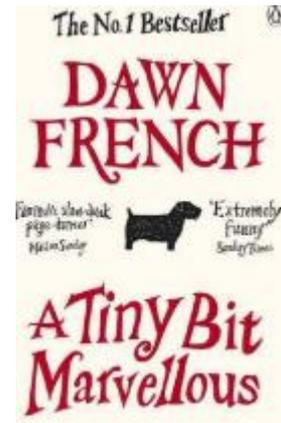


# August 2020 SAMU3A Book Reviews

## ***A Tiny Bit Marvellous*** by Dawn French

Reviewed by Anne Mason

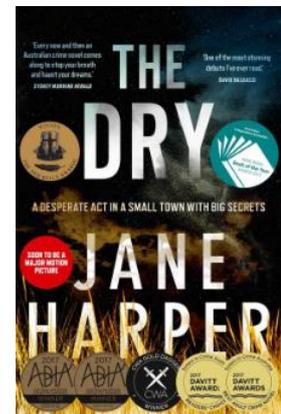
I'm a big fan of the author, but I just couldn't get into this book. It is written with 3 voices from the same family. The mother, the 18 year old daughter and the 16year old gay son. I thought she captured the different personas very well. I just couldn't relate to them, though the angst between the mother and daughter brought back some memories. The daughter really put me off as she was such a scatterbrain. I preferred the erudite son. I thought it interesting that the father only gets a voice for one chapter. He remains in the background, but steps up when he is needed. That becomes the pivotal moment for the story. I'm afraid I didn't find this a tiny bit marvellous!



## ***The Dry*** by Jane Harper

Reviewed by Anne Mason

I enjoyed her other novel so much I found this in the library on my first visit back. Our main character is personally connected to the people who have died in this book. The deaths of the present stir up memories of a death in the past. As we find out the truth of how and why the present deaths occurred, we find out the truth behind the death in the past as well. In both cases the culprit is not who you think it is at first. I look forward to reading more of her novels in the future.



## Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Part 6 of 3

### ***And Another Thing*** by Eoin Colfer

Reviewed by Anne Mason

I read this as I'm a fan of Colfer's Artemis Fowl series. (One of which has been made into a film which was to be released this year- now streamed) I had read Hitchhiker's Guide and seen the movie. The main characters are back- Arthur Dent, Trillion (Tricia McMillan), Zaphod Beeblebrox, Ford Prefect and Random Dent (Arthur and Trillion's daughter).



It is written in the same style as the other books with frequent asides to give Wikipedia type information from the guide. The plot, such as it is, is full of fanciful characters and improbable events, which is par for the course in this series. Never will you find more "Jabberwocky" type language than in these books. I found it a slow read and kept putting it down and coming back to it. Perhaps I'm over such nonsense reads. Doubt I'll bother reading any more from this series. The video versions are much easier to digest.

***The Great Zoo of China*** by Matthew Reilly  
Reviewed by Anne Mason

I am a fan of Matthew Reilly. He is Australia's answer to Clive Cussler. His books are full of action and the 'good guys' overcoming incredible odds to win the day. This book didn't disappoint.

I found the Introduction quite inciteful. His whole premise for the zoo is that China wants to be Number One. This book was published 6 years ago.

Reilly's hypothesis on how dragons could really exist is believable. His portrayal of the Chinese as ruthless in the pursuit of success is also easily accepted.

He is right in thinking only the Chinese could build something so fantastic- and keep it secret from the rest of the world. This is Jurassic Park meets Mission Impossible meets James Bond for action. But with a female in the starring role. This was a page turner for me.

***A Short History of Drunkenness*** by Mark Forsyth  
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

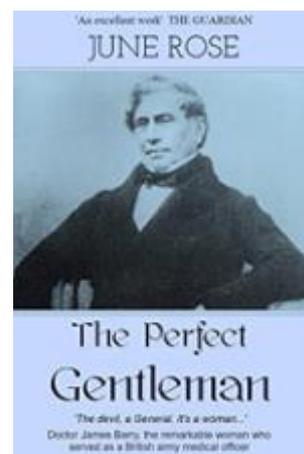
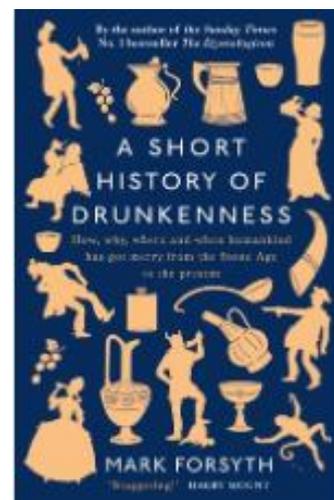
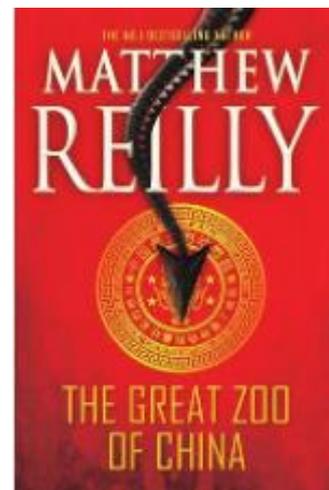
This is an entertaining yet erudite romp through the annals of boozing. Forsyth looks at animals getting blotto on fermenting fruit, considers the Sumerians and their porridge-like beer, moves on to the annual Egyptian religious ceremony where orgiastic drinking, vomiting and sex were de rigeur and thence to all quarters of the world where alcohol was made and consumed.

He notes in passing that only two cultures never produced alcohol: Australian Aboriginals and the tribes of Northern America. The NSW Rum Corps gets its own section.

It was surprising to read about the place of alcohol in Islam: yes, the Koran forbids it, but with typical human ingenuity, the imams came up with devious work-arounds. He quotes a fairly recent Iranian imam who noted sorrowfully that while Westerners sip their drinks, Muslims get hammered ASAP. This is a light-hearted and often very funny book.

***The Perfect Gentleman. The remarkable life of Dr James Barry*** by June Rose  
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

This interesting biography tells the story of a young boy who gained a medical degree from Edinburgh University in 1811 aged only thirteen. He went on to serve as an army doctor all over the world from 1813 to 1859. At his death in London in 1865 it was discovered that he was, in fact, a woman. Tell-tale marks on the belly suggested that s/he had given birth. June Rose first published this book in 1977 and in very readable prose from meticulously researched sources, paints a picture of a difficult, contrary character who kept getting into trouble with the powers that be while at the same time being a kind and caring doctor with special concern for the poor and downtrodden. Often, the reason for his/her run-ins with authorities was her insistence on good hygiene, diet,



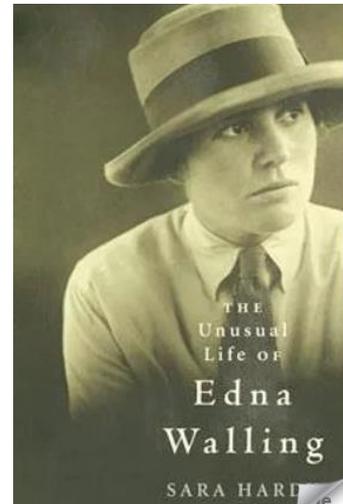
fresh air, exercise and sewerage that was streets ahead of its time. In the Crimea, that other advocate for better, cleaner conditions - Florence Nightingale - found Dr Barry objectionable. Reading about conditions in South Africa, Jamaica etc certainly makes you glad to be alive now, rather than then.

Rose doesn't speculate, but does invite us to consider what it took to do that kind of work in those conditions while cut off from others due to the necessity of living a massive lie. The next female doctor was Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (grad. 1865). In Cape Town, Dr Barry was the first doctor to perform a successful Caesarean. Both mother and baby survived and to this day the first born Munnik son is named James Barry. An incredible story.

***The Unusual Life of Edna Walling*** by Sara Hardy  
Reviewed by Cheryl Gardiner

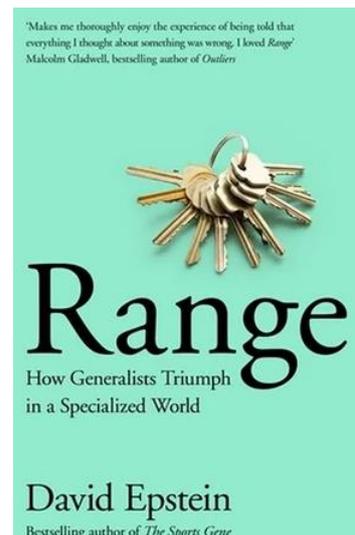
Edna Walling was a landscape architect, who designed many gardens in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Her renowned work spanned almost fifty years, from the 1920s to the 1960s. She was also a conservationist and was dedicated to the protection of Australia's native plants and the preservation of indigenous vegetation along roads.

Sara Hardy has written a comprehensive biography of an amazing, intelligent woman, ahead of her time. I loved this book, so much so that I hope to visit some of the gardens designed by Edna Walling one day.



***Range: How Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World***  
by David Epstein  
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

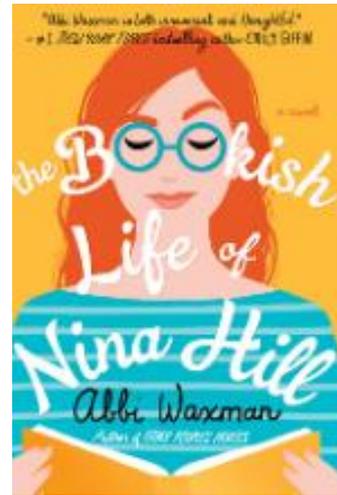
This is one of those well-written science books with heaps of interesting examples. The basic theme is that in this era of increasingly narrow specialisation in many fields, there is still a need for generalists. Epstein points out that most of the scientists who win Nobel prizes have a wide range of interests far divorced from their fields of research. He thinks this is necessary for creating useful analogies and talks about Kepler, who pumped a variety of analogies for all they were worth when coming up with his new laws of planetary motion. Indeed, the further away from the original field of the problem, the more useful the analogy is likely to be, and this applies to many fields, not just science, eg: finance, business, education.



The section on music learning and practice is fascinating, as are the sections exploring counter-intuitive ideas for making learning more durable and flexible. Super interesting and highly recommended.

***The Bookish Life of Nina Hill*** by Abbi Waxman  
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

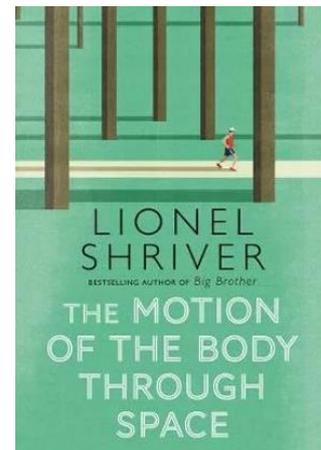
This is chicklit romcom at its best. Nina is a book-loving young woman who works in a bookshop, runs book clubs, goes to yoga and is a member of a crack trivia team. She's not shy, exactly, but she is an introvert. She was raised by a lovely nanny while her Australian mother zipped around the world being a photographer. Imagine her surprise when she's told that her father has died and that she's included in his will. As her mother has always refused to say who her father was, she's astonished to find that her dad was on wife number 3 and that she has several step-siblings, nieces and nephews, most of whom are lovely – but not all.



There's the obligatory romance with the captain of an opposing trivia team, a set piece disaster scene when her bookshop seems to be on the verge of closing down (very cinematic and no surprise that it's going to be a film), but the biggest joy of this book is the witty banter that had me chuckling frequently.

***The Motion of the Body Through Space*** by Lionel Shriver  
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

This is the latest from Lionel (We Need to Talk About Kevin) Shriver. It's a suitable book for us, as it concerns a couple in their sixties. The husband has been forcibly retired; the wife is still working. The wife has always exercised but now her knees are shot and she dreads having them replaced. In an about-face, her husband suddenly becomes an exercise addict and starts training for a triathlon. He hires a very buff personal trainer called Bambi – a character you'll love to hate.



The adult children of these two are unsatisfactory: their son is a self-indulgent lackadaisical but intelligent cool guy drug dealer and their daughter after disappearing on them for years became a born-again Christian with a very narrow viewpoint. The scenes involving them are often very funny.

Things come to a head during the super-hard triathlon that has the husband laid out on the track at night after a heart attack, however the couple manage to recover from all their trials and find a new equilibrium. Shriver is famous for her acidic point of view on many subjects and her trademark wit is on view here though Christians beware: what she has to say about the daughter's children singing Yes, Jesus Loves Me may annoy you. She also has a big dig at political correctness via the incompetent young black woman who forces the husband out of his beloved job.

## Good Quotes

Have you ever laughed out loud or been particularly struck by something you've read? In this section are quotes from books. Feel free to submit your own.

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You know, come to think of it, Oscar Wilde's dying words were about wallpaper, weren't they? "Either this wallpaper goes or I do." No, wait, actually, that's a myth, now I think about it –

cemetery space was tight in Oxford so they used to dig up medieval bones to make room for the newly dead. They'd burn the bones behind the church, he said, in a 'bone fire' – a 'bonfire.'

**Magpie Lane** by Lucy Atkins

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Pocahontas was a princess of the Powhatan tribe, which lived in Virginia. Of course, the Powhatan tribe didn't know they lived in Virginia. They thought they lived in Tenakomakah, and so the English thoughtfully came with guns to explain their mistake.

Aubrey's Brief Lives contains this sad story about the seventeenth Earl of Oxford: This Earle of Oxford, making of his low obeisance to Queen Elizabeth, happened to let a Fart, at which he was so abashed and ashamed that he went to Travell, 7 years. On his return the Queen welcomed him home and sayd, My Lord, I had forgot the Fart.

The neatest palindrome in English is undoubtedly: 'A man, a plan, a canal: Panama.'

**The Etymologicon** by Mark Forsyth

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Patrick turned and walked to the other side of the room. He sat on a windowsill and looked up to the view, which she knew was the Deco spire of the Chrysler Building. Typically, men like to think about something phallic before they agree with a woman.

"Hey. I'm just looking out for you, Lance. Your breath is bad, and you should know these social skills." "I'm married with kids. I don't need skills anymore."

**Pickle's Progress** by Marcia Butler

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There were murmurings around the room as everyone made those noises you make when you're mildly impressed but have no idea what to do with the information you've been given. Sort of like a herd of wildebeests muttering about Tupperware.

"So, where is everyone at school?" She might as well have said, So, let's rank each other by socioeconomic status and potential social power, shall we? but listing schools was much quicker and equally effective.

She put her hand on my leg and squeezed. "Don't worry about it. I promise not to desert you and run off to the Peace Corps." I felt the tension ease a bit. "Are you sure? You're not secretly harboring a desire to build latrines in the developing world?" "Well, obviously that would be fun, but no, I'm quite happy with things as they are."

"Yes. Graduated near the top of your class at Columbia Law, a year or two in Washington as an associate at a very good firm, then out to Los Angeles, youngest partner at Lexington, several landmark cases and state precedents. For a single woman, it's all very impressive." I took a breath. Why was there always that qualification? What if every time I commented on a man's success I said, for someone whose genitalia is dangerously housed outside of their bodies, it's a reasonable effort. I chose to deflect.

Emily banged on the door. “Hey, Mom, did you fall in?” “Yes,” I replied, “I’m stuck in the toilet and you’re going to have to make it through the day without me.” Then I pulled the door open. “Disappointing,” said my daughter, passing me. “That picture would have gone viral in no time.”

**I Was Told It Would Get Easier** by Abbi Waxman

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‘For God’s sake, Matsumoto, what is this, Camelot? Marriage and love are not the same thing. In fact, they tend quickly to become mutually exclusive.’

‘It would be interesting if we could imagine for half a minute that I’m in possession of more common sense than a chicken,’ he said quietly.

**The Watchmaker of Filigree Street** by Natasha Pulley

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“At your age, Sera, you might consider an e-bike,” Bambi suggested. “I recommend plug-in models to older clients all the time. Keeps them on the road, even with, you know—bum joints.” “Yes, I’ve considered one of those,” Serenata said brightly. “But it seems more cost efficient to go straight to the mobility scooter.”

When Dr. Churchwell showed up with a Magic Marker and wrote TKR on the (knee) joint soon to be tossed into a medical waste bin, she was a little nonplussed that after all their dealings with one another he was still afraid he’d forget and take out her spleen instead.

*On podcasts*

Civilizationally, we were regressing to oral history around a campfire.

**The Motion of the Body Through Space** by Lionel Shriver

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Thanks to the reviewers for our August SAMU3A online book club, especially Anne Mason! Please feel free to write a review of your own reading loves (or hates) for the September edition of SAMU3A Book Reviews. Email to [erylacarter@gmail.com](mailto:erylacarter@gmail.com). **Please don’t feel that only serious books are welcome. Especially during COVID times there’s nothing wrong with a bit of light-hearted escapism! Also, don’t feel that you need to provide a picture of the cover. I’ll get that.**

Cheers, Eryl.

*Happy reading!*