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Cover photograph by Robyn Mills, Labang Prabang, Laos, October 2018.

INTRODUCTION

One thing I missed when we were on holiday in Canada during September was the 30th anniversary of Robyn and me leaving the UK in September 1992. We had moved there after we got married in May 1990 with the aim of living and working in London for a couple of years before the combined weights of children and mortgages hung too heavily over us. It was a great time and we ended up staying about 6 months longer than we originally intended and way shorter than we might have preferred. But that September was the best time for us to leave as Robyn was pregnant with our first child, Catherine, and we wanted to get back to Australia in enough time to settle in before the birth.

The day we left the UK was also the day that I gave up smoking. I had been smoking for about 20 years by that time and had always wanted to chuck it in, so I took the opportunity of a complete lifestyle change, as well as my promise to Robyn that I would not be smoking when we became parents, to give the habit away once and for all.

I didn't have too bad a time of it as I had been weaning myself off the darts for some time prior to giving up: not smoking at work and trying to reduce the number I smoked in any given day. I also had the added bonus that, after leaving London, our first stop on our journey home was in Bangkok. I joked afterwards that walking down the streets of that city in those days was like being on 20-a-day habit anyway. I made it through and by the time Catherine was born in December I'd been off them for 3 months and thought it might be a good idea to celebrate with a cigar. Two puffs and I realised what a good decision I'd made in that September; it just about killed me.

October was also the third anniversary of me finishing work in 2019— not retirement, that would come a bit later in February 2020. I wrote about this in **Perryscope 1** and that piece, along with the notes about the death of my father in that issue, was one of the main reasons why I kicked off this little publication. And after three years I can safely say leaving full-time work was the best outcome I could have hoped for. I miss the money, of course, but I'm spending less on a day-today basis, I'm trying to de-clutter my house (not so successful with that as yet), and find that I have plenty to be getting on with in my life. Prior to retirement I had a few things set up, and a few aims and ambitions to achieve. I won't be fully successful in all of them, as some have already been scrapped as impracticable, but that doesn't matter. It's fun just trying.

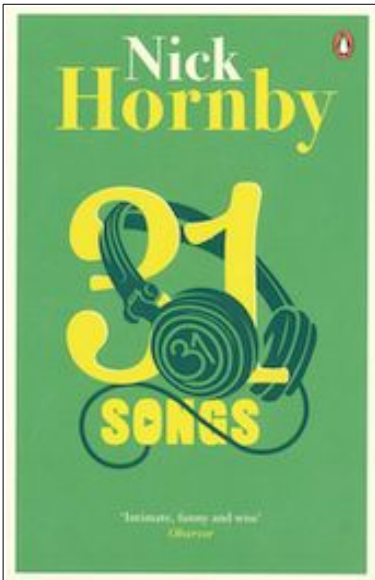
WHAT HAS IMPACTED MY LIFE – “Thunder Road” by Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band

I was first introduced to the music of Bruce Springsteen via the turntable of then-Adelaide sf fan John McPharlin. John played me the *Born to Run* album one day in mid-1978, and while I didn't know it then, I would later come to consider one of the tracks on that album as my all-time favourite rock song.



In his non-fiction collection *31 Songs* Nick Hornby lists Springsteen's "Thunder Road" as his second "favourite" song, after Teenage Fan Club's "Your Love is the Place Where I Come From". He starts by stating: "I can remember listening to this song and loving it in 1975". By my calculations Hornby was about 17 or 18 at the time. What's that line about loving and knowing every song you heard when you were that age? Not so much for me. The major song that had an impact for me when I was 17, at the end of 1972, was Alice Cooper's "School's Out"; the song with the great lines "School's out for summer/School's out for ever/School's been blown to pieces". 1972 was my last year of high school. I didn't know if I was going on to university or not, so school, for me, was definitely out forever. I would have gleefully blown it all to pieces if I could.

I was a few years older than Hornby when I heard the Springsteen song for the first time – 22 going on 23 – but it had a similar impact. Hornby reckons that, by 2003 when his book was published, he'd listened to this song around 1,500 times; "just over once a week for twenty-five years". I'm guessing my numbers would be something similar. I can't think of any other song I've played as much.



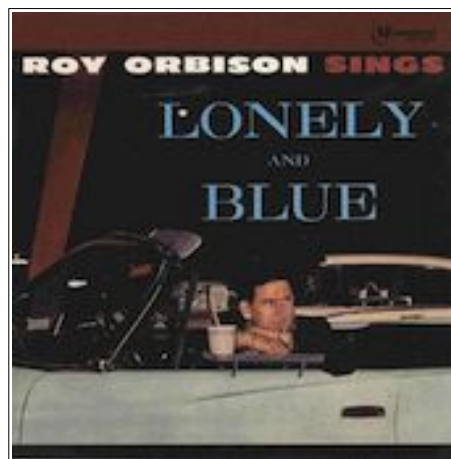
The album version of this song begins with harmonica and piano together, though the best versions of the song start with a lone piano, with a lead-in played by Roy Bittan that sounds like it really belongs at the end of something else, something that has gone before, something that might have been in the original draft of the song but which was later excised. And then we get the harmonica coming in over the top of the piano, lonesome and poignant, before we move to Springsteen's vocals: "The screen door slams, Mary's dress sways/Like a vision she dances across the porch as the radio plays." Straight into the action. There's a common literary technique known as "in medias res" which means "in the midst of things". The idea is that a story

should start in the heart of the action, dropping all the lead-in material. That's what Springsteen does here, hinting with piano and harmonica about what has gone before, leaving it for the listener to fill in the background. Our unnamed narrator is out front of

Mary's house, sitting in his car, waiting for her to appear "like a vision...across the porch". Overly romantic? Possibly. And if you think that you'll hate the next bit.

As Mary moves across the porch there is a radio playing in the background: "Roy Orbison singing for the lonely/Hey, that's me and I want you only." Yep, almost sick-making, but I love it. What rock songs had, prior to this, referenced their influences so blatantly? Not many I'm guessing.

There was a rumour that Springsteen had been contemplating including a cover version of an Orbison song on the *Born to Run* album. I have no idea if that is true, and it never came about. But if it had happened, I'd like to think that that song would have been "Only the Lonely". It's interesting to note that the Orbison song originally appears on his album *Lonely and Blue*, surely the underlying state of both Mary and our narrator, and that the cover of the Orbison album might just as easily have been the cover for a single version of this song, if that had ever been released.



"Thunder Road" appears as the first song on the *Born to Run* album. As Springsteen notes in his 2016 autobiography – also called *Born to Run* – he had envisaged the album to be a series of vignettes, following a single character for a day, with this first song acting as an introduction, an invitation to come on the journey. It does that for me, it's always done that.

In the album version of the song, which runs to 4:48 minutes, it's not until 1:12 minutes in that the piano and harmonica are joined by drums and guitar. This piano lead-in technique is one that Springsteen has used a number of times, notably on the songs "Racing in the Streets" and "Jungleland", the song that ends the *Born to Run* album. But these are rock songs. Surely the drums and guitar should be up-front and dominating throughout? No, not here. It's the first song and he wants it to be an introduction, a soft beginning before the main action of the song, and later on, the rest of the album. The vocals start at 19 seconds, and for next next minute (or near enough) we have only vocal and piano. And then we're away. The lyrics continue with our narrator – a musician as we later learn ("I got this guitar, and I learned how to make it talk") – talking to Mary as she moves between the porch and his car. To me it reads and sounds like she's stopped between the two, waiting for something, an offer, a promise perhaps. He sees her pause and tells her not to be afraid, that "All the redemption I can offer, girl, is beneath this dirty hood/With a chance to make it good somehow." Still she hesitates and he offers her a movie scene of freeways and cars: "What else can we do now?/Except roll down the window and let the wind blow back your hair/Well the night's busting open/These two lanes will take us anywhere." It's about escape, a chance to get away because "heaven's waiting down on the tracks." And finally he tells her what he really wants: "So Mary, climb in/It's a town full of losers/And I'm pulling out of here to win."

Does she? Does she climb in and drive off with him? Of course she does. The world would be a much sadder place if we thought she didn't.

In 2012, Springsteen gave the keynote speech at the South by Southwest music festival. In that speech he described the influence that a song by The Animals called “We Gotta get Out of this Place” had had on his music. Its line “We gotta get out of this place/‘Cause girl, there’s a better life for me and you” reads like the basic template for this Springsteen song. Actually, for nearly all of Springsteen’s songs. In his speech he goes on to say “that’s every song I’ve ever written”, which is greeted with cheers and laughter. “Everything I’ve done for the past 40 years, including all the new ones.” That’s “Born to Run”, “Racing in the Streets”, “Born in the U.S.A.”, “Stolen Car”, all of it. And he’s right.

The only trouble is that the album version of this song sounds so muddy, almost as if it were recorded with the life taken out of it; every live version is better. It is impossible to tell who was responsible for this. It could have been sound engineer Jimmy Iovine, record producer Jon Landau or even Springsteen himself. We’ll never know.

If you search in YouTube for live versions of this song you’ll quickly find the rendition from the famous London Hammersmith Odeon concert in 1975. The album was released in August 1975 and this concert was held in November, a touch less than 3 months later and already he’s working on variations. Here, in Hammersmith, it’s just Bittan on piano and Springsteen on harmonica/vocals, with the odd percussion tingle in the background. You can hear some in the audience recognise the song but it’s not the screaming response that follows the first few bars of versions in the 1980s and beyond. It’s basically an acoustic version. And you can watch a whole slew of other versions on YouTube as well: Houston 1978, New York City 2001, etc, etc, up to Brisbane in 2014 and maybe even later. It’s a Springsteen standard and I reckon you’d feel a little let down if he played for close on 4 hours at a gig and didn’t play this. I know I would.



Is Springsteen now old-hat, irrelevant and outdated? Maybe. I don’t care. Is “Thunder Road”, as Hornby notes, overwrought, po-faced, and corny with its doomed romanticism? I don’t care, and frankly, what’s wrong with a bit of “doomed romanticism” anyway? Is rock music about more than girls and cars? Of course, and so is this song if you dig deeply enough. Anyway, I don’t care.

I frankly don’t care if people despise Springsteen, his music, his politics, or his faux working class attitudes. I just don’t care. This is my favourite song, and if I could get a hard rocking version played full blast at my funeral scaring the pants off everyone in attendance then I would. I wouldn’t be there to enjoy it but, as I might have mentioned, I just don’t care.

“Show a little faith, there’s magic in the night.”

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

WHAT I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT LATELY

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



Notes from this month's podcasts

Episode 82: (3 November 2022) *A new wave comes flooding in*

This time we return to the Hugo Time Machine and have a look at the fiction categories of the 1969 Hugo Awards. That year the winners were: ***Stand on Zanzibar*** by John Brunner, ***Nightwings*** by Robert Silverberg, “The Sharing of Flesh” by Poul Anderson and “The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World” by Harlan Ellison. We are quite bemused as to how some of the works made it on to the final ballot.

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 – Anth : Anthology; Aust: Australian; Hugo: Hugo Award winner; Nvla: novella.

July 2022 books

Title	Author	Genre	Date	F	R	Pub Date	Notes
<i>Stand on Zanzibar</i>	John Brunner	Sf	Nov 1		4.3	1968	Hugo
Ness	Robert Macfarlane	Fantasy	Nov 2		3.2	2019	Nvla
<i>Night Blue</i>	Angela O’Keeffe	Lit	Nov 3		3.4	2021	Aust
<i>Limberlost</i>	Robbie Arnott	Lit	Nov 8		4.7	2022	Aust
<i>Orbit 3</i>	ed Damon Knight	Sf	Nov 9		2.4	1968	Anth
<i>The Torrents of Spring</i>	Ernest Hemingway	Lit	Nov 10		2.2	1926	
The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected in Water	Zen Cho	Fantasy	Nov 16		3.3	2020	Nvla
<i>Mountains of the Mind</i>	Robert Macfarlane	Non-fic	Nov 16		4.4	2003	

Books read in the month: 8

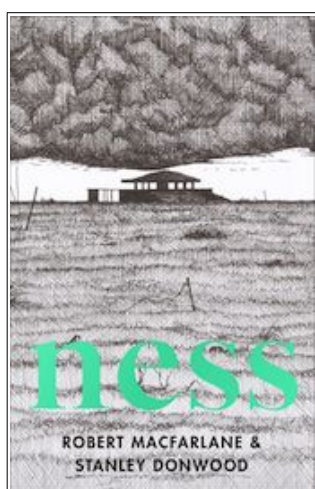
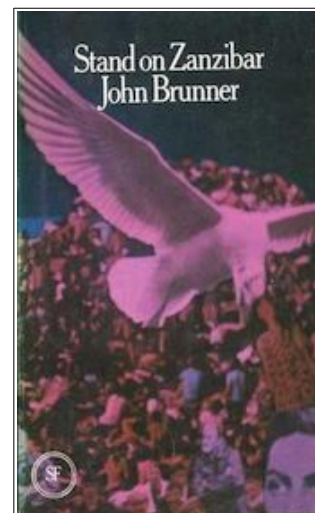
Yearly total to end of month: 69

Reading targets achieved: 16 novellas; 4 Hugo Award winners.

I am certainly not going to be hitting my major targets for reading this year. So it goes.

Notes:

Stand on Zanzibar (1968) – This novel was the winner of the 1969 Hugo Award and the 1970 BSFA Award, and was shortlisted for the 1969 Nebula Award. In the future world of the year 2010 the number of humans on the planet has increased to seven billions. A lot of countries, and states with the USA, have enacted strict birth control measures, only allowing couples to procreate if they are free of major genetic disorders. As the novel progresses we discover that the list of these prohibited disorders is steadily increasing, with the latest included being colour blindness. The novel has two main plotlines: the fictional African state of Beninia is negotiating with the major world corporation, General Technics, to take over the management of the country in order to raise the standard of living there to first-world levels; and in the fictional South East Asian country of Yatakang a scientist believes he has discovered a major breakthrough in genetic engineering which will allow for direct gene modification of any embryo. Brunner runs these two plotlines in parallel as well as interweaving chapters featuring lists of news reports, book quotes, songs, advertising material and other fragments of texts from various sources in order to give the reader an overall sense of the world of the novel. This is sf world-building laid bare and supposedly follows a template used by John Do Passos in the ***USA Trilogy*** in the 1930s. It is certainly an innovative approach not seen in an sf novel prior to this one – Kim Stanley Robinson does something similar in his latest novel ***The Ministry for the Future*** (2020). Brunner’s novel is long, deep and complicated and it demands the reader pay attention. I wouldn’t recommend any reader starting to read Brunner with this novel as it would give them a very skewed impression of the author’s work and style. The book is very much a creature of its time with women playing very minor and very suppressed roles. This is not to excuse it, just to make the observation, and for any reader to be aware of its limitations in this regard. In any event it is one of the most interesting sf novels to be published in the 1960s for all its failings. R: 4.3/5.0

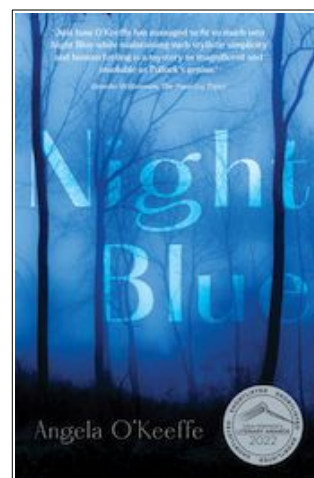


Ness (2019) – Robert Macfarlane, who is better known for his travel and nature writing (***Mountains of the Mind***, ***The Wild Places*** and ***Underland***) here provides us with a short prose poem – I’ve listed it as novella length but it’s probably way shorter than that. This story is set in Orford Ness, a shingle spit on the coast of Suffolk once used by the British Ministry of Defence as a weapons range. Here, in The Green Chapel, The Armourer leads a sinister dark mass, whose central object of worship is a missile carrying a thermonuclear device. We don’t know The Armourer’s objective but it isn’t good and it has drawn the attention of several “forces of nature” that seem to be self-assembling from various objects in the environment, both large and small, natural and man-made. This is a very strange little book with some wonderful pencil illustrations by Stanley Donwood which add to the sense of foreboding that dominates the text. The general intent of the work is fairly obvious so it doesn’t pick up a lot

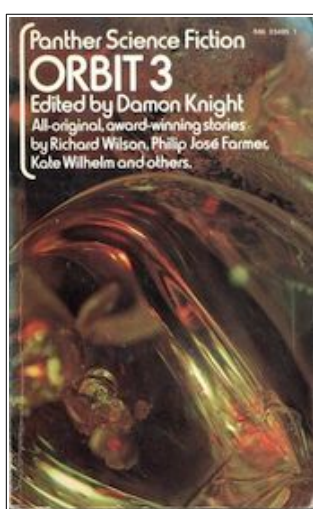
of points there, although it builds a feeling of menace and power through the force of the words, and the way they are aligned on the page. R: 3.2/5.0

Night Blue (2021) – This novel was shortlisted for the UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing, which is a part of the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards.

This debut Australian novel is another strange little work. It tells the story of the Jackson Pollack painting *Blue Poles*, mostly from the point of view of the painting itself. Nothing if not ambitious. “I began one night in 1952 in a barn on Long Island, New York.” From there we get details of the painting’s creation, its initial exhibition, its sale to private owners, and then its purchase by the Australian Government in 1973 amid massive controversy and criticism. I remember going to see the work when it toured Australia soon after its purchase so I’m old enough to recall the vitriol that was hurled at this \$A1.3 million painting, which, at that time, was the highest price ever paid for a work of modern art. I’m guessing that if you hate the painting – I don’t – you’ll probably struggle with this novel, though you really shouldn’t let that put you off. I found it rather slow going in the initial stages in the first section and felt the “painting narrator” might have been a little more emotional about its treatment – it was almost discarded, ignored, and then kept in a cupboard for about 10 years while Australia built its National Gallery in Canberra, so it had something to gripe about. It does pick up in the second section, narrated by Alyssa, a young Australian art restorer, who makes a brief appearance in the first part, who is investigating whether Pollack painted the work on his own or was helped – there seems to be some controversy surrounding this, though it wasn’t something that I had been previously aware of. The third section is back to the painting again, and ruminations on art, artists, politics, and feminism. A very interesting piece of writing. “The story is a moth; its destiny is light.” R: 3.6/5.0

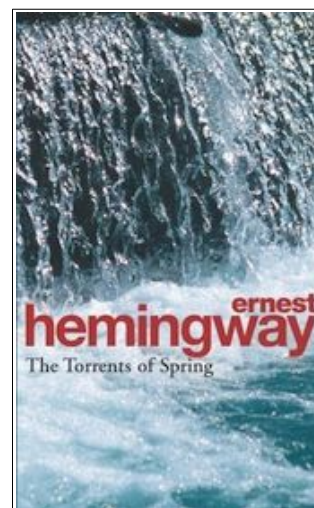


Limberlost (2022) – see major review below.



Orbit 3 (1968) – The third in this continuing series of original story anthologies edited by Damon Knight. This volume includes two Nebula Award winners: “Mother to the World” by Richard Wilson (novelette) and “The Planners” by Kate Wilhelm (short story). The Wilhelm was fine but the Wilson was just ordinary. In his introduction to that story Knight describes it as “not just a new variation on the Last Man theme; he has given it one new twist”. A new twist it may be, but it still doesn’t make it any good. Apart from the Wilhelm I liked Gene Wolfe’s “The Changeling”, Joanna Russ’s “The Barbarian” (one of her stories about Alyx, the thief and swordswoman) and James Sallis’s “Letter to a Young Poet”, which uses an sf set-up to tell a story that might just as easily have been written as a straight literary story, and does it very well. That gives the anthology four starred stories out of nine, putting it into the middle range of such volumes. Why Knight even bothered choosing Philip José Farmer’s “Don’t Wash the Carats” is beyond me. Maybe I’m becoming a bit biased about Farmer, but the more I read the more I wonder what people saw in his work. R: 2.6/5.0

The Torrents of Spring (1926) – This second book by Hemingway was written while he was living in Paris, and was supposedly drafted in about 10 days. It is also reputed that he wrote it as a parody and/or criticism of such writers as Sherwood Anderson. Unfortunately I'm not familiar with Anderson's work so its impact on me as a parody is precisely zero. Apart from that, there are some interesting touches to the work – with the author interposing himself between chapters extolling the reader to keep going and to keep buying his books – which are mildly amusing. But it is very poor in its treatment of women – all they want to do in this book is find a man, and, then when they have found one, to hang on to him – and downright racist when dealing with both Indigenous Americans and African-Americans. A reviewer on GoodReads noted that this book should really only be read by Hemingway completists and not the casual reader. I think that's right and pretty good advice. R: 2.2/5.0

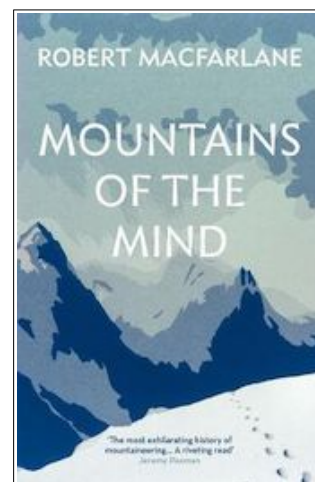


The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected in Water (2020) – This novella was shortlisted for the Locus and British Fantasy Awards for Best Novella in 2021.

In many ways this reads like a fantasy Western set in an unnamed Asian country; not that there's anything wrong in that. A bandit enters a coffeehouse and sees a wanted poster on a wall. The poster details him and his group. He then steps in to help a young waitress who is being harassed by another patron and almost before we know what is happening she, a nun from the order of the title, has joined his group and their adventures begin. Zen Cho strikes me as one of those authors who writes well on a sentence-by-sentence basis, who creates an interesting world of fantasy but who struggles to deliver a compelling story. There are a lot of interesting things here though it reads more like the start of a much longer novel than the 170-odd pages of this novella. A good title, pity the story was a tad pedestrian. I can only hope the author has further stories planned for this world, that would help justify the time here spent setting up the characters and wider world. R: 3.3/5.0

Mountains of the Mind (2003) – This non-fiction book won the Guardian First Book Award in 2003, and the Somerset Maugham Award in 2004.

Robert Macfarlane, who I find myself reading often this month, is a decent mountaineer as well as an excellent writer. So he is about as good as you could hope for to write this history of man's obsession with mountains and mountain-climbing. Subtitled "A History of a Fascination" Macfarlane introduces us to his subject by detailing his own obsession, which started in his grandfather's house when he was 12, just the age for it. And his own obsession is what drives him to examine how others came to be so driven as well. As he puts it early on "Three centuries ago, risking one's life to climb a mountain would have been considered tantamount to lunacy." (I



love the way he uses “tantamount” in that sentence.) Yet lunatics there were. From the early days of mountaineering in the French and Swiss Alps right through to the later attempts on the high mountains of the Himalaya Macfarlane guides us gradually, but steadfastly, onwards and upwards. His reading on the subject is prodigious with something over 150 books and numerous journals listed in the book’s “Selected List of Sources”. But that reading and learning is presented lightly and you never feel like you are getting bogged down in any way by the prose, the subject matter or the stories he tells. And stories is what it is all about. Interestingly he spends a full fifty pages on George Mallory’s three attempts to scale Everest (1921, 1922 and 1924) and yet only mentions Sir Edmund Hilary once in the whole book, and then only in half a sentence. It seems he’s as fascinated by mountaineering failure as he is by conquest. Maybe it all comes down to this quote from the book:

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

As you can tell from the awards won, this book was Macfarlane’s first and established his reputation as a writer to watch for his writings about the natural world. I find myself in the happy position of knowing that I have another ten or so books by the author to enjoy in the future. R: 4.5/5.0

THE MOOCH O’ LIFE

*Time mooched on slowly, year by year,
And motors started to appear
Upon the road to Windywoe –
More progress, as of course you know.*

C. J. Dennis: “The Rise and Growth of Windywoe”

I’ve always thought that the concept of a bathroom shower was a relatively simple one. Wikipedia describes it as “a place in which a person bathes under a spray of typically warm or hot water”; or “cold” if that’s your thing. There’s not much to the concept: a showerhead nozzle or rose for delivering the water from height, and a tap/lever arrangement for controlling the flow and/or temperature of the water being delivered. And yet, it doesn’t seem to be as simple as I might have thought. In Ireland, where we were in 2019, we continually came across shower controls that took some level of analysis before we could determine how the contraption worked – user manuals were not provided – all, of course, carried out in a position under the showerhead which threaten you with blasts of hot or cold water at random intervals. They were just way too complicated for the operation they were controlling. I want a shower that delivers a straight stream of water, not one that tries to act like a masseuse.

On the other hand, our recent travels in Canada introduced us to showers where the main, and only controlling device was a lever. On the majority of occasions this lever could be shifted to left or right in order to produce the required water temperature which worked well. But sometimes that was all the lever did – there was no opportunity to adjust the

pressure at all. If your design requirements are to allow the user of a device easy access to a simple mechanism and that there are only two controls required to be met I would think that achieving only one of those controls indicated a certain level of failure.

I fear I have met yet another case of design trumping functionality.

I note that in the past couple of days, as I write this, yet another cruise ship has docked in Sydney with a large number of COVID-19 cases on board. There is a solution to this problem, though I'm sure a number of people won't like it.

Make it mandatory for everyone on board to have had a negative PCR test in the 72 hours prior to the cruise ship departure. This was the situation we faced when we took our cruise out of Vancouver up to Alaska at the beginning of October this year. Everyone booking a berth knew that this was a requirement when they booked so I have to assume they were happy enough to comply. As it happened the Canadian Government changed its COVID testing requirements just before the departure date so I'm sure a number of people were able to board without the test. But I'm also fairly sure quite a number of people, like us, took the test without knowing the change in arrangements.

This basically meant that we could be sure that everyone on board was as COVID-free as they could be and as long as we avoided crowded areas, wore a mask in lifts and sanitised our hands as often as we could, then we were in the best position to avoid any possibility of infection.

I didn't hear of anyone getting sick on that ship. I'm sure that small numbers of infections would probably have been kept relatively quiet, but I can't see how a large number – and the recent cruise ship outbreak looks like it infected about a quarter of the passengers and crew overall – could have gone unknown. People talk to strangers on cruise ships over dinner and in the bar, so rumours would have been flying in such a situation.

Making mask-wearing mandatory is one part of the possible solution. Making pre-cruise testing compulsory is another.

Cover notes: In 2018 Robyn and I undertook a month-long tour of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. One of the places we had as a definite destination on our list was Labang Prabang, in the north of Laos. The tour we had arranged had wanted us to stay in a hotel of their choosing which was outside of town, but we wanted to be in the centre, close to the night markets, and on the route for the Buddhist monks as they walked through town around dawn – so we arranged a change. Here I'm sitting on that hotel's balcony about to have breakfast. We had a great time in Laos; the people and the countryside were both wonderful. But the impacts of the war from the 1960s and 1970s were still being widely felt, and that was very disturbing.

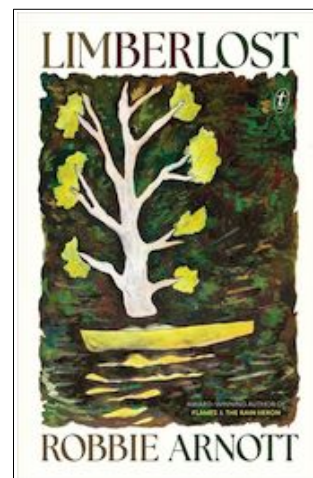
REVIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

Limberlost (2022) by Robbie Arnott

Genre: Literary

[My thanks to Text Publishing for the review copy.]

I feel very safe in saying that Robbie Arnott is one of Australia's finest young novelists, having written two of the best Australian novels I've read in the past five years: *Flames* (2018) – see **Perryscope 19**; and *The Rain Heron* (2020) – see **Perryscope 4**. He's now back with a new novel that will only enhance his current reputation and which is sure to be in contention for all of the major Australian literary awards in 2023. If not something is very wrong.



Ned West is a young man living on his family's apple orchard, Limberlost, near a large river in the north of Tasmania. His father runs the property while his two older brothers are away at the war, the Second. His sister, also older, lives there as well, and always in the background is the presence of his dead mother, dead so long that Ned has no memory of her. In its heart this novel tells the story of Ned as an adolescent, trapping and shooting rabbits over his summer school holidays to sell their pelts in order to raise money so he can buy a boat. And while Ned's work towards owning that boat is the story's main motive force it is really a story of his relationship to the land on which he lives, the animals, fish and whales which inhabit it, its other human occupants, and its indigenous history.

We first meet Ned as a five-year-old accompanying his father and brothers out on a small boat to see a whale "gone mad at the mouth of the river." We, as readers, are never really sure what happens on that journey as Ned struggles to remember it clearly, but it has a profound affect on the boy in his latter life. Is this the main reason behind his desire to own his own little skip? Maybe. Arnott doesn't give you any easy, simple answers; he just lays out the story and lets you come to your own conclusions.

The chapters flit backward and forward across the decades and we come to know something of Ned's future life: his marriage, his two daughters, and him running his own farm. All of it emanates from this one long summer. And all of it is shaped by the land on which he lives. Arnott has shown himself, here and in his previous two novels, to be a fine observer and writer on the natural environment, and the overall effect of his writing is an immersive one. Far more than most other authors he provides the reader with a sense of being fully there, in *that* moment and on *that* piece of land.

As a young man nearing adulthood, Ned is undergoing crucial changes in his life. He starts to get an understanding of his distant and remote father, and a strange feeling of distraction induced by a local girl – even when she's not there. But at his core he's an Australian male, with his silent ambitions, hurt feelings and poor communication skills; he never seems to have long conversations with anyone, yet he thinks and cares deeply about the issues that confront him, even when he doesn't fully understand them. Arnott has created an interesting character in young, and old, Ned: flawed, of course; caring;

resourceful; kind; devoted to his family; and weak and strong at the same time. In other words, a whole human being.

After a series of triumphs and defeats, the novel, and Ned's summer, both have to end, and Ned has to face the return to school and a different phase of his life, a life we've been given glimpses of throughout the book.

When the summer died, it went quietly. There was no final exclamation of heat, no furious storms, no flourish of violence. The season just came to an end, and lay down. Instead of constant stifling dryness the days began to hold whole catalogues of weather: dewy mornings, warm lunchtimes, gusty nights. Skirts of rain drifted over Limberlost on little skips of wind, greening the grass, brightening the leaves. The sky shifted from brittle blue to something softer, a pale colour interrupted by streaks of thin, uncertain clouds. At dusk, it glowed peach and salmon. Beneath it, the river lay steely and waveless, cut by the eternal rhythm of its whirlpools. The sun retreated. Autumn's grace crept forward.

As an example of Arnott's writing style this quote pretty well sums it up. There is no flamboyance or artifice here. The text is crisp and clean with a minimum of adjective and adverbs but with enough there to paint the pictures for the readers that the author wants to portray. It just flows.

Arnott's first two novels both contained elements of *fantastique*, though there is none of that here. There isn't any need for it: the magic is already there, in the text.

One of the best – if not “*the*” best – books I've read this year.

R: 4.7/5.0

In his review of ***Gilgamesh: A New Translation of the Ancient Epic*** translated from the Akkadian and with essays by Sophus Helle in the October 20, 2022 edition of **The New York Review of Books**, Robert Macfarlane writes:

Why does ***Gilgamesh*** continue to concern us? One reason is the durability of its central preoccupations. Ecocide, poor governance, toxic masculinity, fear of death, invasion, insomnia: Gilgamesh's themes could be transcribed from yesterday's newspaper.

It is also a poem of firsts: the first cities, the first axes, the first male friendship, the first queer love story. The character of Gilgamesh has much to do with what Helle calls the “strangely fresh” nature of the poem. Gilgamesh is fascinatingly complex: variously a vulnerable aesthete and a knuckle-dragging silverback, a grieving lover and a swinging-dick bullyboy. At times (priapic, solipsistic, childishly delinquent) he resembles Boris Johnson; at others (tired, wiser, sadder) he's more late Franklin Roosevelt. Like a status-conscious middle manager, Gilgamesh is prissily precise about the degree of his divinity: he is “two-thirds god,” no more and no less.

WHAT I'VE BEEN WATCHING LATELY

Television

Iceland with Alexander Armstrong (Miniseries — 3 episodes)
(2022)

Platform: SBS TV

Genre: Travel documentary

By now you will have realised I'm rather fixated on anything on television about Iceland. So it should come as no surprise that we watched this. Alexander Armstrong is one of those British actor/comedians – he's the host of the BBC game show *Pointless* – who pop up from time to time in programs such as this and who generally do a pretty good job of it. Armstrong here is no exception. His aim is to see as much of Iceland as he can in a short space of time, so he gets to ride an Icelandic horse (we didn't so that), eat fermented shark (he didn't like it as much as I did), ride on a snowmobile on a glacier (we walked on ours), soak in a thermal pool hot tub and marvel at the original geyser (well, yes!). He also gets to a few out of the way places like an island off the coast of Iceland which we missed, and also visits a number of eating and drinking places which seemed to have popped up since we were there in 2019. This acts more as a travel advertisement than anything else, almost as if it were attempting to convince you of the need for you to visit. A sentiment that I can only agree with. R: 3.4/5.0



Around the World in 80 Days (Miniseries — 8 episodes)
(2021)

Platform: Foxtel

Genre: Drama

David Tennant, as the strait-laced British traveller Phileas Fogg in this new adaptation of the Jules Verne novel, makes a pretty good fist of the role; moving from repressed, quiet, British club-man to a man who becomes resilient, adaptable and willing to run through the streets of London in order to make his deadline. He is ably supported here by his companions, Leonie Benesch as Abigail "Fix" Fortescue and Ibrahim Koma as Passepartout. This, as you might expect, is not an exact adaptation of the original novel with Abigail joining the two men on their journey and taking over the "name" of the novel's Scotland Yard detective, who mistook Fogg for a fugitive bank robber. There is a nod to that in this series when Fogg is unable to access any bank funds after a club rival arranges a bogus arrest warrant for him. The series takes a while to get going as the slow, early episodes are dominated by Fogg's fears and lack of self-confidence, though it picks up as it progresses and the tone starts to lighten. My wife and I kept on trying to account for the losses of the group's luggage ("didn't he lose that hat last episode?", and "if they didn't have time to eat at their last stop how did they buy all of those clothes?") but decided just to go with the flow in the end. The last episode teases a possible second season and I see, from the Wikipedia entry for this series, that the trio will get another outing. Not top drawer but certainly diverting and a lot of fun. R: 3.6/5.0



The Devil's Hour (Miniseries — 6 episodes) (2022)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Drama

I hadn't read anything about this series before we started to watch it, though it seemed to be popular, it had an interesting poster image and it featured Peter Capaldi in a leading role, looking rather sinister and menacing. And I'm glad I approached this series in that way, with no major expectations and not having heard any spoilers. If you're going to watch it, and get the most out of it, then I'd suggest doing the same. Capaldi plays Gideon Shepherd who, when we first meet him, is being questioned in what looks like a secure room by two people: a woman who we discover is Lucy Stephens (Jessica Raine), mother of Isaac, separated from husband Mike; and a male police detective, DI Ravi Dhillon (Nikesh Patel). Stephens has sleeping problems, waking each night at 3:33am, and her son is very disturbed, suffering from some sort of emotional disorder. Dhillon is investigating the death of a man in his home which seems connected with an old missing person's case. Yes, it all comes together and the twist, or explanation if you prefer, is one I've seen in novels but not previously on the screen. I was convinced, though my wife wasn't. There are some story discrepancies between characters – why is he like that when that other guy should be as well, yet isn't? – but that would be picking too many nits to be fair. Not overly scary, at least not for me. While all the leads play their parts effectively, especially the menacing Capaldi, for me it is Benjamin Chivers as the young boy Isaac who steals the show. How he acts that way at that age is beyond me. Watch him and be amazed at how good he is. Don't be surprised if there is a second series of this. There are certainly enough pointers to suggest one is being considered. R: 3.8/5.0



The Bear (Season 1— 8 episodes) (2022)

Platform: Disney+

Genre: Drama

Carmen "Carmy" Berzatto (Jeremy Allen White) was once voted the Best Young Chef in America, but now, a few years later, finds himself running his family's sandwich shop, The Beef, back in Chicago. His older brother committed suicide four months before the series opens and left the restaurant to Carmy, rather than to Richie, his cousin, best friend and de facto manager. The series follows the inner workings of the restaurant as young and ambitious Sydney Adamu (Ayo Edebiri) is taken on as sous chef and the two start working together to get the restaurant out of its financial and managerial problems. The episodes are rather short, 20-47 minutes, with one seemingly shot in a single take – this is episode 7 and I should go back and check that. This is a very intense, character-driven series with all the supporting cast turning in excellent performances. As the series progresses we get more information about Carmy's brother Michael, more about the back stories of the main supporting characters, and it is finally revealed why the series has the title it has. Even though this is distributed via the Disney streaming platform the language is rather swearsy. One of the best, most interesting things I've seen this year. Thankfully it looks like there will be another series. R: 4.5/5.0



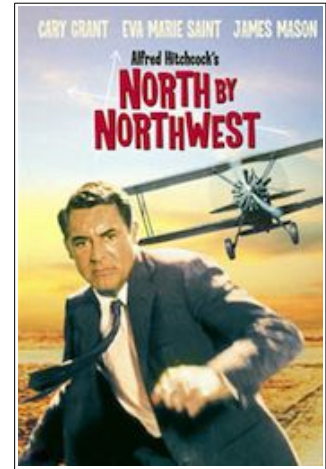
Film

North By Northwest (1959)

Platform: DVD

Genre: Thriller

As the late Warren Zevon once sang: “I’m the innocent bystander/Somehow I got stuck between the rock and a hard place/And I’m down on my luck.” Which pretty much explains the fate of Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) in this Alfred Hitchcock thriller. This is a classic tale of mistaken identity leading to murder attempts, car chases, a femme fatale, international espionage and some rather corny love talk between Grant and Eva Marie Saint (who plays Eve Kendall). It’s considered a classic and it definitely is, but that is not to say that it all holds together as well as it might: there are some loose ends — did the local police not know who was living in that massive mansion?; some slightly unconvincing co-incidences — how was it possible for Thornhill to board the Chicago-bound train in exactly the right carriage to meet up with Kendall?; and some of the action sequences are more than a little silly — trying to kill someone with a crop duster of all things! And yet it’s still an interesting, and every enjoyable movie for all of that. R: 4.0/5.0



[We’ve started a monthly (or so) film watch with all of the family, with me getting to choose the titles. My wife and I had seen this Hitchcock film before but my kids (29 and 23) had not, so it was something of an education for them. I now have to pick a film with a connection to this one. I have a few titles in mind, and the idea of starting to watch a chain of films all related to a Hitchcock movie is appealing.]

The Stranger (2022)

Platform: Netflix

Genre: Thriller

Two men meet on a bus, one, Henry Teague (played by Sean Harris), will be the main subject of this film, the other will introduce Teague to the other main player, Mark Frame (Joel Edgerton). Frame gradually introduces Teague to his criminal network, giving him more and more work as he becomes more deeply imbedded. But we soon come to realise this is all a setup, and everybody we meet, other than Teague, is in on the scheme. This Australian film is based on a real-life case of a missing child, who was abducted and murdered in Queensland in 2003, and is based on a book detailing the undercover operation. It has a very noirish feel to it, with much filmed at night in low light, in semi-rural locations. I really liked it. I thought the slow build-up suited the story extremely well and the two main leads do excellent work. I’d certainly be happy if the Australian film industry could turn out more like this. And I will be searching out the previous film by director Thomas M. Wright. A suggestion: watch this with the subtitles on. Some of the dialogue is a bit muddy or indistinct and you’ll get a lot more out of the film this way. R:4.2/5.0



First Blood (1982)

Platform: Foxtel

Genre: Thriller

After having recently visited the small town of Hope, British Columbia, where this film was filmed, and seeing the carved statue of Sylvester Stallone as John Rambo, the protagonist of this film, in the main street, I was interested to see how the film held up after all these years. The verdict: not too bad, which is an Australian way of saying quite acceptable. The plot about an army veteran entering a small town which sets off a series of violent events is rather cliched now – think about nearly every Jack Reacher novel. But you have to remember that the original novel, on which this film was based, was published in 1972, and you can conclude that this story was the precursor for all of the others that followed. In which case you need to view this with a slightly biased eye. I remember reading the novel sometime in the late 1970s and, while the film's script doesn't stick to the novel's plot exactly, the main elements are there. Stallone was flying high at this time in his career, having just completed ***Rocky II***, ***Escape to Victory*** and ***Nighthawks***. He brings a more human quality to the main character here – the novel tended more towards the superhero end of the scale – although he's rather better when he plays the stoic rather than trying to emote (yet more Reacher comparisons!). The best actor on display here is Brian Dennehy as the obsessed Sheriff Teasle. He never drifts into the overly comical and remains intelligently resolute in his dislike of Rambo and the army organisation behind him. One to be re-watched, though mainly for historical purposes. R: 3.3/5.0



Black Panther : Wakanda Forever (2022)

Platform: Cinema

Genre: Marvel Cinematic Universe / Superhero

In the way of such things in the MCU, there was always going to be a sequel to ***Black Panther*** (2018). That film introduced Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa, the Black Panther, and the country of Wakanda. Boseman looked like he was in for a long run as the Panther but he unfortunately was diagnosed with cancer and died in 2020, before this film was in production. Marvel could have taken one of two paths following that: 1. they could have cast someone else in the role; or 2. incorporated the death of Boseman/Panther into the script and carried. They have opted for the second of these alternatives. The main problem with that approach is that, while it will work in the long run, it requires another origin story, and, in order to add the tension required, the origin of Namor, the Sub-Mariner, another Marvel villain. So what we end up with is a rather long series of expositions as the script has to set the stage for the evolution of the Black Panther lineage, and the interactions between Wakanda and Namor's kingdom of Talokan. As you might expect, the shadow of Boseman's Panther hangs heavily over this film though it doesn't stray into the mawkish, for which we can be grateful. The producers here obviously had a lot of problems to overcome, and they've done a reasonably good job of it. It is enjoyable – as always a joy to look at with its high production values – though in the end I came out thinking it was just so-so. It is more of a transition film for the MCU rather than something new and revelatory like the original ***Black Panther***. R: 3.3/5.0



PERRYSCOPE Responses

Perryscope 27:

Rose Mitchell: “Very interested to read about your Hugo Ceremony experience at Chicon8. I am very disappointed that there were no controversies or scandals this year. Shame on Chicon for being so professional and well run even.”

[**PM:** It ran smoothly and *on time*. Quite astounding really.]

“The Chair of the Worldcon does have a role at the Hugo ceremonies, albeit at Front of House, being the face of the convention that is awarding the Hugos or more significantly paying for the whole shebang. The costs of running the Award is material, especially if every nominee named on the winning item demands a statue, a pin, bring their entourages to the before, actual ceremony and after event. The Chair should work the room, congratulating or commiserating as needs be at any function associated with the Hugos.”

[**PM:** Good points. I was thinking more about the back of house functions; vote tallying etc.]

“Pity about the Nette & McIntyre loss as it’s an important work in the science fiction field. However neither is all that well known by the masses or fans so I agree with you entirely about the Hugos being a popular vote. I have said for years that was so but the significance of the award is that it reflects what was being read that year, ie, the state of the market. The Parker-Chan was a well written and engaging novel. However to genre, she said herself that the fantastical elements were bolted on and if removed from the story, makes no difference to the narrative nor the plot. Excellent piece of Alt-History none-the-less and drove me to research that era. Job Well Done then.

“Jet Lag: I always suffer coming back, apparently it’s the East-West thing, which I suspect might be a furphy; never looked into it. I think it’s more about the let down from an adventure and fun filled few weeks abroad.”

[**PM:** That is an important factor that I failed to mention. Robyn and I have basically decided that five weeks is about our limit, unless we can arrange for a week in the middle where we sit and do absolutely nothing. The week-long cruise at the end of our trip helped in that we didn’t need to be packing and shifting each day but we were still out and about seeing things and wandering around. As a result the old brain box continues to absorb input when it’s already at overload. You just need some time where you can sit back and do nothing and allow all of the inputs to be slotted away, reassembled or forgotten as needed.]

I also heard from: **Werner Koopmann**; **Nick Price** who noted he “really liked the insider view on the Hugo Award experience in **Perryscope**. Popularity over substance? How can that go wrong? (Turns away from UK news)”; he also sent along some video/movie recommendations; **Lesleigh Luttrell**, who thinks her loc I printed last issue may be the first one to appear this century – so she shouldn’t leave it hanging out there alone; **John D. Berry**, reminding me of a discussion we had in Chicago about reviewing; **Nic Farey**, who is thinking of re-watching **Moneyball**; **Chris Garcia**, who is interested in Arthur Upfield; **Barbara O’Sullivan** who liked Will’s portrait of me on the cover, and recommended **The Watcher** on Netflix; thank you one and all.