

SAM U3A Book reviews November 2021

Non-fiction

An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook's Battle for Domination

Sheera Frenkel and Cecilia Kang

Facebook has nearly 3 billion users and a revenue of over \$31 billion this quarter, making it more powerful than most countries. It's great for keeping in touch with people, finding people and sharing interests. There's a dark side though, which this book demonstrates. There was the Cambridge Analytica scandal in which an app developer obtained the private data of 87 billion FB users. Russian troll farms interfered with the 2016 US election and tried to do so again in 2020. It suited the Russians to have Trump in power. CEO Mark Zuckerberg is committed to free speech, allowing users to say what they want, including Holocaust deniers, Trump (who never let truth stand in the way of a catchy insult), and the many people who organised the insurrection of January 6th at the Capitol geed up by Trump to "Stop the steal" by "the radical left Democrats". Most terrible though, were the massacres in Myanmar. When the internet took off there, second hand phones came preloaded with FB: in fact, the internet and FB became synonymous. It wasn't long before Buddhists - many in the military - were posting anti-Islamic sentiments and making many false claims against Muslims. It resulted in an atmosphere of vitriolic hate that led directly to the killing of minority Muslims and the eventual expulsion of the Rohingya into Bangladesh.

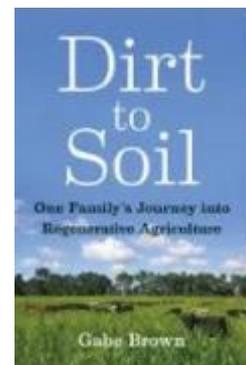


Free speech is a marvellous thing but it becomes problematic when people make stupid stuff up and others believe it. For example, the claim that COVID vaccines don't work and are a government plot to put nanoparticles into you to track you. Or that Hillary Clinton is part of a cabal that abducts children through the basement of a Washington DC pizza parlour to be trafficked as sex slaves. Or that Donald Trump did in fact win in 2020 and responsible citizens should take their weapons and go to the Capitol and take over the country. As one FB engineer said in a weekly meeting "How are we going to feel if people accuse us of breaking democracy?" This is a well written, easy to read book by two excellent journalists.

Dirt to Soil: One Family's Journey into Regenerative Agriculture

Gabe Brown

Regenerative agriculture is getting buzz all over the world and Gabe Brown is one of its leading advocates. He's a rancher in North Dakota who after four terrible years of crop failure was forced by poverty to reconsider his entire philosophy of farming. His conclusion? We've been doing it all wrong. He aims to build deep, nutrient dense, water retaining soils that produce healthy plants, healthy animals, healthy humans and diverse biomass that's more likely to survive droughts, hailstorms, early snow and climate change. To a large extent he's succeeded. This book explains how he did it by not tilling; by not using synthetic fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides or fungicides; by using animals to enhance soil fertility and by sowing an extremely wide range of cover crops to keep soil protected at all times. He's very clear-eyed about the need for farmers to earn money but every farming decision is made with long term goals in



mind and those, basically, are the health of the planet and all its creatures. This is an eye-opening read with very clear implications for policy makers, agribusiness and us, the consumers. Did you know that current fruits and vegetables contain a mere fraction of the vitamin and mineral content they used to have?

The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century

Ian Mortimer

This engaging book will probably make you glad you live now and not then. It's about ordinary life rather than big historical events and is arranged thematically with sections such as The Landscape; What to Wear; Hygiene; The Law and so on. It was - surprise! - a misogynistic society: "It is not that they are second-class citizens – class has got little to do with it; high-status females are just as highly respected as high-status males – it is that women are blamed for all the physical, intellectual and moral weaknesses of society." It's full of interesting tidbits like this: "For example, in 1339, in Exeter, one hundred nails for constructing tables for the fish market cost 3d: about the same as the carpenters' wages for making those tables (2¾d per person per day, plus ale)." "Food is far more valuable and expensive in the fourteenth century than in modern England. Labour on the other hand is relatively cheap. Land is dirt cheap (rents of 1d or 2d per acre for free tenants are common). But a chicken can cost more than a labourer's daily wage, and a pound of sugar costs more than twice as much." You could get married and start having babies at fourteen and naturally, you'd probably spend time brewing ale, as the water might not be fit to drink, given that the only thing resembling a sewage system was the local river. Despite a generally low life expectancy, plenty of people lived into their eighties, especially if they were well fed bishops.

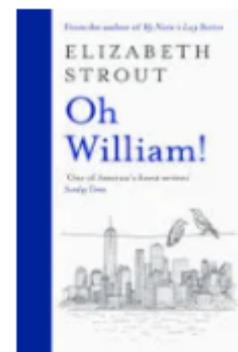


Fiction

Oh William!

Elizabeth Strout

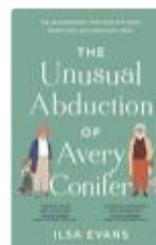
Acclaimed author Elizabeth Strout continues the story of Lucy Barton by writing about Lucy, her ex, William, their two adult daughters and various spouses. Lucy's second husband Dave has died and she still gets on well with William, who has remarried and fathered a third child. William is in for a shock, though. He doesn't want to believe that his mother had a daughter to a previous husband before he came along. Lucy goes with him to check it out. During the course of the novel Lucy loses her sense that she is safe with William. She starts to see him as a normal, vulnerable man, not an all-knowing protector. Things go a bit pear-shaped for him. Lucy narrates the story with trademark diffident insight, often using the phrase "What I mean is ...". Very wise in an understated way.



The Unusual Abduction of Avery Conifer

Ilsa Evans

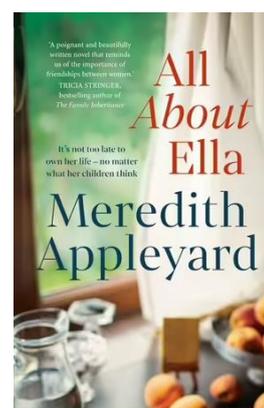
In this Aussie book four year old Avery is abducted by her two grandmothers who initially don't get on and her father's tech savvy grandmother Winnie, who's 89. They have good reason: her mother's doing a jail stint and Avery is carrying bruises and a cigarette burn which can only have come from Daniel, her father. The ladies come up with devious plans to stay off grid, which are more or less successful, leading to a lot of media attention and headaches for the two policewomen who are trying to find them. You might possibly have to suspend a little disbelief occasionally but the plot races along excitingly, there's a lot of humour which did actually cause me to chuckle out loud and there's a good deal of insight into family dynamics plus an excellent conclusion about life that's actually quite Buddhist in nature. Some of the acerbic comments about the intelligence of some commercial TV presenters are priceless. Loved this one.



All About Ella

Meredith Appleyard

Another Aussie novel dealing with an older woman. Ella is 71 and widowed, having endured the gruelling death by cancer of her forceful husband Sam. He left her well provided for and a well renovated Adelaide bluestone which her kids have heaved her into selling. As the book opens she's living with one son and his bossy wife, the idea being that a granny flat will be added to their house. It isn't working out. On impulse, she takes off for the rural town where one of her oldest friends lives, quite forgetting that this friend is away on holiday.



So begins a story of Ella teaming up with a forty year old woman with her own unfortunate family history and buying what could be an unsuitable house, only to find her son exercising his power of attorney, thus forcing her to go through the rigmarole of proving her sanity. But not in time for settlement, which leads to losing the deposit. It ends up ok, but it's an object lesson for older folk re managing one's affairs. The surrounding characters are well written and life in the seaside town well imagined.

The Tea Ladies of St Jude's Hospital

Joanna Nell

This Aussie novel featuring older women is more commercial, meaning that that the characters are more stereotyped. Posh Hilary runs the cafe though her circumstances are reduced because her high-flying husband is bankrupt and she's had to move back home with her unmarried, chain-smoking sister Nancy. Joy is a colourful flibbertigibbet who's always late. Chloe, on the other hand, is 17. Both parents and her two older brothers are doctors but Chloe faints at the sight of blood

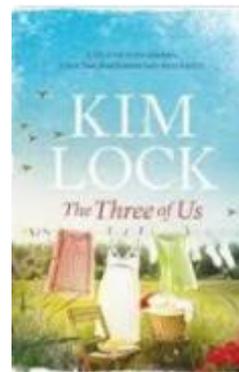


and would rather be an artist. When the hospital modernises and brings in a cafe chain that sells stuff like quinoa and beetroot hummus at high prices the three ladies go into battle to keep the old cafe alive. There's nothing wrong with a scone or a sausage roll. There are battles on the personal front too, as practically all the characters have to do some changing to be their real, best selves.

The Three of Us

Kim Lock

This book is set in Gawler, South Australia, spanning from the sixties to the present. Its subject is unusual, namely, polyamory. Elsie finds housewifery as boring as all get out and finds herself drawn to her next door neighbour Aida, a young, unwed mother whose parents have promised to rear her child as their own. They don't. Aida is forced to relinquish her child for adoption. Kim Lock does a good job of showing us how it could be that Elsie, her husband Tom and Aida end up in a stable, committed ménage a trois and how that plays out when Elsie bears two children, who start coping unwelcome comments at school. The conservative attitudes of suburban Australia mean that there has to be a lot of secrecy but it must be said that Aida's birth experience in a Catholic hospital is the most horrifically un-Christian example of human behaviour of the lot. Elsie herself has to face her own prejudices when her daughter decides to live with her partner without marriage. By the end of the novel attitudes have relaxed but there are a couple of surprises left. One involves a marriage, the other, thalidomide.



The Other Side of Beautiful

Kim Lock

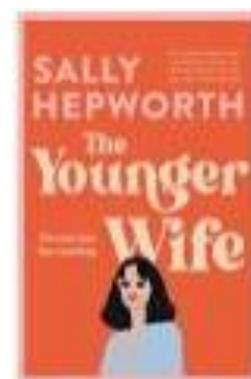
Here's another Kim Lock book. This time, the main character is Mercy, who we first meet practically catatonic with shock outside her burning house with her sausage dog Wasabi. A man appears and tells the paramedics he'll look after her. This is Eugene, her ex, who's living with his boyfriend Jose. It turns out that Mercy's big problem is agoraphobia, so she finds it enormously difficult on two fronts to be at Eugene's. Somehow, she finds herself buying a clapped out campervan from the old guy across the road and with no house to go back to, impulsively sets off on a road trip from Adelaide to Darwin. As the days go by, she meets grey nomads and Andy, a Scot who's now single. Eventually we find out what she used to do for a living, why she's become agoraphobic and something about her damaged and damaging mother. She becomes better at coping with her situation but as she nears Darwin, there's pressure to return to Adelaide for an inquest that's been brought forward. As luck would have it, a fellow traveller on the Stuart Highway is a journalist whose online comments made Mercy's life a misery. The old van is badly equipped but it does come with ashes labeled Jenny Cleggitt. Mercy gets it into her head that she must reach Darwin and deliver Jenny's ashes to the sea. The book ends well, I think. Nothing is neatly tied up but you get the impression that Mercy's life is about to get better.



The Younger Wife

Sally Hepworth

Don't know that I entirely buy the central premise of this book. There's a suave Melbourne doctor whose wife is in a home with dementia. The doctor announces to his two adult daughters that he's going to marry his decorator - who's in their age bracket. They point out that he might want to divorce their mother first. Dr Stephen has a very inclusive view of family. Naturally he wants his daughters and fiancée to get on. More

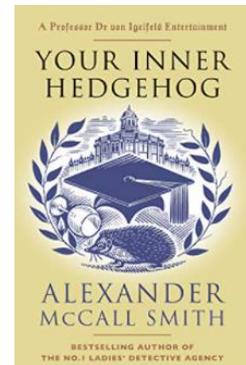


unusually, he wants Pam, his now ex-wife, to be present. She is, with disastrous results. A hot water bottle containing \$97,000 is discovered. It seems this was Pam's running away money. What we're asked to believe is that Stephen is abusive but he's so good at gaslighting that his wives and daughters don't exactly realise it. Especially the daughters, who both have significant problems of their own. This is a tricky proposition for an author to pull off and maybe I'm being picky. It's certainly a very readable, lively book, full of human problems both old and new.

Your Inner Hedgehog: a Professor von Igelfeld Entertainment

Alexander McCall Smith

Alexander McCall Smith is a seriously clever man, an expert on medical law, and a seriously prolific writer. He always writes 1,000-5,000 words a day and 414 of his books are listed on Goodreads. He hit international fame with the Number 1 Ladies Detective Agency. This is the first in the von Igelfeld series I've read and though it's charming and pokes delighted fun at university systems and the personalities therein, it's slight. But then, it's not meant to be anything else. We obviously need to be wary of scheming academics with low EQs and the stuffy pompous ones with their bizarre habits and rituals. And American ones.



Autobiographies

Windswept and Interesting

Billy Connolly

One New Year's Eve I was feeling bored and disconsolate. The kids were in bed. The husband was on night shift. Then I turned on the Billy Connolly special. Before long I'd fallen off the chair and was literally rolling round the floor in gales of unstoppable laughter, mopping up the tears. Best New Year ever. No doubt many people think of Billy with the same gratitude.



His Parkinson's meant that he recorded this into his phone and at first it feels like it, but the flow gets better. He describes his early tough life in Glasgow, his days as a welder at a shipyard and his life as a folk musician. Then came show biz. It's astonishing that he never scripted anything. Artist Brett Whitely once challenged him to not repeat anything at the Sydney Opera House that he'd said the night before. He managed it. A favourite anecdote is of discussing Vegemite with Whoopi Goldberg. He loves it. She hates it. "It's like licking a cat's ass." He replied, "Who did your research?"

Of course, he's married to Aussie Pamela Stephenson who was pretty funny herself in Not the Nine O'Clock News. She retrained as a psychologist. She once told him that he is confrontational. He said "I don't think I'm confrontational." She said "See?" She also tackled him about his drinking, with the result that he's been off the booze for years. No doubt about it: he's a remarkable talent and a very decent human being.

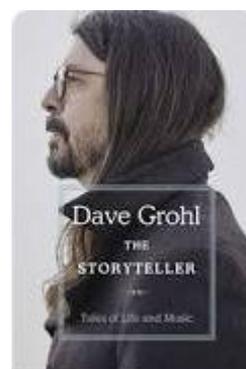
This Much is True Miriam Margolyes



MM describes herself as a short, fat, Jewish dyke. She is (not universally) loved for her warmth, intelligence and outrageousness. On one occasion she flashed her boobs at a camera crew to brighten up their day, and is also known for saying bad words in public. That began when she was on a university quiz team. At uni, she was part of the reviews that brought the Monty Python team to fame and has nothing good to say about them because they didn't treat her very well.

In fact, one of the refreshing things about this autobiography is her willingness to speak plainly about people she doesn't like. Actually, she speaks plainly, period. For example, about her associations with penises, which might be unusual for a lesbian. She's a dual Australian-British citizen now and apart from acting gigs is well known for her documentary series. She did a lovely job of connecting with a wide variety of people in *Almost Australian*, for example. She's a firm believer in older folk being technologically literate.

The Story Teller: Tales of Life and Music Dave Grohl



Dave Grohl was the drummer in Nirvana before the death of Kurt Cobain. He then started the Foo Fighters and has worked with many musicians, gaining a reputation as one of the nicest guys in rock music. His parents split up when he was young and he's had a close relationship with his hard-working mother ever since. His admiration of her is palpable. He was one of those kids who was forever coming into unfriendly contact with hard objects, often finding himself in Emergency, being sewn up. He was also lousy at school but absolutely dedicated to music, one result of which was losing a lot of tooth enamel because of his habit of (almost) silently practising drum rolls with his teeth. His early days in music were typically tough and poverty stricken, so the quick success of Nirvana came as something of a shock. It's something he's learned to deal with and he comes across as a terrific, supportive dad to his three girls, a dedicated, professional musician and an all-round sane and happy man. His writing technique is to start a more current story, circle back to previous, formative times and circle forward again to complete the story. Drugs are involved.

Feel free to send your reviews to erylacarter@gmail.com. It would be great to hear what you're reading and enjoying (or not enjoying).

Happy reading!