

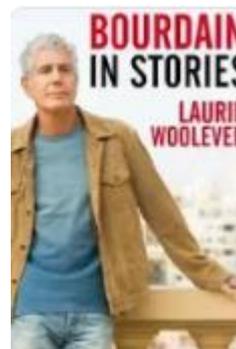
SAM U3A Book reviews December 2021

Non fiction

Bourdain: In Stories

Laurie Woolever

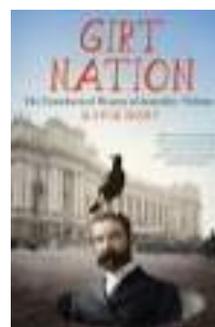
Tony Bourdain was exceptional, charismatic. Millions tuned in to watch this tall, lanky bad boy chef go anywhere, eat anything and deliver trenchant, sardonic observations to camera, often in highly colourful language. He was a food critic for grownups. Not for nothing was his first series called No Reservations. In this book his long-time assistant presents perspectives from everyone who knew him and what emerges is a portrait of a very complex guy: super intelligent, very well read, a shy introvert and an elegant raconteur both, a hard-working person of strong loyalties who had an uneasy truce with fame, a brilliant speaker, a terrific writer, an iconoclast, ultra-sensitive yet driven. And that's just for starters. When news emerged of his suicide it was a gut punch similar to that which we experienced on hearing of the death of Robin Williams. Fame has its price. RIP.



Girt Nation: The Unauthorised History of Australia Volume 3

David Hunt

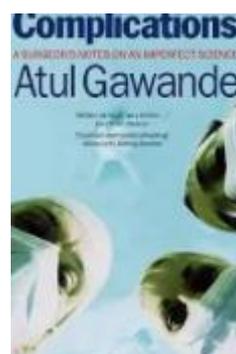
David Hunt is a lawyer who loves his history. He's worked for government and is also a satirist, TV and podcast presenter and speaker. His Girt books are a humorous yet accurate look at Australian history. This one focuses on Alfred Deakin, Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson and the period at the end of the 19th century when the states were stumbling towards federation. Sir Henry Parkes and Breaker Morant are just two others who make appearances. Hunt reminds us that yes - the British did some horrible things in South Africa, but let's not forget that the Dutch Vortrekkers did some horrible things to the indigenous population too. Deakin was the only boy at an all girls' school early on and was involved in spiritualism throughout his life yet despite his oddity, shepherded politicians and newspaper men to create the Australia we know today. Funny, concise, well written and hugely informative.



Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science

Atul Gawande

ATUL GAWANDE is a resident in surgery in Boston and a staff writer on medicine and science for The New Yorker. He also has a Masters in Public Health from Harvard University. As the son of doctors, mealtime conversations could get interesting. He recalls his father telling them about a drunk man who woke up and shot off his penis, mistaking it for a snake under the covers. In this book he combines tales from the front line with well researched reflections on medical decision making, which can be surprisingly ad hoc, driven by such things as recent experiences, doctors' egos, the socio-economic status of the patient, changes in attitudes (eg: patients have the right to decide, autopsies aren't in vogue anymore), and which part of your country you're in.



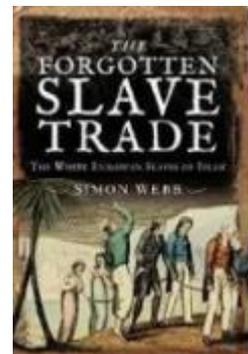
Frequently, the point he's making is that medicine is still an inexact science with plenty of grey areas. Honest doctors will often say "I don't know", and be no less respected as long as patients see that they're trying their hardest (he quotes the example of a woman with horrendous nausea right throughout her pregnancy). He starts the book with his early experiences of trying to insert a central line which leads to a discussion of a fundamental issue: to get skilled doctors in the future we need to allow a bit of clumsy fumbling as they start out. He ends it with the tale of a young otherwise healthy woman with a red leg. It was probably just cellulitis but he had a small niggling suspicion it was necrotising fasciitis (flesh eating bug, a hugely nasty problem). Devastatingly, it was the bad one, but luckily, they were able to cut the destroyed muscle away without amputating. Which leads to another issue: following up on patients who've had massive interventions long term. Are they grateful? Would they rather have died? The book is full of issues like these, providing plenty of food for thought. First published in 2002, it's no doubt still current in terms of what policies, procedures and attitudes we should have. It's an easy and engaging read.

PS: Remember the eighties, when it seemed every third Australian had RSI or was walking around with an arm in a sling after carpal tunnel surgery? In the nineties, it just seemed to all go away. He talks about this.

The Forgotten Slave Trade: The White European Slaves of Islam

Simon Webb

The fundamental point made early on is that throughout recorded history, in just about every corner of the world, slavery has been the norm. From the earliest writings of the Sumerians, from Biblical accounts of the Jews enslaved in Egypt and Babylon, in ancient Greece, Rome, India and China, throughout Africa, Arabia and the Americas, conquered peoples could expect to be enslaved. Before the Norman invasion of 1066, ten per cent of English people were slaves in their own country, says Webb. He's written this book as a response to the current perception that the "slave trade" means only the iniquitous trade in Black Africans to America.



While acknowledging that it was dire, he points out that just as dire, and in many cases worse, was the capture and enslavement of Europeans by Muslims, especially the raiding corsairs of the Barbary Coast around Morocco. In fact at one point, the island of Lundy in the Bristol Channel was their stronghold. People from Iceland, the UK, all of Europe both west and east and Slavic people from as far away as Russia were sold in the markets of Algiers and Tripoli along with Black Africans. More people were sold in this way than were transported to America. We get the word "slave" from the fact that so many Slavs were enslaved.

He pursues the social, political and military consequences of this, which were many. For example, the West had trouble understanding the vociferous Serbian response to Kosovo Muslims during the Balkan wars of the 1990's, and to Hungary's bellicose response to Syrian refugees more recently. Memories are long, however. It was in 1683 that the westward expansion of the Ottoman Empire was stopped at Vienna, largely due to Polish hussars mounting one of the world's largest cavalry charges. We could have been Muslim. Slavery was legally abandoned by the US and the UK in 1807 but continued unabated in the Arab world right into the 20th century operating mainly out of Zanzibar. It still exists of course. The financial incentive is strong.

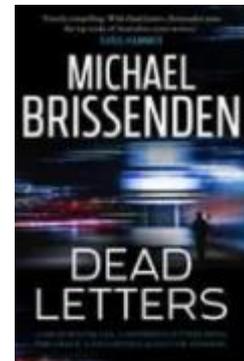
Webb is not a trained, academic historian. There are many problems with grammar and syntax in the Kindle version which could be due to him or his editors. However, he cites sources frequently and the bibliography is enormous. I think he's proven his general point: slavery is common and always has been and slavers aren't too fussed about the colour of your skin.

Crime fiction

Dead Letters

Michael Brissenden

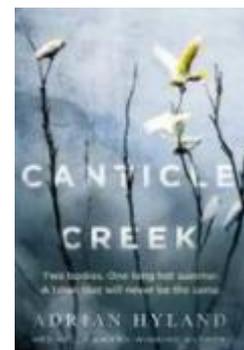
ABC viewers will be familiar with reporter Michael Brissenden. In this thriller his hero is Sid Allen, veteran of Tarin Kowt in Afghanistan. He's back in Sydney, working with police on the death of another Afghanistan veteran who's become a rising politician: Dan LeRoi, the Member for Barton, Chairman of the Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. In a rollicking good yarn involving jihadis, Leb drug dealers, manipulative security forces and a multi-ethnic investigation team the disappointing truth eventually emerges, but not before considerable danger to Sid and the other good guys. You trust a political reporter to know a thing or two about behind the scenes shenanigans.



Canticle Creek

Adrian Hyland

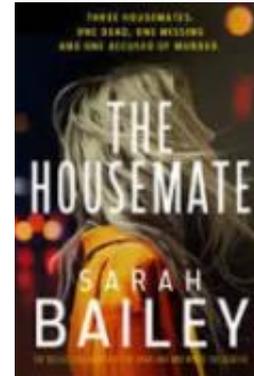
Adrian Hyland spent 10 years in the NT with aborigines and now lives in rural Victoria where he volunteers with the local fire brigade and teaches at university. His likeable heroine is Jesse Redpath, a senior constable in a remote NT community, a dab hand at martial arts and a decent tracker, thanks to her aboriginal training. Jesse and her artist dad end up in a Victorian country town checking out whether the deaths of a local botanical artist and her aboriginal boyfriend from Jesse's community were the murder/accidental suicide by car crash they appear to be. Jesse's instinct that they're not proves correct but it turns out that although some Eastern European bad guy drug dealers are certainly dangerous, the real villain comes from a different background entirely. There's some really snappy dialogue, some beautiful writing about landscape, the legacy of a Japanese artist who made the town his home, two terrific teenage girls and a horrendous fire which is scarily and vividly described. This book is surely destined for huge popularity.



The Housemate

Sarah Bailey

The lead character here is journalist Oli Groves, who once covered a case in which three female uni students shared a house in Melbourne. One was killed by another and the third disappeared. Ten years later the case is raked over again when one of them is found swinging from a tree on a remote rural property. Oli has partial involvement. One of the original detectives was married to the man she's now engaged to. That woman was killed and Oli feels some guilt at having had an affair with the guy while he was still married. In fact, that death turns out to be part of an extensive web of corruption and criminality in high places which is perhaps a little overdone.

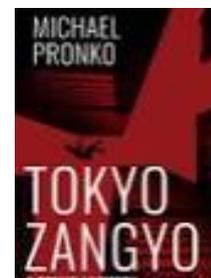


Nevertheless, what this big book does really well is describe how journalism works in this digital age and how journalists interact with the police. An engaging character is Cooper Ng, a chatty tech-whizz millennial who persuades Oli to do a true crime podcast.

Tokyo Zangyo

Michael Pronko

Michael Pronko has lived and worked in Tokyo for yonks and this is the fourth book in his detective Hiroshi series. "Zangyo" is the Japanese word for overwork - something that conservative Japanese business culture is famous for. It's also (in)famous for its treatment of women. Likeable Hiroshi trained in accounting in the US and normally traces financial crime but he's called to the scene of an apparent suicide from a twenty-storey building. The victim is a hugely successful manager in a media company that's about to go global. Over the years, several women have lodged complaints against this man but the most significant were from a young woman who committed suicide from the exact same spot. Her mother brought a case against the company and won. Hiroshi and the team are somewhat spoiled for choice when it comes to the question of who might have pushed the guy off (yes, it is indeed murder) and the truth turns out to be somewhat messy and in true whodunnit style, the perp is not the most obvious candidate.

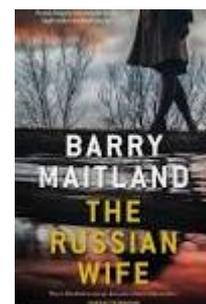


The main fascination here is the insight we get into contemporary Japanese life but this is not to downplay some excellent plotting and character building.

The Russian Wife

Barry Maitland

Barry Maitland is on form here in the 14th Brock and Kolla book. A rich English guy marries a Russian woman who is fleeing, with her son, an abusive Russian husband. Years later, the son is the somewhat flaky graduate of an art school and is working for a slightly dubious gallery business. His stepfather is often in New York, where Brock catches up with him in surprising circumstances after the Russian wife is found dead in a fenland puddle, close to the oldest church in England. She has been contributing to its restoration in concert with her lover, a taciturn Scottish artist who was a fellow student with her son. The artist is also found deceased. The question is: has the abusive former



husband changed identity and is he part of a Russian Mafia ring doing nefarious things in the art world? In side plots, Brock goes to Germany wondering if his Schwitters collage is genuine Merz, but more worryingly, Kathy Kolla is unfairly targeted by Police Integrity and has to do some nimble footwork to prove her innocence.

Christine Falls

Benjamin Black

Benjamin Black is the nom de plume of Irish literary writer John Banville and this is the first in his series of Quirke books. It's set in 1950's Dublin and Quirke is a pathologist who discovers that the doctor with whom he was raised as a brother has falsified the death certificate of a young woman - Christine Falls - who worked for their family. Their situation is complicated by the fact that his foster-brother is married to an American woman who has never felt at home in Ireland and whom Quirke loved too and wanted to marry. Instead, he ended up marrying her sister, who is now dead.

He is close to his niece, who wants to marry a man the family thinks is unsuitable. To get the young woman away, they all go to America to stay with wealthy Irish-Americans in Boston, a trip that has some awful results. What is eventually uncovered is the scam we all know about now: the illegitimate babies of "fallen" Irish girls were unofficially adopted by childless American couples. This trade involved massive corruption and coverups in high places.



Much has been made of the quality of the writing in the Benjamin Black books. Indeed, some consider them better plotted than Banville books, though as one Guardian reviewer said: 'Let's face it. You don't read Banville for the plot'. The main characters are rarely wholly admirable, including Quirke himself, who is often the worse for wear after drinking. This aspect of him is relevant to a plot reveal towards the end of the book that nevertheless still stretches credulity mightily. I also could not admire the way he interacted with his sister-in-law, with his hot/cold approach. Not that the heroes of books need to be wholly admirable of course. Flaws, after all, are the interesting things that drive almost every novel or play. If King Lear hadn't been such an idiot, there would have been one less Shakespearean tragedy. The writing *is* very fine, though and it's no surprise that it was made into a TV series.

Fiction

Great Circle

Maggie Shipstead

This was short listed for the 2021 Booker and by golly, it's good. I put off reading it because I'm not especially interested in early aviation but it's about so much more than that. Moreover, Shipstead's writing is so good she can make you interested. It's a big book that traverses a lot of history, from the early 20thC days of transatlantic trade to WWII when many female pilots ferried planes from place to place, to modern times, where the counterpart story has film star Hadley Baxter playing the part of aviatrix Marian Graves in a film to be called *Peregrine*, after Marian's plane: the one in which she attempted to fly a great circle round the earth via the north and south poles. All the sections are interesting and enjoyable, even when they're sad, but the way Shipstead describes the paparazzied life of a film star is brilliant. There are many parallels between the lives of Hadley and Marian: they're both orphans raised by uninterested uncles, for example, although Marian has a twin brother who



becomes an artist. The plot also involves an interesting web of rich people who are connected to the twins and to *Peregrine* the film.

Above and beyond the glories of the plot is Shipstead's writing style. It's warm, concise, endearing, poetic and often funny. She describes some unusual relationships. The man who fosters Marian's desire to fly becomes the husband she has to escape from. In England she falls in love with a fellow female pilot from the US who is in a friendly supportive marriage to a gay man who eventually becomes Marian's navigator on her great circle attempt. As children, the twins form a threesome with a half indigenous boy who initiates Marian sexually and who is still her occasional lover in later life. Shipstead ends Marian's story in a very unusual way - it involves New Zealand, where an Auckland airport statue of aviatrix Jean Batten was inspirational. As Hadley investigates the truth of Marian's life she becomes aware that the story the film is telling is nothing like the reality of what actually happened. This is utterly masterful.

Seating Arrangements

Maggie Shipstead

Buoyed by *Great Circle*, I downloaded this earlier novel and was not disappointed. It's much narrower in scope, but none the worse for that. It follows a well-off family of American WASPS who have gone to their regular summer island home for the wedding of heavily pregnant daughter Daphne, along with various friends and relatives of all concerned. There are some priceless pen portraits. Particularly enjoyable are the grandmothers of the groom, however the main focus of attention is the bride's father Winn.



Winn is one of those well-heeled conventional, conservative old boys of an Ivy League university who belongs to lots of clubs, except - oh horror! - the golf club on the island. His attempts to weasel his way in are depressing, cringe-making and funny, if you have a vicious streak. (And hopefully, you have.) Despite his long lasting and highly successful marriage to the sensible and capable Biddy, whom he genuinely loves, he is feeling his oats and is disturbed by his attraction to his daughters' friend Agatha, who is to be one of the bridesmaids. Little disasters pile up as the weekend progresses and psychologies clash, not helped by the wedding planner distributing some calming Valium. Winn unwisely mixes his with alcohol, resulting in an embarrassingly maudlin speech at the rehearsal dinner that everyone tries to forget.

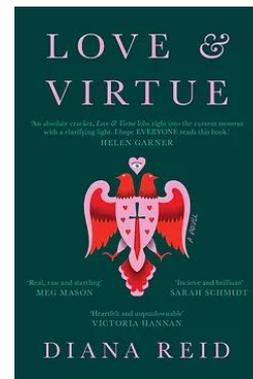
Some reviewers have criticised Shipstead for choosing to write about well-off WASPS. This seems strange to me, given that many an author has made a living exploiting the lack of emotional intelligence of the wealthy. We can all experience a great deal of delightful Schadenfreude at their pratfalls, especially when they're so humorously and insightfully described as they are here. Three cheers, Maggie.

Love and Virtue

Diana Reid

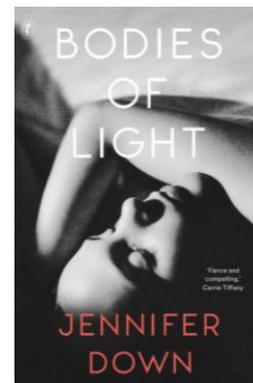
In this debut novel, Michaela comes from Canberra to Sydney University to study philosophy and live in Fairfax College, where the talented girl in the room next to her - Eve - becomes a friend, a mentor, a *bête noire* and in later life, a successful public figure. Michaela finds herself surrounded by wealthy kids from private schools who already know each other. As the hard-working daughter of a single mum from a different city, it's hard to fit in. During alcohol-fuelled Orientation Week

she gets blind drunk and one of the boys has sex with her. Eve sees this as a feminist issue and wants her to go public with it. Michaela sees it differently. The situation becomes complicated by what happens to the boy and by her consensual affair with a philosophy lecturer. The love and virtue they are philosophically studying are further put to the test when Eve appropriates Michaela's story for her own ends, leaving Michaela with very mixed feelings as an adult. This is an excellent study of modern university life in woke, phone texting times where old moral conundrums are as relevant as ever.



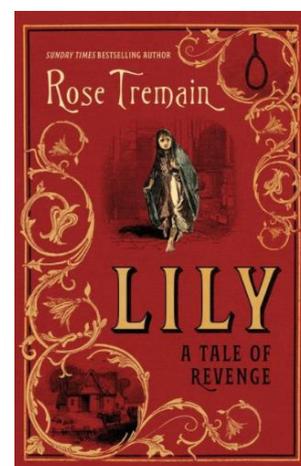
Bodies of Light Jennifer Down

If we were ever in any doubt about the damaging effects of being a ward of the state, this book will dispel it. A woman in America called Holly receives a Facebook approach from a man called Tony in Australia asking if she knows what became of a girl called Maggie. Holly is inclined to have nothing to do with him at first, but over time, a backstory emerges of a life spent in care and in foster homes that is soul shrivelling, albeit told in a matter of fact way. Despite everything, Maggie makes a successful marriage but tragedy strikes repeatedly, leading her to fake her own death and escape with a new identity to New Zealand. There she has an affair with a woman who ends it, saying that she can't take the closed-offness, the necessary protective shell that Maggie/Josie needs to survive. In a twist of fate, Josie falls in with a graduate American student and - long story short - ends up following him to the States and marrying him. All is well for many years and she makes up for her former lack of education by becoming a nurse. However, fate has one last, big bad hand to deal her and the road to recovery is long and slow, involving a second change of name. It's helped in part by knowing Tony, who's had his own hard road to hoe. This is a story that really leads you to consider the psychological damage done to children in such circumstances. It also plays in to the whole question of male attitudes to women and girls though it is reassuring to note that both husbands are good blokes, particularly the American one.



Lily: A Tale of Revenge Rose Tremain

Beloved English author Rose Tremain brings us another tale of an orphaned girl: this one set in Victorian times. New born Lily is discovered at the gates of a London park by a young policeman who takes her to an orphanage. The system then involved fostering baby orphans with families till the age of three, whereupon they were delivered back to the orphanage to be maltreated until they could be put out to work. Lily strikes it lucky with her kind foster mother Nellie and loves the farming life she leads with her foster brothers. On being returned to the orphanage her distress and Nellie's are enormous. Orphanage life is predictably horrible and she makes unsuccessful escape attempts which earn her particular vindictiveness from one of the nurses, who also, we are given to understand, abuses her sexually.



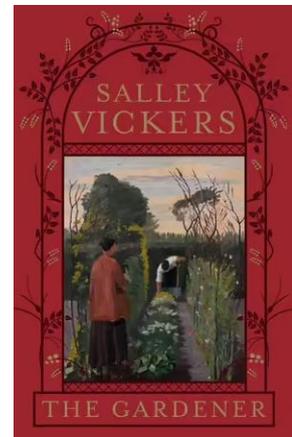
As a teenager, Lily is apprenticed to a theatrical wig maker and does very well. She is rediscovered by her saviour, who is now an Inspector. He and his wife are childless and offer to adopt her. It's a

good offer but two things stop her. She's attracted to Sam as a man as well as a father, plus, she's killed someone. Believing he already knows, she confesses as much. The best he can do then is to turn a blind eye while she escapes, both knowing they must never meet again because he will be obliged to fulfill his legal duty which will end with her death on the scaffold. She makes good her escape and finds Nellie once again, now living with dementia in the care of her last remaining son Jesse. They accept her back into their lives and we hope fervently that Lily will live happily ever after.

The Gardener

Sally Vickers

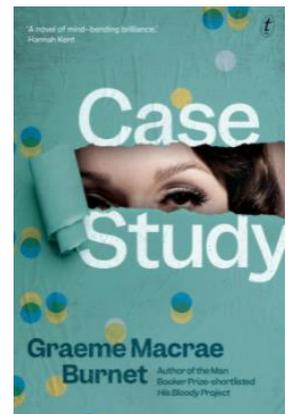
This is not the best book Sally Vickers has written, but it's still pretty good. Upon the death of their father, sisters Margot and Hassie (short for Halcyon) put aside their differences and pool their money to buy an old Jacobean house near the Welsh border with a run-down garden. Margot returns to her city life of high finance while children's book illustrator Hassie settles in. She's in mourning over a lost love affair. A surprising person turns up to help her get the garden in shape - a gentle Albanian called Murat. There are also two stock characters: Phyllis, a doughty and astringent retired teacher and Peter, a doubting vicar who's adrift after the death of his wife. Working in the garden is healing though they have to deal with a bratty little village girl and some racism. Hassie becomes interested in the story of an unhappy wife who previously lived in the house and in the old pre-Christian religion. The story ends with a surprise pregnancy and we're left to wonder who the father is.



Case Study

Graeme Macrae Burnet

An author called GMB receives some old notebooks written by a young woman in the sixties who had decided that her sister's suicide was prompted by the outre therapist her sister was seeing. She invents a persona - Rebecca Smyth - and goes to see this man as a patient to find clues as to what happened. GMB has an interest in the therapist - Arthur Collins Braithwaite - and publishes the notebooks interspersed with his biographical notes on Braithwaite. Braithwaite was a wild Yorkshire boy with a difficult family life who worked with renowned Scottish psychiatrist RD Laing and WWII veterans before hitting university. He had a beast of a reputation - clever, dominating, fascinated by the "angry young men" of the sixties and the anti-psychiatry movement. He was also very jealous of Laing. The novel is thus an interesting mix of the real and the invented. (Laing real, Braithwaite and the notebooks invented.) Attractive as the notion is that our various selves are all legitimate as opposed to the idea that there is a "true" self that is central and surrounded by some possibly weird ones that need to be truncated, GMB does acknowledge that those who embraced the former idea, often with the help of LSD, tended to end up in psych wards.



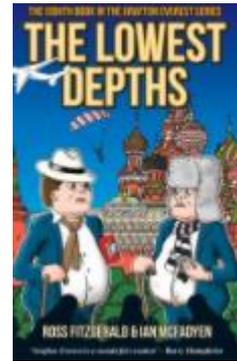
As the notebooks progress, the more daring "Rebecca" persona threatens to take over the psyche of her unnamed host, who ponders going the same route as her sister. Clearly, even ordinary suburban folks with no obvious trauma can suffer debilitating mental issues thanks to the complexities of the human mind and its response to its environment. This novel won't be

everyone's cup of tea but it's well written, interesting for the history of psychiatric thinking and certainly clever.

The Lowest Depths

Ross Fitzgerald and Ian McFadyen

This is the third in a series of high-spirited, light-hearted spoofs that gleefully lampoon political correctness and just about everything else. At the start of the book, Professor Everest Grafton, once the first President of the Australian Republic for a whole six months, effectively ends a Writers' Week by agreeing with an indigenous academic that English is indeed the language of colonial oppression and that they ought to be conducting proceedings in an indigenous language. He is then shanghaied onto a UN team to look into Russian elections which gave President Vladimir Putrid the right to be President for Life. His real mission is to obtain a sample of Russian Corollavirus vaccine which the CIA thinks might actually be a biological weapon. Unknown to the CIA he has a third mission: to find an older brother he didn't know he had thanks to an affair his mother (a former spy) had with a Russian during the Cold War.



Be prepared to suspend disbelief as his cryogenically preserved former science teacher who has a tendency to clone himself as several well known actors helps him with all three missions. The third one involves a surprisingly compelling mystery concerning the Romanovs and a possibly extant heir who might become the new Czar thanks to a devious plot. It ends in glorious unexpected mayhem and Everest barely makes it out. Silly, fabulous, entertaining stuff that makes perfect holiday reading in these Omicron times.

That's it for 2021. Whew! Just squeezing this in before the year ends. All the best for the Christmas and New Year season.

Happy Reading!