wigs which were often spotted with blood and grot from his dissections of various carcasses. The film left a lot to be desired in storyline but the special effects of ships of that time and the battle scenes were very realistic with plenty of blood and guts. I loved the music too...”

[**PM:** I’ve had quite a lot of people tell me that O’Brian’s works are definitely worth following up, and I really must do that. They are very popular in the sf field, I suspect because O’Brian is building a world and populating it with interesting people under pressure. I’ll get there. Someday.]

Leigh Edmonds: “Thanks for sending me **Perryscope 14**. Although it arrived a few days ago I’ve only now got around to reading it, which is perhaps a fortunate coincidence. We happened to be flicking idly through the options on Netflix last night and came to rest on *Arrival* which I recalled reading good things about previously. We watched it and I

thought it was a curious movie, good in parts but marred by the crisis towards the end. Being an American movie it had to have one but I thought it might have been better if the crisis had been the hero's attempts to make sense of her altered state as she came to understand the alien language. Perhaps that might have been too subtle for your average viewer but it would have suited the tone of the rest of the movie better, I think. I did wonder how many viewers would grasp the notion that learning a new language changes a person's mentality and thus explains the closing section of the movie which was, a clever solution to the problem set by the crisis. Overall I was glad to have seen it, partly to see what the fuss was about and partly because it was a better stf movie than most."

[**PM:** The "crisis" at the end you mention is probably the cliché of the military acting dumb, which I think detracts from the overall effect of the film. I agree that the main thrust of the protagonist's altered mind state should have been enough tension for the film, though as you note, maybe the film-makers didn't believe the average audience would get it. In which case they might have added in a few more references to get their point across better. In the end, it is a thought-provoking film, which is a whole lot more than most films of any genre.]

"Once your rather elegant cover was explained I was struck by a kind of sense of wonder that a person who started out in a little town in the South Australian bush finds himself many years later lounging on the rail of a boat taking in the view of South East Asia. I wondered what the people in the boat in the picture think of alien visitors from the Western World gazing at their world of work from the luxury of such a boat. The other sense of wonder part of my thinking was that you probably arrived in Vietnam on a jet airliner, the kind of voyage that would have been very expensive and taken weeks sixty or seventy years ago. Must write more aviation history to explain how this change in the way the world is organized came about. (I once gave a conference paper titled 'The Boeing 747 as a weapon of global hegemony' which I must return to one of these days)."

[**PM:** When we were in Iceland a few years back it suddenly came to me that we were a very long way from home. I was reminded of the first of *The Lord of the Rings* films when one of the hobbits (forget which one, though probably Samwise) says: "If I take one more step this will be the farthest from home I've ever been." Or words to that effect. We asked our bus driver to stop at a certain point where we, similarly, would be the farthest from home we'd ever been, and got out for a photo. We were within 100 kilometres of the Arctic Circle and that certainly felt a long way from home. In Asia it is more a feeling of being a long way from home culturally, especially from "white-bread" Laura in the 1960s. I look on it as a major life lesson well-learned that I am aware of the differences and can get something new from them each time. I doubt my 12-year-old younger self ever thought that he would be travelling as much as this. To the moon and stars, yes. Vietnam and Cambodia? Probably not.]

"Reading your comments about finding Zora Cross in the pages of *The Bulletin* gave me the impression that you have done a lot of diving in there. Not so much for me, but it strikes me as being a fairly complete expression of what the Australian colonies/states were like around the Federation period. I wondered what your feelings were about the 'Bushman's Bible'. For some reason that now entirely escapes me I also spent a few days trawling *Melbourne Punch* which seemed, in its own way, to be trying to do something similar but in a more Melbournish way. The other thing that comes to mind in thinking about this is that somehow the city and the bush seemed closer together then than they are now."

[**PM:** Back in **Perryscope 10** I discussed some of the work I had done with the *Melbourne Punch*, especially in regards to the work of Edward Dyson, the magazine's long-time editor. I find that I am always in two minds about the *Bulletin*. It is an excellent literary resource but its editorial stance of "Australia for the White Man" turns my stomach. Can I be conflicted about this?]

"Thanks also for the Cross poems. Yes, bookshops are like that. I particularly like the big second hand shops for their immense variety of stock where I sometimes find books that I've heard about but never seen or find books that I didn't even know I needed. The smell of old books en masse is something special too."

[**PM:** I miss second-hand bookshops. There are a few around but just not in the numbers there were previously. When we moved into this house in late 1993 it was possible for me to find volumes of early twentieth-century Australian poetry collections in three excellent shops within a kilometre. Sadly, they have now all gone.]

"That was interesting about your brick house in Laura actually being stone. I recall wandering around the streets of suburban Adelaide and seeing so many stone houses. Some were all stone and some had the wall facing the street made of stone and the rest made of either brick or timber. It gave the city a feel different to other cities in the same way that coming in to land at Sydney Airport over rows and rows of houses with red tiled roofs seems to set the scene for that town. Do you now recall many other stone houses in Laura? Over in Dimboola there were a few houses built of Mount Gambier limestone so I wonder if that was the stone used in Adelaide."

[**PM:** The main buildings in the town – the churches, pubs, banks, old brewery and a few of the other big houses were all made of stone. The rest either brick or wood. I doubt any of the Laura houses were made from Mount Gambier stone. It would have all been local. Adelaide may well be a different story.]

"Thinking on about Laura, I was taken by your comments that, although there were few money options for kids there, you didn't want for anything. Same here. I had no idea that my life lived somewhere between lower middle class and upper working class because, as you say, we didn't want for anything and I could buy all the stuff that turned up in the local newsagents. Which wasn't much, perhaps thankfully. Also as you say, we didn't have the media screaming at us to buy, buy, buy. I wonder how kids these days manage to get by under the deluge of ads that seem to have colonized social media like YouTube and my mobile phone. It's just as well for me that my only weakness in dotage is 1/72 and 1/144 scale plastic."

[**PM:** Without the second-hand bookshops of yore, I have little to buy these days. I have picked up a taste for whisky though, which keeps me occupied.]

"You will see that I jumped over all the stuff in the middle. Good reading anyhow even though I have nothing to add."

Martin Field: "I had not heard of Zora Cross but her "In the Book Shop" rings true. 'In precious parchments, holy as Content, Philosophies forgotten trembling lie. I turn the leaves with olden creeds besprent And hear a dead world sigh.' Worthy of Lord Dunsany."

[**PM:** I don't think I really put across how good a writer she was. If you can find any of her poetry collections in old second-hand book-shops then I recommend picking them up. You won't be disappointed.]

“Jack Vance’s works are all enjoyable. **The Last Castle** I re-read not so long back – a top yarn but of its time I thought.”

[**PM:** My major sf discoveries – or should that be re-discoveries? – of this year would have to be Cordwainer Smith, R. A Lafferty and Jack Vance. Back when I was a younger lad, I didn't have a lot of time for them. Just couldn't see what the fuss was about. As I've gotten older I can now appreciate the work, the imagination, the whimsy and the writing.]

“We're watching **Hemingway** currently. A wonderful and insightful doco. Ken Burns excels in the art form.”

[**PM:** Burns has made the long-form documentary his own. It's a signature style that really seems to work well. His Wikipedia page has him lined up to work on quite a few others, most of which look nothing less than interesting.]

“Boyd Oxlade (*Death in Brunswick* author) shared a house with friends in the very early '70s as I recall. At that time he was your regular long-haired, (when long hair was neither popular nor profitable in Melbourne) freeloading, dope-smoking hippie, and a good bloke. His hair, imagine Prince Valiant on a good hair day, required a lot of his attention and he was prone to use his hostess's shampoos and conditioners, much to her irritation. In the end I believe she threw a carving knife at him and showed him the front door.

“I can't agree with you re *Echo in the Canyon*. The bits with the original artists were fine but I thought the covers of their songs by the up and comers were glum and dismal.”

[**PM:** I think I was rather more enamoured with the interviews than the covers. I see what they were trying to do and I think you're probably right, though I think they were a tad better than “dismal”.]

I also heard from: Chong, Joseph Nicholas, and Werner Koopmann; thank you one and all.

Mail update: I received two letters of comment in the mail on Friday 3rd September: one had been posted in Baltimore on 23rd August (12 days delivery time) and the other in Los Angeles on 10th August (25 days delivery time), No, I can't work it out either.

Later: a letter from Germany, posted on 8th September arrived here in Hawthorn on 14th September (6 days). I'm not sure if this, along with the other details above, says more about the US Postal service or the Australian.

And as for anything larger than a small envelope getting out of the US, forget about it.

