

## SAM U3A Book reviews January 2022

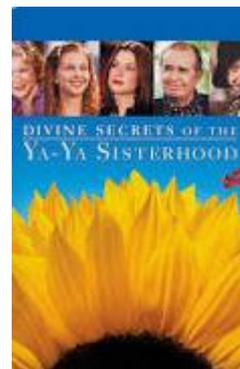
For holiday reading I aimed for lighter, more uplifting books, with more or less success. To begin, a trio of novels set in the Deep South.

### Fiction

#### **The Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood**

Rebecca Wells

It's not surprising that this was made into a film. Imagine four little girls - Louisiana belles - who form a strong, lifelong bond, seeing each other through grief, mischief, despair and joy from the 1930's to the 21stC. The story is framed particularly around Vivi and her oldest child, daughter Sidda. When we first meet them, Sidda, aged forty, is finally having a big New York success as a stage director. A crafty journalist interviews her and she spills the beans on some abuse she suffered from Vivi. It doesn't go down well at home and Vivi excommunicates her. After finally finding the love of her life, Sidda pulls back on her commitment to marry him, wondering if she's too damaged a packet of goods to inflict on him. She goes to a quiet lakeside cottage to consider. It's then that we get the stories of what happened throughout the years to make the YaYas how they are. Much of Louisiana life was wonderful but there were some really awful things as well ... have tissues handy.



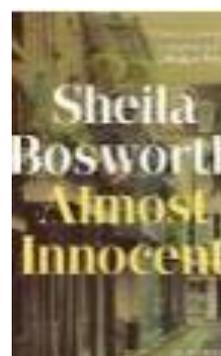
Rebecca Wells writes wonderfully vividly, seamlessly integrating various points of view so that our readers get a fuller picture than any of the characters. You really feel as though you're on those bayous, occasionally lapsing into Cajun French. The various children are collectively known as the Petites YaYas. Catholicism, race, alcohol, music and food are all part of this distinctive milieu where they really know how to have a good old time and eventually to forgive, to accept, to move on. Tres bon, cher.

PS: Successive YaYa books are lauded by some but often panned as far less successful attempts to cash in on the success of this one.

#### **Almost Innocent**

Sheila Bosworth

Still in the South, this 1984 book tells the story of an 18 yo New Orleans beauty who falls for an older artist and elopes with him. Her father - a widowed judge - takes it hard and ends up dead, leaving an unexpected trail of debts, forcing the sale of the house and just about everything in it. Greatly reduced in circumstances, Constance, husband Rand and daughter Clay-Lee are happy enough until the arrival of Rand's uncle Baby Brother, the only member of his once illustrious family who's still rich. He's also forceful, dominating, somewhat shady and smitten by Constance, who has grown tired of being poor. New Orleans life is colourfully described through Clay-Lee's eyes: the Mardi Gras, the blacks, the Irish, the Catholicism and so on but of course she is highly attuned to

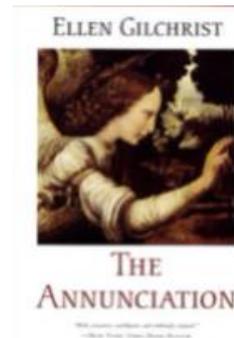


the mood changes of her parents as various schemes come into play. In a bout of wild weather there's a dire ending which displays the aptness of the title.

### **The Annunciation**

Ellen Gilchrist

This more modern take on Louisiana life features a delta-raised heroine who ends up pregnant to her cousin at 14. The baby is adopted, she goes to college in Virginia, comes back and marries a lovely Jewish man, and becomes a fairly shallow, alcoholic member of New Orleans high society before coming to her senses, giving it all up and heading to Fayetteville, Arkansas, to translate old French poetry. Her cousin wants to find their adopted daughter but she doesn't feel right about that. Instead, she has an affair with a much younger man, falls pregnant at the age of forty and has a home birth. Although I'm in sympathy with just about all her feminist beliefs I found her annoying. Sometimes she seemed emotionally self-indulgent, not intelligent at all, far too self-obsessed, frankly erratic and capable of riding roughshod over others. Religious imagery is used to bolster the idea of a new, more female friendly religiosity, which - okay sure - the world probably needs but this woman is probably not the saint to be following. Language warning for those who don't appreciate it.

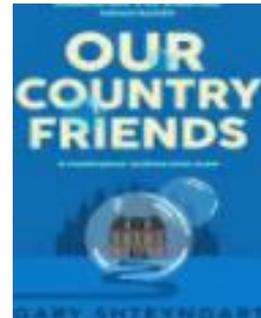


*"But Malcolm had pulled the pillow over his head. There was a tone Amanda got in her voice when she was going to start quoting something that made him want to tie her jugular vein to her carotid artery."* I know how he feels.

### **Our Country Friends**

Gary Shteyngart

Gary Shteyngart's family are Russian Jews who came to the States when he was small. He's developed a reputation for novels with that distinctively quirky Yiddish humour. This is a COVID novel: old friends, a trending essayist and a famous Actor come to the country retreat of Masha (psychiatrist) and Sasha (author hoping to get a TV script going with the Actor) to sit out the spread of COVID in New York. Masha and Sasha have an adopted Chinese daughter Nat who's crazy about a Korean boy band. Nat warms to Sasha's old high school friend Karen, with her Korean lineage. Karen is now filthy rich after the success of a mating app which nevertheless has some disturbing consequences, which affect the Actor and the Essayist (who plays off her poor white Southern roots). Sasha's other old high school friend is Vinod (Indian descent) who was once on track for a tenured professorship but became a short order cook after losing half a lung. He's a gentle soul who's long been in love with Karen. Masha is particularly concerned about him, insisting on masks and social distancing. Sasha did a bad thing to Vinod, who once wrote a novel that never saw the light of day.



There's a lot of division over this book. Respected authors like Salman Rushdie praise it highly, while ordinary readers are less impressed. For the most part it's very engrossing - people doing what good and bad stuff they normally do - but I agree that the hallucination scenes as death approaches for one character are too long. The ending is sort of surprising, sort of not.

*"... the remaining tufts of his untrimmed hair leaning oddly to the side like a stegosaurus at rest."*

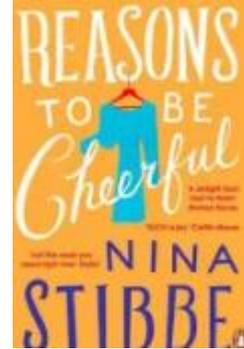
*“Steve the Groundhog turned up by the pool deck, rushing about sun dazed and boisterous like a London taxi driver taking his two weeks on the Costa del Sol.”*

*“She put her hands beneath her chin in the manner of her author’s photo and then spoke calmly and brightly the way one talks to the British.”*

### **Reasons to be Cheerful**

Nina Stibbe

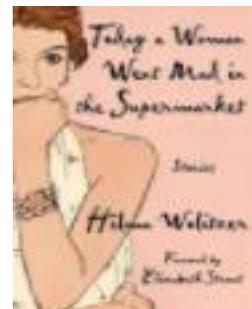
Set in Leicester during the 1980’s, this won a prize for comic fiction in 2019. It’s utterly delightful and full of quirky characters who aren’t cardboard cut-outs. 18 yo Lizzie becomes a dental assistant, almost gets a boyfriend, has a truly bizarre mother, is incredibly well read despite her lack of O levels and dreams of writing helpful columns in women’s magazines. It’s not so much a laugh out loud book as one of continuous smiles. Enjoy.



### **Today a Woman Went Mad in the Supermarket**

Hilma Wolitzer

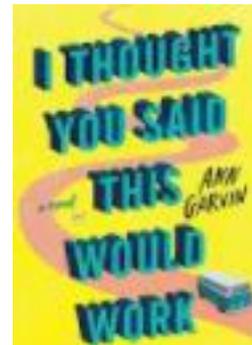
Hilma is the 90 yo mother of novelist Meg Wolitzer and this is a lovely collection of stories she’s written over the years. The final one was written recently, about the COVID death of her long-time husband. The others are gentle little jewels; observations of life’s quotidian events. She taught creative writing and has written novels as well.



### **I Thought You Said This Would Work**

Ann Garvin

Ann Garvin also teaches creative writing. At first it seemed this was going to be a cheesy piece of chick lit, but luckily it soon smartened up. It’s a road novel in which disaffected friends Samantha (who narrates) and Holly travel to California then Utah to pick up a large diabetic dog called Peanut for their mutual friend Katie, whose cancer has returned. Katie’s rotten ex took Peanut with him when he departed despite the fact that Peanut was really Katie’s dog. The idea is that the dog will help Katie’s recovery.

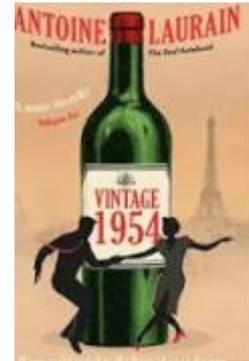


Somewhat to their surprise, they find themselves accompanied by Summer, the former host of a Californian lifestyle TV show, who’s wise and batty in equal amounts. After various adventures they’re hightailing it for home, desperate to get there before Holly’s wife gives birth. On the way, Sam and Holly find out what went wrong with their friendship. The strength of the novel lies in the psychological growth gained by Samantha in particular, especially as she’s been hiding from the possibility of romance since the death of her awful husband 18 years ago, since when, she’s raised a daughter alone. There’s a great scene where Summer goes nuts with a baseball bat at a truck stop in defence of Sam and Holly who are being monstered by a very insalubrious trucker.

## Vintage 1954

Antoine Laurain

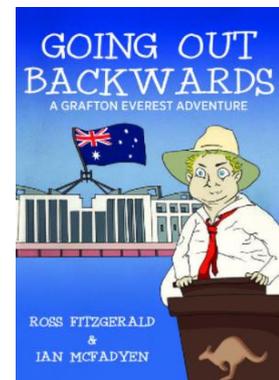
French author Antoine Laurain has a reputation for writing gentle, whimsical books. In this one an American fulfills an ambition to see Paris, though sadly, it's without his beloved wife, who has been in a coma for a long time. He stays in an apartment in a building that has always been owned by one family. A member of that family plus two other younger residents of the building (a restorer of old china, a barman at Harry's Bar) join him in a glass of 1954 wine. Next morning, it's 1954 on the streets of Paris: everyone smokes, cell phones don't work and we have an opportunity to meet various well-known people of the time (Edith Piaf, Truffaut, Cocteau etc). Charming as this world is, however, we're reminded that not everything was wonderful. It's surprising to learn that French women only got the vote in 1944. Their return to the present involves a UFO (!) and a couple of little miracles have occurred.



## Going Out Backwards

Ross Fitzgerald and Ian McFadyen

*Going Out Backwards* is the fifth volume detailing the farcical adventures of a Queensland academic who finds himself holding the balance of power in the Australian Senate. How this eventuated is as much a mystery to Senator Everest as it is to everyone else. He is still obsessed with his penis, as his life and career continue to drag him through a series of preposterous adventures.



For this latest outing, political commentator Ross Fitzgerald has enlisted the aid of comedy writer Ian McFadyen, and together they concoct a well-crafted political farce, replete with a cavalcade of ludicrous characters. The writers take aim at many targets and bullseye most of them as they pass by: minor political parties, the corporatisation of tertiary education, arts funding, medical science, natural remedies, anti-bikie legislation, obesity, sexual politics, and, inevitably, impotence (in various manifestations). The language is playful, cynical, and epigrammatic, as the novel moves with pace and an accelerating rhythm to its bizarre and satisfying conclusion.

*This review is from the NSW State Library.* I'll just add that due to prostate cancer, Grafton Everest's penis and its lack of rigidity is VERY much a feature of this instalment. (In case you don't want to read about it.)

*... luckily the discussion diverged into a debate about the pejorative nature of the word 'zombie', which some people felt discriminated against the undead and should be replaced by the term 'differently enlivened'.*

## Crime fiction

### Don't Point That Thing at Me

Kyril Bonfiglioli

Why is this man not a household name? There are jokes and witty word play on every page. Kyril Bonfiglioli was born on the south coast of England in 1928 of an English mother and Italo-Slovene father. He served in the army, went to Baillol College, Oxford, became an art dealer and a contributing editor of SF magazines. He described himself as "an accomplished fencer, a fair shot with most weapons and a serial marrier of beautiful women ... abstemious in all things except drink, food, tobacco and talking ... and loved and respected by all who knew him slightly." He died in his fifties of cirrhosis.



His louche hero Charlie Mortdecai is a larger than life version of himself only richer, more high class and less law abiding. Charlie's sidekick is Jock, a Scottish thug. In this first book in the series Charlie has sold a stolen Goya to a Texan billionaire and ends up piloting a Rolls Royce from Washington to the Lone Star state after some unpleasantness at home involving naughty photos of the great and not so good. Circumstances at the ranch are ... well ... surprising and he and Jock suffer several indignities on their way back to Blighty. Still on the lam, he returns to old haunts in Lancashire where both the Brits and the Yanks would like him to give himself up. He is on the point of death or capture when the book ends, ensuring that we buy Book Two. Enormous fun.

PS: The Mortdecai books were made into a movie starring Johnny Depp. It was widely regarded as a stinker.

*...the Hon. Charlie Mortdecai – I was actually christened Charlie – who is, or rather am, a nice, rich, cowardly, fun-loving art-dealer who dabbles in crime to take his mind off his haemorrhoids.*

*I often think that Jock should take up squash. He'd have made a splendid wall.*

*He looked grave, worried; his under-engined brain revving furiously as its deux chevaux tried to cope with this gradient.*

*"But in the Lower Sixth we all got either religion or Communism – it goes with acne you know. Vanishes as soon as you have proper sexual intercourse."*

*I had never seen an ecdysiast before; toward the end she was wearing nothing but seven beads, four of them sweat. I think that was the place we were chucked out of.*

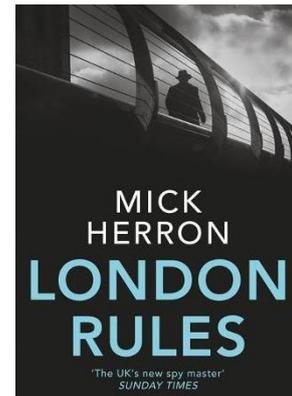
*By the time I had dressed and packed I was being shaken with hangover like a rat in the grip of a keen but inexperienced terrier.*

*Having sound views on Giorgione didn't carry with it the privilege of staying alive; why, I might linger on for years, a misery to myself and a burden to others.*

## London Rules (Book 5 in the Slough House series)

Mick Herron

The unlovely Slough House is where MI5 sticks its problem spies, who are known as the Slow Horses. Their boss is Jackson Lamb: corpulent, none too hygienic and insultingly, wittily sarcastic. Twelve people in a Derbyshire village have been gunned down, presumably by Muslim terrorists, and the tabloids are going berserk. Then a pipe bomb is thrown into a penguin pool and a railway bomb is defused. This sequence of events starts ringing bells about an old M15 document ... it turns out not to be Islamic terrorism at all. The truth, if it gets out there, won't make MI5 look good. Mick Herron is terrific at presenting the politics of government and the Secret Service with caustic levity that is British to its bootstraps. Despite a monumental cockup re a conniving Brexit politician, the Slow Horses do manage to cover themselves with some glory and Lamb has enough leverage to get Five's Second Desk ("Lady Di" Taverner) to leave him and the Slow Horses alone.



*'You're all crazy,' Flyte said.  
'We prefer the term "alternatively sane".'*

*It was difficult arguing a point when you had no reliable information or accurate knowledge.  
Unless you were online, obviously.*

*He looked at Louisa. 'Mansplaining is when a man tells a woman something she already knows in a patronising, condescending manner,' he said, slowly and clearly.  
'Thanks.'  
'Do you need me to repeat that?'  
'No, I'm good.'*

*Number 10 was a warren, as if an architect had been collecting corridors and decided to use them all up at once.*

*'His wife makes Amy Schumer look like a model of discretion.' She paused. 'That was a cultural reference, Claude. I'll make sure you get a memo.'*

## Something to Hide

Elizabeth George

Elizabeth George is American but all her Thomas Lynley books are set in Britain. In this one she tackles the issue of FMG (Female Genital Mutilation) which still occurs among Nigerian and Somali enclaves wherever they are. Here, a feisty African woman known as Zawadi runs Orchid House in London, offering sanctuary to girls in danger. Lynley and his team become involved after the death of a black female cop who was herself a victim of this practice, but the main story concerns 18 yo Tani and his efforts to save his little sister Simi from being cut. Both his appallingly abusive father and his long-suffering mother want it done so that Simi will be more



“marriageable”. It’s a long book with a big cast of characters both black and white who all have their own issues to deal with, including Lynley himself, who realises that the reason his own relationship isn’t going so well is his desire for Dairdre to be not so much herself as the image of Dairdre he has in his head. Patriarchal control comes in forms both subtle and not. Serious as the book is, there are moments of comedy, mostly down to pragmatic DS Barbara Havers, whose sartorial and eating habits leave something to be desired.

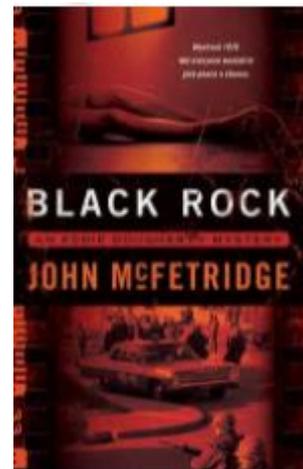
*Her mobile had rung as the two Pop-Tarts were coming out of the toaster, filling her cottage with the scent of a thousand and one browned preservatives.*

*He said, ‘How could she ... How did it happen?’ Barbara said, ‘I expect it happened in the normal way’ unless the Angel Gabriel introduced her to the Holy Ghost while she was washing her knickers.’*

### **Black Rock**

John McFetridge

Does Canada have other good crime writers apart from Louise Penny? Yes. It has John McFetridge, who’s written for TV as well. He’s not soulful and philosophical like Penny. This reads more like history and sociology. It moves fairly slowly, showing the humdrum nature of much police work, but you feel as though you’re seeing reality (his brother was a Mountie). It’s set in 1970’s Montreal, when there were a lot of bombs going off, and hijackings, kidnappings and terrorism were common all around the world, including the Troubles in Ireland. Young Eddie Dougherty is trying to find a murderer who has slain several young women - mostly in his spare time around terrorism

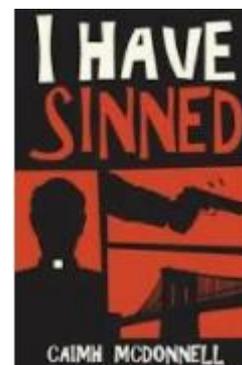


related duties. He sort of succeeds. It’s helpful to know French, although McFetridge usually manages a translation. There’s some sardonic humour, a lot of streetwise knowledge and of course, Pierre Trudeau pugnaciously trying to keep his country on track, pointing out that the “freedom fighters” are willing to impose their view of the world by violence on people who might seriously disagree with them. Thinking back: was this the inevitable backlash against the swinging sixties and the Summer of Love?

### **I Have Sinned**

Caimh McDonnell

Caimh has written many books featuring Bunny McGarry that are set in Ireland and it would probably be a good idea to start with those. Bunny is a Garda: big, tough, a rough diamond with a heart of gold (he coaches young disadvantaged kids in hurling, the Irish national sport). He’s always getting himself in a pickle and always just manages to come out on top. Irish humour abounds. There’s often a mouthy kid or a sort-of senile grandad talking in non sequiters reminding you of James Joyce’s stream of consciousness.



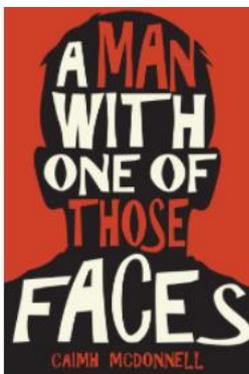
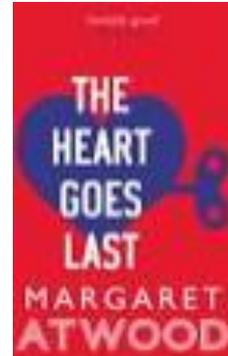
This book finds Bunny in New York trying to get the mysterious Sisters who seem to run their own MI6 to help him find the endangered Simone, the only woman he’s ever loved. He hooks up with Father Gabriel, who’s spent years trying to save kids in a bad part of town. The priest’s backstory is a terrible one. Suffice to say that a very evil man is after him and would be quite happy to do

Bunny a whole lot of harm as well. Comic relief is provided by a cab driving dwarf with a temper and a people-shunning Pakistani nun who's a technological whizz. In all honesty, I don't think this is as good as the Irish books. It's far more violent, the plot is sillier and the whole thing seems to be amped up to appeal to an American audience. Send Bunny home, I say.

## Science fiction

### **The Heart Goes Last** Margaret Atwood

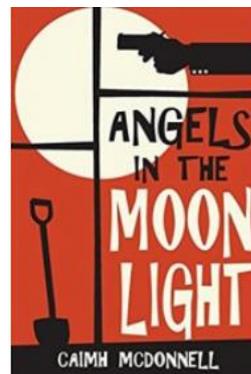
"The Handmaid's Tale" author enjoys herself here with another take on a dystopian future. Like many, Charmaine and Stan are living out of their car, having lost their jobs and their house. The streets are anarchic. They're sitting ducks for a new experiment in living: successful applicants will spend half their time in a refurbished prison growing food etc and half their time in a refurbished picket fence house also doing useful work. They'll alternate with another couple. Great, right? Full employment, secure environment, nice place to live, no drugs. A fifties vibe sees Doris Day on endless repeat, but it's not long before insidious nastiness creeps in. Charmaine's medical administration job during her prison stints involves jabbing incorrigibles with a lethal happiness drug. So sad, but necessary for the greater good. The ruling company pulls in extra cash with sex robots but they can malfunction. Wait! Here's a better idea: let's zap people's brains so their pasts lie low and when they awake, they become sexually and romantically fixated on the first object with eyes they see. Sort of a Stepford Wives solution. Just don't put a teddy bear on the pillow. Of course, there are still people who carry on about choice and personal freedom blah blah blah. The tension ramps up when one of the high-ups turns traitor and takes steps to let the truth out. This involves a cast of Elvis impersonators in Las Vegas, naturally. Atwood has a grand old time with all of this and romps her points in.



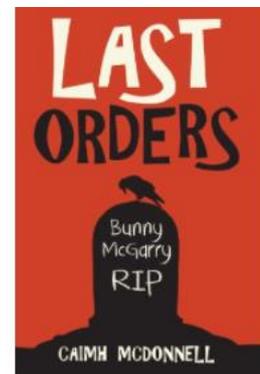
A MAN WITH ONE OF THOSE



THE DAY THAT NEVER



ANGELS IN THE MOONLIGHT



LAST ORDERS

---

That's all for now. Don't forget to send your reviews to [erylacarter@gmail.com](mailto:erylacarter@gmail.com). It would be nice to know what everyone's reading.

Happy reading!