

PERRYSCOPE 25



PERRYSCOPE 25, August 2022, is an issue of the personalzine published monthly 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 photograph by Perry Middlemiss, July 2022.

INTRODUCTION

For this second anniversary issue I've moved away from my sequence of photographs or drawings of me back to the model I used for issue 13 of this fanzine. You'll recall there I used a scan of a painting of my childhood home. On this issue I've used a photo of the house in which I currently live. And to accompany it I have a piece I wrote a long time ago about how we came to purchase it in 1993. I was a bit lucky with this photo in that it was taken in mid-winter, so, while the front garden is not at its best, we had a bright sunny day which helped.

There is a lot more to be written about both this Elphin Grove house, and the house in Laura, and I'll be getting to them both in future issues. I don't see a need to rush this so I'll be spreading it out. I have to keep your boredom levels under control somehow.

Last issue I wrote about how this household (my wife, my son and myself) all came down with COVID at the beginning of June. I noted we were lucky at that time that we didn't get a bad dose or suffer from any lingering illness. Almost two months later I can safely say that all lingering effects have now dissipated and we don't see any chance of long-COVID putting in an appearance. For which we are very grateful.

WHERE I LIVE NOW Part 1 – House Hunting

In December of this year Robyn and I will have been living in this one residence in Elphin Grove in Hawthorn for the past 29 years. It seems strange that we have managed to hang on here so long. The original intention was to buy, stay here for about four or five years and then to move into something a bit bigger. But we then decided to renovate instead, and then Catherine started going to school and settled in, and then Will was born and he followed the same pattern. And then they each in turn moved onto high schools that were within walking distance and, before we knew it, we find ourselves still here all this time later.

It has suited our needs for all that time, sometimes feeling way too big and sometimes way too small. It is a single-fronted, single-storey, free-standing terrace house. It's one of a pair, with number 30 being a mirror-image of ours – well, the original structure is anyway – and is long and narrow. There is a garden out the front and also out the back. The two houses were built back in the 1880s and are separated by an open area containing a path about a

metre wide and a small garden of about 2/3 metre on either side of that. It is a classic design for its period: three bedrooms off a long corridor, followed by an open lounge and bathroom and then a room that was originally the kitchen. When we bought the property a weatherboard extension had been added to the back of the house – so I have no idea of what was there originally – where the kitchen had been re-located. The old kitchen was now a dining area. Also attached was a small covered verandah and an outdoor laundry. There was a toilet in the bathroom as well as one outside, but that was no longer in use when we arrived. And, yes, as you can see from the photo on page one, it has a name: Pendarves Villa. More on that another time.

In August 1993 I wrote an account of how we came to buy this house. At that time Robyn and I were living in a rented apartment in Richmond and our daughter, Catherine, was only nine months old. This article only got a small distribution through ANZAPA (in *The Wollongong Pig-Breeders' Gazette 3*), and I reprint it here. It seems to fit as a good starting point. I should note that it has been slightly amended, with some additions and corrections.

Robyn and I bought a house on the weekend. It's something I've never done before and, for quite a few months of this year as we looked around at all the houses on offer, it was something I began to believe I might never do. It's a strange feeling being a home-owner (well, not quite an owner, but I guess you know what I mean) for the first time in my life. The prospect of actually being responsible for such a large investment is more than a trifle daunting. But the main emotion I feel at the moment is one of great relief. The whole process of house-hunting, inspecting, re-inspecting, discussing, worrying and finally buying has been draining, both physically and mentally. I'm just glad it's all over.

The quest for a new house started just after we got back to Melbourne from London last September. We were idly looking around at house prices trying to get a feel for the type of thing we could afford if I ever got a job, occasionally dropping in to open days trying to look like the young affluent parents we weren't, discussing what we would need and how we would go about the whole process. But nothing really got under way until mid-May this year when I started to go around to various financial institutions checking out the possibilities of getting a home loan. I had just been extended on my contract for another three months and was beginning to feel a little more comfortable about the idea of selling my soul to a bank for the next 25 years. Unfortunately, the banks didn't appear to feel the same way. St. George Building Society just shook its corporate head, the Challenge Bank felt we hadn't been banking with them long enough or some such crap, and Westpac, after seeming initially receptive, clammed up when I informed them I was a IT contractor. "We might take you on if you had a twelve month contract," I was told. "But no-one in my industry gets twelve month contracts," I explained. "Yes, I know," was the reply. That one left a severely bad taste in my mouth. Then I went round to the local Commonwealth Bank – not a bank I have had much joy with over the years – and the tone was completely different. I got all the details of mortgage rates, loan periods and the general bank publications dealing with matters relating to home loans and made an appointment for Robyn and me to see the manager. Contrary to all popular myths the bloke was pretty good. We explained our requirements, outlined our income and detailed where all the money was going to come from. After we gave him the amount we wanted to

borrow, he worked out a few figures and asked “Sure you don't want any more?” Things were starting to look good.

But all such good beginnings to long-running enterprises normally presage some form of disaster. And while our search for a suitable house in which to live didn't actually plumb the depths of unmitigated catastrophe it did appear from time to time that we would still be looking when Catherine was going to school. We started in mid-May and over the next four and half months lost count of the number of houses we inspected. Saturdays disappeared as our routine became one of getting the paper from the front yard (delivered, occasionally, by the incompetent newsagent in the nearby shops), bypassing the sports pages and front page



Number 32 (ours) on the left and number 30 on the right; with shared off-street parking area.

news with barely a glance, and going straight for the real estate jugular, red-pen in hand, street directory at the ready, emerging half-an-hour later with four or five broadsheet newspaper pages covered in circles, under-linings and crosses. Lots of crosses.

The difficulty any prospective house-buyer finds in utilising *The Age* newspaper as a classified advertisement index to properties is that houses listed under the “Houses for Sale” section generally aren't. Nine times out of ten they're for auction — which is a different kettle of fish entirely. In the main, houses intended for auction appear in slightly larger ads, sometimes are accompanied by miniature pen and ink line drawings of the house's facade, and always feature exceptionally florid prose masquerading as a property description. They do not include a price — even as a guide.

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It didn't take us long to get a feel for the prices involved, however a four-bedroomed, solid brick house with all original features intact on a quarter-acre block was not going to be in our price range, no matter how old it was. The difficulty came in guesstimating the expected auction price of a three-bedroomed weatherboard with open fireplaces, lead-lighting and ceiling roses in Richmond. Robyn's approach was direct and to the point. Immediately upon entering the property to be inspected she button-holed the person representing the real estate agents, provided them with our name and number, obtained a copy of the house plan and demanded the asking price. Most of the agents took it pretty well though one or two baulked a little. If the three of us entered together I was generally carrying Catherine while Robyn went for the documentation. If Catherine was asleep in the car I stayed back to check the street directory for the next port of call as Robyn reconnoitred the situation. In either case we were able to upset the agent's expectations that the male of the couple would ask all the questions while the female would look at the wallpaper. We simply swapped roles. It amused us anyway. And, from time to time, we got different answers to very similar questions, particularly regarding the expected sale price.

In the early months of our searching we found ourselves with anything up to 8 or 9 houses every Saturday worthy of a look. Starting with the first inspection around 11:00 am we jumped around from Richmond to Hawthorn to Kew and back again attempting to finish up somewhere around 4:00 to 4:30 pm with a quiet drink in The Geebung Polo Club — a



Front verandah, in a warmer season

renovated public house rather than a sporting club as named — to review the day's events. After that we were stuffed, Catherine was getting ratty and it was time to head home and

prepare dinner. Anything other than a quiet night in front of the telly was totally out of the question.

It was late June before we were able to attend an auction for a property we were interested in. We'd been to one or two others but never with the express desire to put in a bid. The property was in Elphin Grove in Hawthorn, number 30. A wide tree-lined street in the area we preferred. We checked out the house — a three-bedroomed, part renovated, full brick, single fronted, single storey Victorian (as in the queen rather than the state) terrace — a couple of times before the auction, and we had a few other people look it over for us as well. It looked good, the price being quoted was about right and it was capable of being worked on in the future but still being livable in the interim. On the morning of the auction we had a final inspection and started to get cold feet. There was evidence of rising damp in the middle of the house and the back wooden extension looked decidedly shaky. The auction started casually enough but it soon became obvious that there were a couple of people very interested in the property. Needless to say, the bidding went past our top price like we were standing still. I didn't even get a chance to bid.

A bit of explanation might be necessary here to describe the way auctions work in Victoria. After the vendor decides to auction their property rather than to sell it at a fixed price they set a reserve figure with the real estate agents, the property is made ready for open inspections at advertised times and prospective buyers are contacted. At the open inspections the agent's representative makes a point of informing those who ask that the expected selling price will be a certain figure. You have to take it for granted that this amount will be anything from 10 to 15 per cent below the actual reserve price. The agents do this in order to lull you into a false sense of security about the property, to get you to come along to the auction, to entice you to put in a bid and to keep putting in bids in the heat of the action until you either find yourself out of your depth and staring at a mortgage you can't afford or have pushed the price way up past the reserve — more money for the vendors and more money for the agents. Once you figure out this trap you then have to come to grips with the auction procedure itself. At the start of the auction the auctioneer will lay down a spiel regarding the property, its high points (never its lows of course), its position in the market and on the map, and details regarding its legal standing. Most, if not all of which the dedicated purchaser will have researched previously. Maybe the auctioneer just needs something to get the whole process rolling. The auction itself consists of three separate stages: the first, which runs until the initial bidding stops, gives the auctioneer an idea of how far prospective bidders will go; the second involves the auctioneer passing this information on to the vendor away from the eyes and ears of the milling throng and deciding on a course of action; the third, last and most important stage, involves the auctioneer opening the bidding for a second time and allowing it to run to completion. There are a lot of tactics that people use in order to put the auctioneer off their guard but, basically, it all comes down to knowing how much the property is worth, how much you can afford to pay, and whether or not you get the final bid.

The Elphin Grove auction involved some of the most complicated bidding tactics I've seen. They even seemed to amuse the auctioneer, which must have taken some doing. In the end though, the house went for about thirty thousand more than the real estate agent had quoted during the open inspections and about ten thousand more than either Robyn or I thought it was worth. A result that left us happy we hadn't bid at all but anxious that it seemed to indicate a trend towards higher prices amongst those houses we were looking at.

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The next couple of weeks didn't bring much joy except for an old age-worn house in dire need of some work which looked interesting. We stood around at the auction in the rain with the faint hope of being lucky. We weren't. A middle-aged woman started the bidding and finished it, killing off a couple of other bidders in the process. It was pretty obvious that she was determined to buy the place no matter what. I left a little relieved we hadn't become involved in it all, Robyn was a little depressed.

A few weeks later we were at another auction for a house we really wanted but didn't think we would be able to afford. It didn't have much of a backyard but was in a very quiet street a stone's throw from the Yarra River and right across the road from a large park. It seemed ideal. But it became clear that we weren't the only ones who thought so and we didn't get a look in again. This time it was either a mother and daughter buying together or the mother buying for the daughter. It didn't matter; we still missed out and this time we both came away depressed.



The two houses showing the shared dividing garden and path.

By the time August came around the winter downturn in real estate properties coming on to the market was having a marked effect. The number of houses we wanted to look at had been steadily dropping over the previous month from a high of 9 down to 3. We decided it was time to take a weekend off, and prayed nothing of importance would show up. We were lucky; the first weekend in August was the bottom of the trough with only one house looking like it was moderately approachable. The next weekend wasn't much better in terms of numbers but it did produce another house in Elphin Grove, in fact right next door to the house we'd seen only

two months back. It appeared that the price obtained at auction by the first property propelled the owners of the second to enter the market. We checked out the place on the Saturday not expecting anything much better than we had already seen and were mildly surprised. The house was basically renovated with exposed polished Baltic pine floorboards through most of the house, three bedrooms, four open fireplaces, a generous backyard for the area and, most importantly, no evidence of cracking or rising damp. We came to realise that it was a complete mirror image of the house next door but without its obvious structural problems. The real estate agent quoted a figure we thought was reasonable, and, even adding on the 15 percent markup, appeared to be just on the edge of our upper limit. We talked it over in the car that day, and over dinner later that night and decided that if we stretched the mortgage a bit we might be able to make it. In other words the die was cast.

Over the next three weeks of open inspections we went back twice, had Robyn's brother look over the place with his other half Sonya, and had a few other people check out the house as well. We tried our best not to give the real estate agent the impression we were too interested — we didn't succeed. He seemed to have us pegged right from the start and we kept running into him every Saturday during August as we inspected other properties in Hawthorn. He kept on urging us to concentrate on Elphin Grove. It was getting to the point that anything else was impossible.

The auction was set for Saturday 28th August at 12:00 noon. I woke that morning with a hangover and not in the best of moods. Work had been fairly hectic for eight weeks or so and the stress levels had built up to the point where I was having trouble sleeping, and drinking too much to relieve the stress, and not sleeping because I was drinking too much and... and so on. Even though we intended to go to the auction neither of us expected to be in with a chance of buying the house. It stood to reason that there would be lots of other people interested in the house as well, it was just too good for us to contemplate any alternative.

So we went through with our standard Saturday morning procedure and found about six places to inspect with the first due at 11:30 am. It would be tight but we thought we could get through that property and off to the auction with just enough time for a final look-round. We made it to the first house at 11:25 am, waited for the agent to arrive for ten minutes and then left. My mood was not improved by all this. We arrived in Elphin Grove about ten minutes later and there appeared to be cars everywhere, one of which belonged to a couple of friends of ours. Our friends Kerrie and John were on the way out as we were getting Catherine's pusher ready. We only had time for the basic pleasantries and to be informed that the real estate agent thought Kerrie was a prospective buyer as well. It appeared that she had been through the house more often than we thought.

Kerrie and John left, we had a rapid look over the house for the last time, and the house seemed to glow with the sunshine pouring in the north-side windows onto the butter-yellow walls and the pine floor-boards. We joined the throng in the street outside. Twenty minutes later I was standing on the footpath with the auctioneer saying to me "I'll take 100 dollars. For 100 dollars more you can have the final bid." I looked at Robyn who nodded to me, I turned and nodded to the auctioneer and three slaps of his papers later the house was passed in to me as the highest bidder. I was stunned. We were in a position we never expected to be in, with the right of negotiation with the vendor. Kerrie came back just as the auctioneer was shaking my hand and inviting us inside to discuss the matter; she thought it was the funniest thing

she'd heard in ages. "I only put in a bid to get some practice at it," I said. She thought that was even funnier.

Inside the auctioneer left us in the front bedroom while he went to discuss things with the vendor. "Did you see the barbeque out the back?" Robyn asked. "No," I replied. "I'm sure I pointed it out to you," she said. I just stared at her. "Did we ever look over this house together?" "I don't think we did." "Ah." It appeared that Catherine had been asleep in the car each time we'd inspected so we'd done it separately. I'm not sure how Robyn felt but I was starting to wonder what I was getting myself in for.

The agent returned after a few minutes to tell us our final bid hadn't been accepted. We hadn't expected it to be. He wanted us to put in a higher bid, we didn't want to. He told us we were still fourteen thousand dollars below the reserve — about the figure we thought it would be and set a thousand dollars more than the auction price of the house next door. He asked us again for a higher bid. Robyn and I discussed it and refused to budge. "We have to go over our finances" I said, being as obstinate as my combined state of anxiety and hangover would allow. "Haven't you got your finances organised yet?" he asked, seemingly rather shocked at the mere thought. "Yes, we have," I said, "but we want to go through them again to check it all." He pushed and I stalled. We left it at that with the comment that we would contact him later in the day if we changed our minds. He didn't seem in the least impressed. "It may be gone by the time you call," he said. "Well, that's just a chance we will have to take," by now feeling that I wanted to be away from the whole thing. He showed us outside and we passed another man standing in the front yard — the man I had outbid half an hour before. He looked too patient for my liking and I had this feeling as I walked away that I wouldn't be seeing that house ever again.

Robyn and I carried on as before, dropping a couple of properties off the list as their inspection times had come and gone. We only made through one further house before we both decided to give it away for the day — there was too much on our minds to concentrate on the pros and cons of anything we saw. We settled in to a discussion of our finances and dragged out the calculator and notepad when we got back home. About half an hour later we decided that if we upped our bid by five thousand we were going to finish up short. "I'll try Mum," Robyn said. "She'll lend us a bit and we can pay her back if we're careful." "Holidays are out," I said. Robyn ignored me and headed for the phone.

So we had the money and the inclination to buy. Now it was just a matter of figuring out how much we could offer without breaking our bank but which might just be tempting enough for them to accept. We rang the agent and offered the extra five thousand. He turned us down flat. "No, I'm sorry but an offer of that amount has already been refused by the vendors." "Okay we'll get back to you," I said. "Before you go I should say that an offer of a couple of thousand more will probably get it for you." In fact, he probably shouldn't have said it at all, but I started to get the hint that we were close. "I'll think about it," I said. I rang off and Robyn and I discussed it some more. "We're not far off the mark," I said. "But I'm not sure if we can afford it." "How much more?" she asked. "About two," I said. We looked at each other and knew there really wasn't anything to discuss. "We can't let it go for the sake of two thousand dollars," one of us said, I don't remember who but it didn't matter; we were both of the same mind now. A short time later Robyn rang the agent and put in the new bid. There seemed to be a bit of discussion with Robyn sounding dubious. "He wants a bit more," she said. "Of course he

would. Offer him five hundred extra but say that's it. We can't go any further.” She put it to the agent and all I heard was her saying “No, no, that's it. We honestly can't go any higher.” She hung up. “He's going to put it to the vendors and wants us to put the offer in writing tomorrow,” she said.

Sunday was bright and sunny again and we sat outside and waited for the agent to arrive with the papers. There wasn't much to it really, signing the documents and writing the largest cheque of my life. “I think they'll accept this,” he said, looking at my cheque. We talked a bit about house prices and why unrenovated houses appeared to be attracting higher prices than fully renovated ones. “Because people don't want to pay for renovations they might not like,” he said. “But they'll only have to spend another twenty to thirty thousand to get a place up to livable standard,” I replied. “Yes, strange isn't it?”

Three hours later he rang back. “Congratulations, you're a home owner.” I didn't know whether to feel relieved or petrified.

The world has moved on somewhat since this account was written. The practice of under-quoting by agents has been banned, though you can be sure it still occurs; probably not to the extent it did in 1993. The lack of mobile phones meant that that we weren't being continually harassed by the agents, but it also meant that we had to either find a phone booth to make follow-up calls or go back home. It was a simpler time. But still a stressful one.

WHAT I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT LATELY

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

Notes from this month's podcasts

Episode 77: (20 July 2022) *A Forest of Hugo Awards*

This week we discuss the finalists for the 2022 Hugo Award for Best Novel. Interestingly we agree on what we think is the best novel on the list, but also agree that we don't think it will win.

After that discussion I talk with Lucy Sussex about the controversy surrounding this year's Miles Franklin Award, especially regarding *THE DOGS* by John Hughes.

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; Coll: single-author collection; Trans: translated.

July 2022 books

Title	Author	Genre	Date	F	R	Pub Date	Notes
<i>She Who Became the Sun</i>	Shelly Parker-Chan	Fantasy	July 6	e	4.4	2021	Aust
<i>The Galaxy, and the Ground Within</i>	Becky Chambers	Sf	Jul 13	e	2.7	2021	
<i>Lord Peter Views the Body</i>	Dorothy L. Sayers	Crime	Jul 27		3.0	1928	Coll
<i>At Night All Blood Is Black</i>	David Diop, Trans. Anna Moschovakis	Lit	Jul 31		3.8	2018	Trans

Books read in the month: 4
 Yearly total to end of month: 48

Notes:

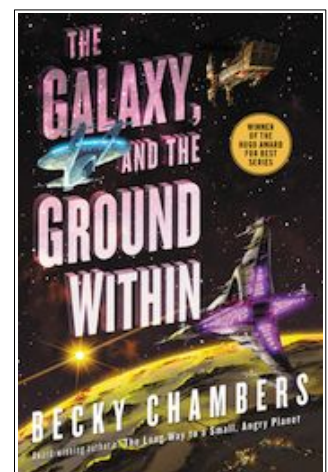
Another poor month. I'm starting to think that I may have hit a wall in regards to my reading. Nothing much seems to be drawing me in at present. This may be due to the books I've been reading, or the way I've been reading them; I do find it better to be reading on paper in times like this. And my attention span seems to have dwindled somewhat. Whether this is due to too much screen time, or just too much time spent inside, I don't know. Maybe the upcoming long holiday will help. I can only hope so.

She Who Became the Sun (2021) – see major review below

The Galaxy, and the Ground Within (2021) – Book 4, and last, of the author's Wayfarers series.

Finalist for the 2022 Best Novel Hugo Award.

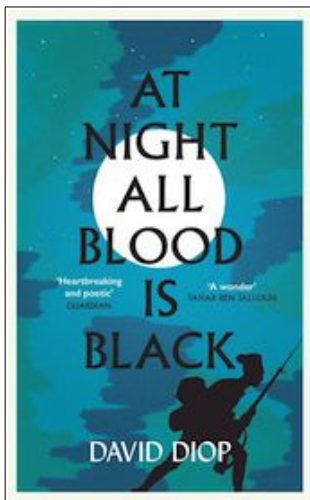
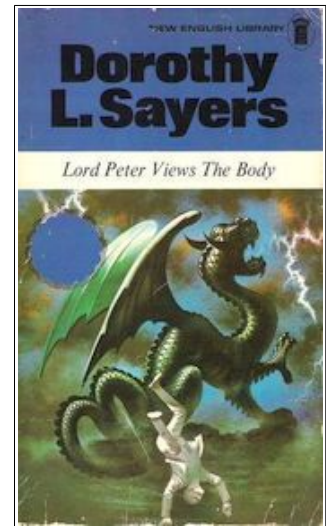
This, like the other novels in this author's series, is a prime example of the subgenre known as "hopepunk" – a rather clumsy concoction that covers works that depict characters working towards positive change, common goals and mutual respect. Which I am fine with, so long as it doesn't leave out one of the major components of a decent novel: drama. Unfortunately, this one falls directly into that trap. The planet of Gora is a lifeless ball of rock that just happens to sit near the intersection of five wormholes, and in a widely inhabited galaxy, wormholes are vitally important for interstellar travel. Gora acts as a stop-off point for travellers as they await their next wormhole transport slot, and hence is populated with rest and recreation establishments, rather like our highway service centres. Here we have a number of non-human characters stopping off for a time when the planet's satellite network goes off-line due to a cascading series of collisions. This novel deals with the time these



characters spend on Gora, waiting for the satellite network to come back online. There are a few moments of tension, but not a lot. And there are some small amounts of drama, but not a lot. And all of the “alien” characters on the planet sound like minor variations on middle-class Americans. I have no idea how this novel made it onto the final Hugo ballot. R: 2.7/5.0

Lord Peter Views the Body (1928) – The first collection of Lord Peter Wimsey stories.

The stories here range from short stories up to novellas, and, as you might expect, are rather uneven in quality. Some of the plots and crimes depicted are suitable for the story’s length but others seem to be condensed novels. Maybe they didn’t work for the author at the greater length or maybe she was writing to order – who knows? Anyway, this collection will give you a good sampling of Lord Peter and his eccentricities, his crime-solving processes and the various people around him – though this is only his butler Bunter and his detective friend Parker; Harriet Vane is yet to come onto the scene. With story titles such as “The Piscatorial Farce of the Stolen Stomach” and “The Undignified Melodrama of the Bone of Contention” you get a good idea that these are rather slight entries in the Lord Peter *oeuvre*, but fun nevertheless. R: 3.0/5.0



At Night All Blood is Black (2018) – Winner of the 2021 International Booker Prize. Originally published in French in 2018, translated by Anna Moschovakis in 2020.

In France in the First World War Alfa Ndiaye and Mademba Diop, two Senegalese soldiers, have joined the war with France against the Germans. On one fateful day Mademba is badly wounded and is discovered by Alfa lying in a foxhole with his stomach ripped open. Alfa sits with him offering comfort, but refusing to kill Mademba when asked. Mademba finally dies and Alfa carries his body back to his front line. But then he immediately heads back out into no-man’s-land, capturing a German soldier, cutting him open and watching him die. He then cuts off the man’s hand and returns to his own troops. Over the next few weeks he does this six more times until his fellows look on him as some kind of demon, and his

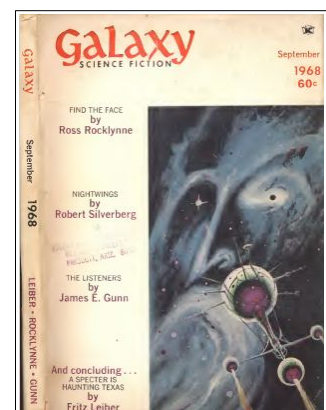
superiors decide that he needs to be send to the rear for a “Rest”. This novel follows Alfa’s descent into madness, as his psyche comes apart under the pressure of combat and the death of his friend. This is not an easy book to read, nor could you say that it was “enjoyable”. But you won’t read anything else like it. R: 3.8/5.0

Other short fiction

Nightwings (1968) by Robert Silverberg (*Galaxy* Sep 1968)

This novella was the winner of the 1968 Hugo Award for Best Novella and also a finalist for the Nebula award for that year.

In this story Silverberg gives us a vision of a future earth, now in its “Third Cycle”, devoid of much technology and whose population is



organised into guilds. The main, unnamed, protagonist is a Watcher, a man charged with using his scientific equipment to scan the skies a number of times each day for signs of an alien invasion that has been foretold. We meet him as he arrives in the ancient city of Roum, accompanied by a Flier, a biologically altered young woman whose flimsy wings allow her to fly at night, and Gorman, a guildless changeling. Silverberg's prose is lyrical in nature, told from the point of view of the Watcher, and his sentences flow smoothly and precisely through the story. It's almost as if he decided to let his writing find its own high level here, reminiscent of Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*. He later went on to write two sequels to this story, also both novellas, which he collected into one volume under the title *Nightwings*. R: 4.2/5.0

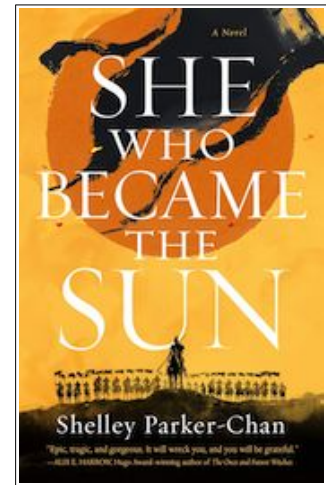
REVIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

She Who Became the Sun (2021) by Shelley Parker-Chan

Genre: Fantasy

Finalist for the 2022 Best Novel Hugo Award.

It seems an odd occurrence that this debut novel by Shelley Parker-Chan is the first Australian sf or fantasy novel to have appeared on the final ballot for a Best Novel Hugo Award. George Turner, Lee Harding, Margo Lanagan, Greg Egan, Garth Nix, K. J. Bishop — to name a few — none of them have achieved the feat. So, in the history of the genre in this country, this is an important novel. If it was uninteresting or poorly written then this might have made this review difficult to write. Fortunately it is neither. It is part alternate history, and part a queer re-telling of the rise of the Ming Dynasty which reigned over greater China between 1368 and 1644.



The novel starts in the year 1345 when China is ruled by the Mongul-led Yuan dynasty. The country has been severely impacted by a long-running drought and families in the countryside are starving. The Zhu family are struggling to survive, and even the prophecy of a fortune-teller that the family's son, Zhu Chongba, is destined for great things is not enough to stave off the death of the father and the son. The daughter, unnamed, is the only survivor. She decides that her only hope of life is to follow her father's plan for his son, that is, to dedicate herself to the local monastery. But there is a problem, the monks only accept boys into their ranks. So the girl decides to take on her brother's identify and name; and her destiny and fate are set. The new monk, Zhu Chongba, is both intelligent and ambitious, as she has to be to survive in such an environment. But she does more than survive, she thrives. Even when the Mongul army destroys the monastery and everyone in it she still finds herself alive and with an even stronger resolve, now to take up arms against the rulers and restore China to a kingdom ruled by Chinese.

The novel is told from the point of view of three main characters: Zhu, who we meet early and is our central figure; Ouyang, once a slave and companion to the Mongul Emperor's son, who is now a castrated Chinese general fired with a lust for revenge against the Monguls; and Ma Xiuying, who will go on to be Zhu's wife and is one of the few people to

know Zhu's secret. Zhu and Ouyang are the two main opposing forces of the book, driving each other into conflict and fueling each other's ambitions, with Ma as the tempering force for good in the middle.

The slow and steady fall of the Mongul dynasty is told through a series of battles — mostly off-stage — internal political manoeuvrings, and intense emotional relationships. The book is both epic in scale and intimate by turns allowing the reader to fully immerse themselves in the world that Parker-Chan has created.

On the face of this description you might be wondering why this is even considered a fantasy novel. There isn't any magic system— though the author has noted that her publishers requested she add one — and the only discernible fantastical elements are the physical representation of the Mandate of Heaven — the divine right to rule — as a magical flame of different colours emanating from the chosen ones, and the presence of ghosts, which only those with the Mandate can see. That's enough. Any more and these elements would detrimentally impact on the plot and story. But you can't have such fantastical elements within a novel without putting them to some use or effect. The Mandate flame makes an appearance and indicates a direction for the characters to follow; the ghosts will obviously be of much greater significance in the second entry in the series. At least we can hope so.

I found this an engaging, fast-paced novel that is very well written indeed. I enjoyed it immensely.

R: 4.4/5.0

WHAT I'VE BEEN WATCHING LATELY

Television

The Staircase (Miniseries — 8 episodes) (2022)

Platform: Foxtel

Genre: Crime Drama

On 9 December 2001, writer and would-be local politician Michael Peterson (Colin Firth) calls 911 in Durham, North Carolina, to report that his wife Kathleen (Toni Collette) has fallen down the stairs and is unconscious. By the time the emergency services arrive she has died and it all looks like a tragic accident. Almost immediately the local police decide that it was anything but an accident and charge Michael with her murder. This series, based on a true story, then follows the crime's investigation, the trial, Michael's time in prison, his re-trial and final outcome of the whole affair. In early 2002 a French documentary film-makers receive permission to follow the case, as they wish to examine the US legal system in some depth. This fictionalisation of the case is based on their documentary, which is also now currently available on Netflix. This is a very well produced miniseries indeed. Along the way we get



three re-constructions of Kathleen's death: Michael's version, where she dies of a tragic fall; the police version, where Michael strangles her and then bludgeons her to death; and a variant on the tragic accident theme involving a bird attack outside the home and her fall on the staircase. Each seem equally plausible. The series also jumps backwards and forwards in time and the viewer needs to be paying attention or will lose the thrust of the narrative. The leads, and supporting cast, all produce excellent work. As to the main question of "did he do it?", the miniseries doesn't lean one way or the other; you are left to make your own conclusions. Which is as it should be. Highly recommended. R: 4.5/5.0

Midnight Diner : Tokyo Stories (Series 2 – 10 episodes)
(2019)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Comedy Drama

Language: Japanese with English subtitles

This is season two of ***Midnight Diner : Tokyo Stories***, but number 5 overall. Netflix picked up the show after season 3 and adjusted the title a little. Again we are back in the small Midnight Diner in Shinjuku Tokyo, run by the Master, with his curious assortment of customers who all make regular appearances: Mr

Chu, an old man who sits at the bar in a blue baseball cap offering advice and harmless banter to the other customers but who does not have a specific story episode of his own; Kosuzu, the cross-dressing gay man who runs a local bar, and, who we discover, was once an action movie star; Ryu Kenzaki, the Yakusa boss; the three Ochazuke Sisters, who offer commentary on the drama around them and who lament their collective inability to find love in a modern world; among others. The stories are often melodramatic, using slightly unbelievable coincidences as their starting points, but are humane and often amusing. We've enjoyed these stories immensely; they make for a perfect counter-point to the rather intense drama series we've been watching. R: 4.2/5.0



The Umbrella Academy (Series 3 – 10 episodes) (2022)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Science Fiction

At the end of season 2, the members of the Umbrella Academy had averted a nuclear apocalypse that would have resulted if John F. Kennedy had NOT been assassinated in Dallas in 1963. They have now returned to 2019, but find they have entered a different timeline, one in which Sir Reginald Hargreeves had adopted a different set of children which he has dubbed the Sparrow Academy. In typical superhero plot fashion the two Academies are at logger-heads immediately due to a misunderstanding and lack of communication. The Umbrellas are defeated and retreat to the Obsidian Hotel to re-group only to discover that their actions in 1963 have resulted in a "grandfather paradox" that has created a

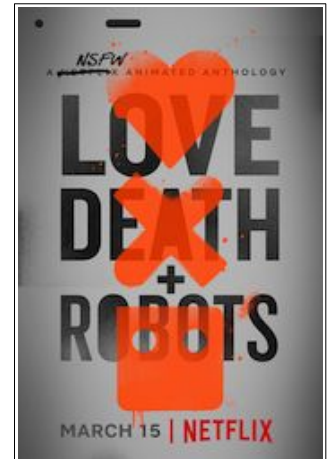
"kugelblitz" that threatens to engulf the universe. Can the two factions work together to avoid the coming destruction? Can the Umbrella siblings learn to trust each other again? And what, really, is Hargreeves's ultimate plan? Good ideas, great production values, but it spends a bit too much time with characters sitting around emoting, and re-hashing old arguments. R: 4.0/5.0

Love, Death and Robots (Volume 1 – 18 episodes) (2019)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Science Fiction and Fantasy

This sf&f anthology series of short films – ranging from 6 to 17 minutes – is based on the original French comics anthology, **Metal Hurlant**, from the 1970s and 1980s, and also on its slightly later US version **Heavy Metal**. Both of these magazines featured adult sf stories by well-known comics and graphics artists – such as Richard Corben, H. R. Giger, and Frank Frazetta – and were a breath of fresh air in the rather staid atmosphere of the 1970s comic book world which was dominated by Marvel and D.C. The stories presented here are partly based on existing sf&f stories – by authors like John Scalzi, Peter F. Hamilton, Ken Liu and Alastair Reynolds – and sometimes originals, the animations are created by various graphics studios from around the world. The quality, as you might expect from the running times, is rather mixed, but all are nothing less than interesting, though a lot leave you wanting more. The best of them, from my perspective, were “Three Robots”, “Beyond the Aquila Rift”, “Helping Hand”, and “Zima Blue”. Definitely worth exploring and I’m looking forward to watching Volumes 2 and 3 in the series, which are already available. R: 4.2/5.0



Ozark (Season 1 – 10 episodes) (2017)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Crime Drama

At last a drama from the point of view of the villain. Marty Bryde (Jason Bateman) runs a financial advisory company in Chicago with a friend. Their general clientele are small family investors, except for one: a large Mexican drug cartel, for whom they launder a large amount of money each year. One night Marty is called into a meeting to find that his partner has been skimming off the top of the laundering business and sees him killed. Marty is heading in the same direction until he convinces the cartel representative that he has a new idea for laundering money that will be much more lucrative. As a result Marty upends his wife (Laura Linney) and two kids and heads off to the Lake of the Ozarks in northern Missouri. There he struggles to integrate into the community while seeking businesses he can take over as cover for his money laundering. In the background the FBI are keeping a close eye on his activities, trying to catch him, and the Mexicans, who are also watching to ensure he isn’t cheating on them. The violence is, at times rather sudden and bloody, though I think it fits the requirements of the script. This is an excellently written, acted and produced series where the criminals are the sympathetic characters. I enjoyed this a lot. R: 4.3/5.0

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

Film

Being the Ricardos (2021)

Platform: Amazon Prime

Genre: Drama

This film was a finalist for the 2022 Oscar for Best Actress (Nicole Kidman), Best Actor (Javier Bardem) and Best Supporting Actor (J. K. Simmons); Kidman also won a Best Actress award at the Golden Globes. With those nominations, and with a script by Aaron Sorkin, you are pretty much guaranteed an above-average and enjoyable film. And with this one you won't be disappointed. The film is structured around the rehearsals for one episode of the Lucille Ball tv comedy ***I Love Lucy*** in 1953. It happens to be the week where Ball is outed as being a Communist, and the one where she also finds out that her husband, Desi Arnaz, is seeing other women. I find Kidman's acting a bit hit-and-miss but she is perfect in this role, looking and acting the part to perfection and performing Sorkin's witty dialogue to a very high degree. I suspect that fans of the original tv show will get more out of this than most of the rest of us, but it is still well worth watching. R: 4.0/5.0



Thor: Love and Thunder (2022)

Platform: Cinema

Genre: Superhero

This is the fourth film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe concentrating on Thor, the God of Thunder, as the lead character, after ***Thor*** (2011), ***Thor: The Dark World*** (2013), and ***Thor : Ragnarok*** (2017). This one is a direct sequel to ***Thor : Ragnarok*** and is again written and directed by Taika Waititi, and featuring Chris Hemsworth in the lead role. The film starts with a man, Gorr (Christian Bale), and a young girl, his daughter, in a desert. She dies of thirst and exposure and he is called to a god-killing sword, the Necrosword. Distraught at the loss of his daughter and the fact that his god, Rapu, did nothing to help him, Gorr kills Rapu and then vows to kill all gods, of all faiths. Thor learns of this and the fact that Gorr is now targeting New Asgard, the new home of the Norse gods on Earth. There Thor finds that his ex-girlfriend, Jane Foster (Natalie Portman), has assumed the role of a female Thor and seems to have reconstructed Thor's destroyed hammer Mjolnir. The two Thors, Valkyrie and Korg subsequently join forces in order to stop Gorr. Along the way they seek help from Zeus (Russell Crowe), which is denied, and then travel to the Dark Realm to confront Gorr and to save Eternity. This is a very oddly paced film: it starts out well but slows considerably when the rom-com element kicks in between Portman and Helmsworth in the second act. And while that seems really slow, the development of Gorr from a simple grieving man to a universe-threatening super-villain seems very rushed indeed. There is a lot to like about this film but also a lot to feel disappointed at, especially the forced nature of some of the comedy. I suspect viewers will find this film incomprehensible if they have not seen the earlier entries in the series. Not as good as ***Ragnarok*** and probably at the level of ***Dark World***. R: 2.6/5.0



Live Theatre

The Picture of Dorian Gray (2020)

Venue: Arts Centre Melbourne

Genre: Drama

This 2020 production from the Sydney Theatre Company finally gets a run in Melbourne, and I'm glad I got to see it. If I'd known how good it was I wouldn't have missed risking it and would have flown to Sydney to catch a performance. It would have been worth it.



Sydney Theatre Company Artistic director Kip Williams has adapted Oscar Wilde's 1891 novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* for a modern audience. He has also directed this one-woman show featuring long-time collaborator Eryn Jean Norvill in the lead role, as well as playing all 25 supporting characters. How this comes about is the major triumph of the production.

In order for the major conceit of this one-woman show to be achieved Norvill is joined by a number of video screens that are suspended above the stage, and, occasionally by cameramen, filming her performance, and stage-hands. There are number of such screens, as you can see from the image below, with the largest of them being about 2 metres by 5. When Norvill is not front and centre she is captured on video by camera operators using steady-cams and cameras mounted on wheeled tripods. This video is then projected onto the screens; sometimes showing just one image and sometimes three or four. The actor has nowhere and no time to hide. To facilitate the interaction of one character with another sometimes a screen will project a re-recorded stream, with Norvill playing the secondary part of course, and sometimes showing a static image. Both are displayed in this photo.



Photograph: Daniel Boud

Using a sequence of wigs, facial hair pieces and coats Norvil transforms herself into the various characters, sometimes with the help of the stagehands at the back of the stage — and occasionally, but rarely, off-stage. Again this is displayed on screens for all to see and it helps the audience adjust to the rapid transition of character.

For a production that seems to be susceptible to massive failure if all the elements don't work well together we were lucky in having only one small technical fault just past halfway. That held up proceedings for about ten minutes, and it did seem to upset Norvill a little as she faltered on her lines a few times after that. But it didn't appear to matter.

If you know the original story of the young man who sells his soul for eternal youth, you will instantly see that it is a very suitable parable for our modern times with its theme of self-destruction brought about by extreme narcissism and hedonism. There is even a joke about mobile phone selfies — pout, head to one side and give the “V” sign — which got a big laugh.

Overall this is a stunning production, and I suspect you'll struggle to ever see a better theatre performance than this. The standing ovation and three encores at the end were testament to that. R: 4.8/5.0

THE MOOCH O' LIFE

*Another day gone by; another night
Creepin' along to douse Day's golden light;
Another dawning when the night is gone,
To live an' love — an' so life mooches on.*

C. J. Dennis: THE SONGS OF A SENTIMENTAL BLOKE

I've had a driving licence for the past 50 years. In that time, in Australia, the only reasons why I would want to flash my lights at an oncoming car are as follows: 1. to let them know they can proceed with their intentions (generally crossing in front of me, or joining my queue); 2. to warn them of an upcoming police car or speed radar point; and 3. to indicate they don't have their lights on, when they should. I get other drivers flashing their lights at me, presumably to tell me that I have my lights on when they don't think it's necessary. Yeah, don't bother; I leave my lights on all the time, day or night, summer or winter. I don't have to worry about the car getting a flat battery as it turns the lights off about a minute or so after I turn off the engine, and most modern cars do the same. And I reckon I'm much easier to see with my lights on, even if it is broad daylight. But I'm seeing a number of drivers who are driving at twilight or at night with no headlights lit at all. Maybe their dashboard lights come up whenever their car is running, regardless of the status of their headlights, and they just don't pay proper attention. In any event I flash my lights at them and they generally just ignore me. Ah well, Mr Grumpy continues to grump. But I'll keep on doing it.

I recently bought some new shoelaces for my walking boots. The boots were only about three months old and the existing laces were fine, up to a point; that point being they were too short. I seem to be having a bit of trouble with my shoe sizes at this time of my life as I appear to be mid-way between two half-sizes.

When I buy new walking shoes I like to buy them slightly tight. They'll stretch over time and grow to fit my feet properly. Having them a bit loose at the start isn't helpful as that way leads to blistered sore feet; something I'm not fond of in the slightest. So I buy my shoes a bit tight and loosen the laces to fit into them properly. The problem with these latest pair is that the laces only just fit. They aren't long enough for a double knot and so the single knot becomes free rather easily. And so I've now purchased some 150cm laces to replace the supplied 120cm variety. The boots can now be laced to the right level of tightness and the lace length is such that a double knot is possible. It's just a pity the colours on offer were so bland.

I sometimes think I live inside a Nicholson Baker novel. I even look a bit like him.

PERRYSCOPE Responses

Perryscope 22:

Joseph Nicholas: “Apologies for this very belated response to the most recent three issues of **Perryscope** (numbers 22, 23 and 24). The reason for the delay is quite simple: gardening has been taking up an ever-increasing amount of my time. As I remarked in the extract from my letter printed in issue 22, the allotment is really too big for one person, and keeping abreast its demands is something of a Red Queen's Race: I have to run as fast as I can just to stay in the same place. This being peak growing season, it doesn't leave a lot of time over for anything else.

“Turning to issue 22, and your account of your childhood brush with death at primary school, I would only say that the accident I had one lunchtime play session at primary school wasn't nearly as bad. We were taking it in turns to slide down a long bank under a big hedge (it hadn't rained for some time, so the soil was dry), and on my journey down my right arm was caught by a projecting branch and wrenched backwards. I thought little of it at the time; but as the afternoon wore it became more and more difficult to write anything, and the pain became ever more ferocious. I was in agony going home on the bus, from the school in Salisbury to the village of Porton a few miles outside, and my mother evinced no sympathy at all, plonking my tea down in front of me and telling me to get on with it. It wasn't until my father came home that there was any thought of visiting the hospital's Accident and Emergency department; so back into Salisbury we went, by car, for an X-ray of my arm, which showed that I had a greenstick fracture of my right elbow. It wasn't deemed serious enough for a plaster cast: just a lot of bandaging to keep the bones immobile and a sling to pin the arm across my chest for the next few weeks. For those next few weeks, I had to try to sleep on my back, which I have never managed with any success; I became very cranky in a very short period. It was a great relief — doubtless my parents' great relief as well — when the sling and the bandages finally came off for good.

“I haven't seen *The Ice Road* film you review in issue 22, and having read your review I don't think I want to. But if nothing else it demonstrates the depths to which Liam Neeson's career now seems to be sinking. Or even plummeting. Once, he had good roles. Now he seems to appear in any old mindless action-adventure junk....perhaps because other Z-list actors have wisely turned down the parts on offer.”

[**PM:** I really get the impression that he's doing it for the money and nothing else.]

Perryscope 24:

Rob Gerrand: “Sad to learn of you and your family's Covid experiences, but glad you've all recovered.”

[**PM:** All good so far.]

“And glad too for the election result; I feel the adults are now in charge.”

[**PM:** I can only second that thought.]

“Your notes on your reading and viewing means I'll now search out *A Memory Called Empire* and its sequel, *A Desolation Called Peace*, *The Seance* and *Maggie Murders*. I enjoyed *Line of Duty*, too, but felt the end of this season was a little contrived.

“We've watched some superb comedies instead: *Minx*, *Killing It* and *Parks and Recreation*. They are each superb. *Minx* is set in 1971, and English actor Ophelia Lovibond is wonderful as a young feminist with flawless US accent trying to get her magazine that she's developed over several years, published. And when she can't with conventional publishers — ‘Why is the woman on the cover so angry?’ — she gets involved with a poor publisher who wants to branch out into the 50% of the population he doesn't reach.

“*Killing It* is set about the time of the 2016 US election, out in the Florida swamps, with a great comic performance from Australian Claudia O'Doherty. She's allowed to keep her Aussie accent. It is a biting satire on different aspects of US life, from the point of view of the desperate down and out.

“*Parks and Recreation* is set in an imaginary US state parks service, with Amy Poehler at her best. All the cast work so well with each other, so after a fairly average first season the characters develop and the show gets better and better.

“All three have laugh out loud moments.”

[**PM:** I've heard of all three, but haven't watched any of them yet. The sheer volume of interesting shows currently available means I'm bound to miss some. It also means we don't have a lot of patience — one, maybe two episodes, and, if it hasn't captured us by then, then it's out.]

Frank McEwen: “I liked *Holding* as well. I was a bit dubious as it was written by a celeb, even if he was briefly in the brilliant reality TV show *Father Ted*. However it was directed by Kathy Burke which meant it was probably going to be OK. It projected some of the feeling of the Irish, though not as much as *Ted*. To be honest, I didn't really follow the plot but

watched and listened to the acting. The Garda guy was very good I thought.”

Graham Peters: “Mention of *The Guns of Navarone* by Alistair MacLean got me thinking of the era where I read such literature. I was stuck in the boarding house at Scotch College with nothing to do, no one I wanted to be with (at all) and no inclination for sporting activities. In the 1970s Scotch boarders were very restricted in what they could do and unable to leave the school grounds, except whilst wearing the school uniform. For a truly educational experience, try a 1970s VFL: match (Richmond v Essendon at the MCG or similar at Windy Hill) wearing the Scotch Blazer of Cardinal, Gold and Blue. Being ridiculously small, I was an easy target and often appreciated the practical education that growing up in the Latrobe Valley had provided.”

[**PM:** I’m guessing we all learned pretty early where we could and could not go and feel comfortable. I wasn’t that big in my early teenage years but didn’t seem to find myself in much difficulty. Then again, it was Adelaide in the late 1960s and I didn’t have to wear the school uniform to the footy.]

“My only escape was reading, devouring the contents of the ridiculously small boarding house library (the most interesting work being the 1960 seminar papers of an engineers’ symposium on the Morwell Lurgi coal gasification plant and prospects for petroleum production) and any other book lying around. Science fiction of variable quality, airport novels, **Playboy** (surreptitiously hidden by others around the Boarding House) mild pornography like *The Happy Hooker* (my sister, who had suffered similarly, boarding at Melbourne Girls Grammar noted that these always fell open at the pages with the racier narrative), detective novels and thrillers such as Alistair MacLean.”

[**PM:** We actually had *HMS Ulysses* by MacLean on our English wider reading list in Year 10 or 11. I have no idea how that snuck on there. The rest were mainly novels that were “acceptable” to our English teachers, ie books with little or no interest for me. I haven’t been back to read that one, and remember very little about it.]

“I took membership of the Hawthorn Library and would visit weekly to supplement my voracious reading habits and fill the long tedious hours. A fast reader, even as a child, I would consume several books each weekend with a remarkable lack of discrimination. Biography, autobiography, whatever; I even read technical manuals for cars and machinery, which has proved more useful than many of the literary byways I ventured down.

“However, that large repertoire of bad reading did bring some refinement to my reading choices. Somewhere along the way, I found Kurt Vonnegut and read my way through everything he had written to that point. I also found Hans Hellmut Kirst who, with Vonnegut, remains one of my favourite authors. The Gunner Asch Trilogy (ultimately 5 books) and the murder mystery *The Night of the Generals* are worth revisiting.

“Some years ago, I picked up *The Day of the Jackal*, finding that it held up well and remained a gripping yarn. I might try and find *The Odessa File* for an escapist moment. I am not sure that I will come at Alistair MacLean.”

[**PM:** You seem to have done better at this than I did. I think my teenage years were filled with endless volumes of crappy sf.]

Leigh Edmonds: “Am I correct in inferring that you are going to cease and desist from putting photographs of yourself on the covers of **Perryscope**? That will be a pity because I always like to amuse myself by imagining what you are thinking as the camera takes the image. This time it's something like, 'Now I know why there's a certain *je ne sais qua* to Icelandic Nordic Noir'.”

[**PM:** No, stupid photos of me will return with the next issue. Now if I can just get Chong to come up with something...]

“I'm sure that everyone is happy to read of your survival of covid. So far Valma and I have managed to avoid it and will strive to continue in that happy state. I've had the fourth injection and felt a little crook the next day, enough to be glad that it was as a result of the vaccine rather than catching the infection itself. I'm looking forward to reading your observations of how the culture you're going to be visiting on your travels are coping with covid.”

[**PM:** I suspect not very well. The Chicago World Science Fiction convention has a strict mask-wearing policy. You will only be allowed to remove it when you are actually eating or drinking. Elsewhere we'll be carrying masks and wearing them in crowded areas and on any forms of transport.]

“I've neither read or seen anything you wrote about in this issue. Valma and I are currently working our way through *The Umbrella Academy* which I might give a 3.75. Mainly I'm watching it because of a desire to see how it turns out, not how it got there.”

[**PM:** Season 3 of that has now started and I'm watching episodes when I can (see review this issue). Robyn isn't interested so I have to slot in an hour here and there.]

“Your little tussle with John Hertz about Asimov the stylist is fun. You are almost certainly right that Asimov was a writer of ideas, not people. Which is fine by me and perhaps why I liked his writing. Maybe that's what I appreciated about his writing, because I like reading ideas rather than reading about how people change over time. The other author I liked from around that time was Aldiss and, frankly, it didn't interest me whether or not his characters evolved through the passage of the story. What interested me were the settings and ideas, and you need characters to convey both of those things. Of course, you are on the side of the popular vote and John is not when it comes to Asimov, but that's 2022 for you.”

[**PM:** I will still read Asimov if any of my podcast episodes call for it, but I won't seek his work out specifically. As I work my way through the old paperbacks and put them out for distribution to better homes, I feel no qualms at all about the Asimov books I put in the box.]

“Your comments with Marc about what one does in retirement struck a chord with me. When I was still working in the Service (lo, over thirty years ago) I was astounded at the men whose idea of retirement was a boat and a fishing rod or a caravan and the long open roads around the top end. Another idea that struck me as very odd as a form of retirement was to buy a lawn mowing business. Valma and I were talking about something related to this the other day, commenting on the activities of all our old fannish friends and what they are doing today. None of them that I know of are sitting about swilling beer and watching the box, life it seems is too short for that. I don't know about you but my

problems isn't that I need an interest to fill my time but I have too many interests and not enough time to indulge in them all.”

[**PM:** Yes, the usual refrain is “I wonder how I ever found time to work.” As we know, fandom is just a goddamn hobby, but it has provided us with a past-time that we can continue or adjust into our retirement years. It has also given us the curiosity to go out looking for other things to keep us busy as well. The men I’ve spoken to who don’t know what to do tend to have a lack of curiosity or of imagination. Either is a help, though it is much better to have a combination of the two. Someone will probably now tell me that you can’t actually have one without the other.]

“Marc Olson's description of the Mississippi sounded almost idyllic (even the flooding) until he got to the part about the river freezing up a foot or so thick in winter. And we thought Ballarat was cold, what with it being the middle of winter here and I have the cats curled up in front of my two bar radiator to fend off the cold. He's welcome to it.”

[**PM:** It’s all a matter of what you grew up experiencing. With you and me it was the heat. But I find high humidity very tiring and I’m not particularly interested in the extreme cold either. We were in Iceland a few years back in their summer, about the equivalent of a Melbourne June.]

“If you were to ask me some of the modern pork manufacturing practices are still not so pleasant but what really struck me was the smell of the factory which had been killing and processing pigs since the 1930s. Bacon, ham, pork and all the rest smell just like that. The other thing that put me off was being there one day when they killed three hundred pigs and I interviewed the lead slaughterman who was one of the jolliest people I've ever met. Later in the day I was shown around the factory and there, in the cool room, were three hundred bodies hung up on hooks. What made this even more sobering is that I was also working on a book about a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust at the same time. He showed me the tattooed number on his arm and told me the story of how he got it. In the cool room I saw the pig bodies with numbers also tattooed on them. The parallel between the two tattoos made me think again about eating meat, which I don't do if I can avoid it these days.”

[**PM:** Yes, well, that would explain it, and probably put me off as well.]

“On that happy note, I hope that your overseas travel are enjoyable and covid free.”

Joseph Nicholas: “Your covid experience, as described in **Perryscope 24**, was clearly much worse than mine; indeed, if I hadn't self-administered a test, using the free kits that were being handed out until earlier this year (I stockpiled a few, just in case), I might not have been aware that I had covid at all.

“It started when I was finishing up at the allotment late one afternoon, when I began to develop the beginnings of a headache and felt a dull aching in my arms and legs. As the evening wore on, my throat felt tighter; the following morning, I was coughing frequently, so checked online whether these were the symptoms of covid. The NHS website said they were, so I self-administered an LFT as a check; it was positive. But these were all the symptoms that manifested: my temperature remained within the normal range, my sense of smell and taste were unaffected, I didn't feel any need to take to my bed with weariness. A further test two days later showed that I was clear of the virus. A lucky escape? Perhaps. A

milder form of the virus, as it mutated to become less of a threat to its hosts? Again, perhaps.”

[**PM:** In Victoria a positive diagnosis, either by the rapid self-administered test (RAT), or the better and more accurate medical test, require the infected to remain totally isolated for seven days. After that time you’re considered non-contagious and free to go about your life. We are also advised not to bother taking a Rapid test for the next few weeks as they will generally return a false-positive as your body ejects virus components or remnants. Just do the seven days and move on. It is interesting how different jurisdictions see and administer the effects of this virus.]

“Everyone aged 50 and over will receive a booster shot this autumn, perhaps of a vaccine reformulated to deal directly with the new variants that are appearing. This is presumably what our glorious (lack of) government calls ‘living with covid’. (You may be aware that, as I write, the Conservative Party is conducting hustings and votes for its new leader, all the candidates promising undeliverable tax cuts and, in the middle of a crushing heatwave, ignoring climate issues even though the Met Office has issued the first-ever Red Alert.) Truly, we are led by mountebanks and idiots.”

[**PM:** It has, frankly, been something of a shitshow over there; a circus full of unfunny clowns.]

“Staying with issue 24 for the moment: **Trom** has just started being screened here, in BBC Four's Saturday evening Scandinoir slot. As most of the reviews have remarked, it's very formulaic: moody, damp coastal setting; investigative journalist whom no one seems to trust; tension between the traditionalist whaling and farming community and activist incomers; under-resourced and out-of-their-depth police officers under pressure from their superior to close the case; an obviously dodgy businessman who preaches tolerance and forgiveness from one side of his mouth while vowing revenge and violent death from the other... But I'm also a fully paid-up Scandinoir addict, so am watching it anyway. An internet search for a second series — you may have made this search yourself — indicates that a second series is being written but that production has been suspended thanks to a dispute over broadcasting rights (Who could have that the Danes could be so argumentative?)”

[**PM:** I will watch a second season of **Trom**, if it ever gets made. I just hope they don't fall into the obvious character cliches that are lurking around the edges.]

“But now the sun is off the garden, and the outside temperature has reduced by a couple of degrees. Time to get out the hose and give everything a good watering — one should never water in full sun, since that risks burning the plants; and watering in the evening is better for them anyway, since they'll transpire less from their leaves during the hours of dusk and darkness. Something I learned from Judith, who was a much better gardener than I'll ever be — this year, when I've had to do it all myself, has been a steep learning curve.”

[**PM:** It's all a big learning curve whenever something new crops up. Stay well.]

I also heard from: **Chong** (re the cover: “You look like you’re about to go on a *Left Hand of Darkness* literary tour”); **John D. Berry**; **Nic Farey** (who agrees with me about Asimov and Colin Kapp’s Unorthodox Engineers stories); **Jerry Kaufman**; and **Barbara O’Sullivan**; thank you one and all. ■