

SAMU3A Book Reviews October 2021

Crossroads

Jonathan Franzen



This is the long-awaited big novel after the success of *The Corrections*. In this one, Franzen conjures up a family in the town of New Prospect, near Chicago, where assistant minister Russ Hillebrandt, wife Marion and kids Clem, Becky, Perry and Judson are learning about life. Russ is finding his marriage stale, and starts pining after Frances, a newly arrived widow. The Crossroads of the title is a youth group which is doing the seventies thing of being emotionally honest, not always with excellent results. Every year there's a trip to Navaho country in Arizona to do good works. During the course of the novel, hyper intelligent, drug addict Perry goes seriously astray, and there are extreme ramifications. This is a superb novel, in which Franzen follows each character, examining their effects on each other such that our sympathies wax and wane for all of them. It's the first in a trilogy, and readers will be on edge to find out how it all pans out.

"She would happily have spent another hour in his garden to spare herself a minute of his grandson pictures; her boredom was so aggressive, it verged on loathing."

It Ends With Us

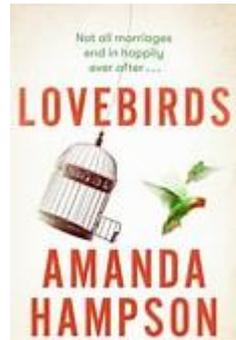
Colleen Hoover



This is a best seller that looks at the issue of domestic violence: an issue worthy of examination. I didn't like it. The first-person narrator is portrayed as sinned against, not sinning, and quite assertive in standing up for herself but somehow it didn't wash. Compared with the depth of characterisation in the Franzen novel, this is a paint by numbers representation of humanity that feels hollowed out and simply commercial.

Lovebirds

Amanda Hampson



This is an Australian novel about a somewhat grumpy elderly woman who needs to get a bit looser. She ends up taking her grandson to find her husband up the north coast. He was a promising journalist before he went to Vietnam. There's some nice humour and some good lessons about parenting difficult teenagers that rings very true. Her more "successful" son ended up in jail: various life lessons abound. Her budgie is called Eric.

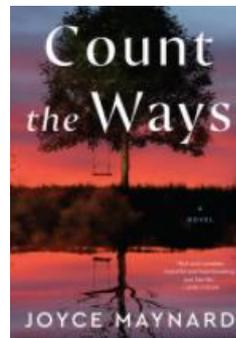
"Elizabeth leaned backwards, put her foot firmly on the goat's forehead and pushed as hard as she could. The goat pushed back, enjoying the game.

'Is that a good idea?' asked Zach.

'I don't know. It's just what I normally do when I'm stuck behind a sofa fighting off a goat.'"

Count the Ways

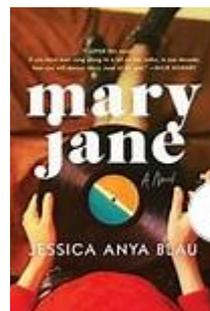
Joyce Maynard



Joyce Maynard is apparently a long-respected author (sorry - I'd never heard of her) who has tackled the theme of divorce before. Write what you know. A young woman alone in the world finds that her children's books are popular and so can afford to buy a remote farm. She eventually finds a wood working husband as well and for many years, all is good. They have children. As her books lose their popularity and money gets tighter the marriage frays, then breaks. It's an uphill battle involving estrangement from her children to find peace again. It's a good book but it leaves the feeling that the husband is not truly forgiven, even though the wife offers to look after him in his final days.

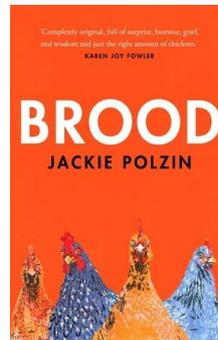
Mary Jane

Jessica Anya Blau



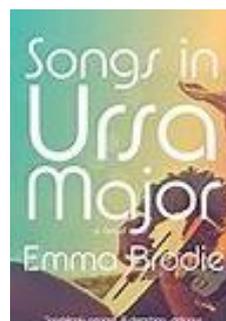
Mary Jane is a young American teenager from a very straight family who gets a summer job babysitting Izzy, who's the delightful child of an unorthodox couple. Izzy's dad is a psychiatrist and he's cancelled all his other patients to rehab Jimmy, a rock star junkie with an equally famous wife. Mary Jane is entranced with these entirely different people and they with her and her domestic competence. Mary Jane knows full well what her parents would think if they knew about it all, and finds herself lying for the first time in her life. Of course, eventually her parents do find out just what sort of people she's been mixing with and the curtain comes down on her liberating gig hard and fast. However, her mother surprises her. A charming story.

Brood Jackie Polzin



To say that this is quirky is an understatement. It's about a couple who have four chickens - to begin with at least. As they get nearer to moving to the west coast for the husband's new job, the wife's narration of seemingly quotidian daily details reveals what Clarissa Pinkola Estes would describe as the Rio con Rio - the river beneath the river, which one Amazon reviewer aptly described as a meditation upon grief. The narrator will never be a mother. But it's so lightly done it's like gauze. It's a dividing book: love or hate it.

Songs in Ursa Major Emma Brodie

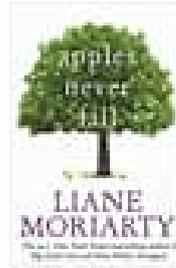


Emma Brodie has long worked in publishing, which makes it less surprising that this is a debut novel. It follows the path of a young band in the seventies, in particular, Jane Quinn, lead singer, song writer and piano/guitar wrangler, who's also the lover of Jesse Reid, a performer who's already at his zenith. The story is said to be based on the romance of Joni Mitchell and James Taylor. It's a wonderful book, illustrating the highs and lows of a music career, and it doesn't shy away from the patriarchal nature of the business that people like Jane had to struggle with. Her Quinn family of redoubtable women holds some big secrets that she tries to open up about but can't, due to family loyalty. Like Taylor, Jesse is a heroin addict. Despite the hardships, Jane ends up having a successful life.

Incidentally: Joni Mitchell is the only woman listed in "Top 100 Guitarists" lists. She experimented with weird tunings.

Apples Never Fall

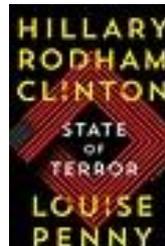
Liane Moriarty



Liane Moriarty is in fine form here, with a story about a tennis family that emphasises how generational patterns of behaviour play out. An older woman goes missing. The cops suspect her husband, who does nothing to defend himself. The four adult kids are very different and form into camps. A stranger is involved: a young woman who showed up at the door of the couple claiming domestic violence. They let her stay but there's something very off about her. Some people might take issue with Moriarty about not being gung-ho pro-woman, but it's great: she's very insightful about the light and shade that form part of a long marriage, how none of us are perfect, and how we're all doing the best we can with what nature and nurture made of us.

State of Terror

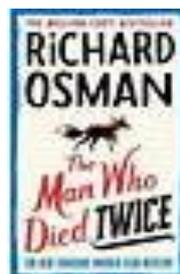
Hillary Rodham Clinton and Louise Penny



Former Secretary of State Clinton and beloved crime writer Louise Penny have co-written a red-hot political thriller. The setup is this: former president Eric Dunn aka Eric the Dumb (who's a look and sound alike Donald Trump) lost the Republican nomination for the 2020 election to Doug Woods, who won. Ellen Adams ruled a media empire that trashed Woods, but to everyone's surprise, he offered her the Secretary of State position and she accepted. Seemingly, he expected her to fail so he could get his revenge. A few weeks into the new administration three bombs go off in London, Paris and Frankfurt. No one claims responsibility, but obviously, there's some sort of terror activity involved. So begins a race to find out who and why. Political junkies and political thriller aficionados will love the inside running on how politics operates. Clinton may have lost the 2020 election but she gets her own back in a thorough trashing of the idiot who almost screwed America into the ground.

The Man Who Died Twice

Richard Osman



TV quizz personality Richard Osman returns after the success of the *Thursday Murder Club* with the same cast of elderly characters in an upscale British home for the elderly. This is a diamond heist tale with several twists that succeeds much better than the first one. There's plenty of humour, the oldies are game and computer literate, plus there's pathos and wisdom aplenty and apart from Poppy, only the bad guys get killed.

'I think you could easily have made two phone calls last night, could have had me and Joyce both here. But I think you didn't want me to meet your ex-husband.'

Joyce nods as Elizabeth responds.

'Well, I've always wished I'd never met him, so I like to extend the same courtesy to my friends.'

'As I say, I was born there. Where are you from?'

'High Wycombe,' says the DCI.

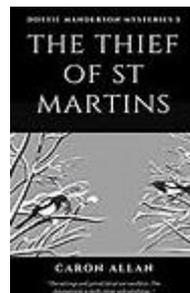
'The mean streets,' says Donna.

'Is that a joke?' asks the DCI.

'No, it's just conversation,' says Donna. 'You can join in.'

The Thief of St Martins

Caron Allen



Caron Allen's heroine is Dottie Manderson, a young woman c1935 who discovered that she is not the biological child of the lovely well-off couple who raised her. She goes to stay with her "Aunt" (her biological mother) and finds a stiff, dysfunctional, status-conscious family. After a murder, she also finds herself in jail, accused of the crime, and it takes work from those who truly love and support her to get out. There's a lot of interesting period detail and a subtle feminist thread in this cosy - and satisfying - English mystery.

Lift the Lid

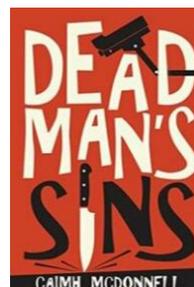
Rob Johnson



A hapless Everyman character finds himself involved with crims and the Secret Service plus a well-padded private investigator. Not bad, but not that great either.

Dead Man's Sins

Caimh McDonnell



Irish writer Caimh McDonnell has a great franchise going with Bunny McGarry, a Garda who's brave but intemperate. In the main series, Bunny is now in America, but for COVID lockdown times, McDonnell returned to Bunny's earlier career, writing "a sequel to the prequel". There's marvellous Irish humour as Bunny finds himself framed for the murder of a loan shark nobody likes in between

coaching the St Jude's Under-12 Hurley Team, an activity he undertakes to keep disadvantaged kids on the straight and narrow. An old enemy from cop school is in charge of the investigation and would dearly like to see Bunny go down. The Commissioner of Police is priceless.

'The woman followed Bunny's gaze as it fell pointedly on the sign behind her head that read THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT. She gave him a smile with no smile in it. "It's covering up a rust spot."' "

Said by Police Commissioner to DI

"Thank you for the explanation of how an investigation works. I particularly appreciate you putting it in simple terms as I've seemingly won a competition to meet a police officer. I do hope you'll let me have a go on the siren later."

"If this is the end of your policing career, you really must consider moving into the real-estate business. It's like referring to Pompeii as a bit of a fixer-upper."

'Marshall was about to reprimand Burke further, but then his eyes grew wide and he turned to face the neighbour. "Excuse me? There was a taxi? Did you see what company it was from?"

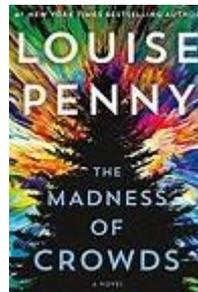
"I did, of course."

"Fantastic."

"I also got the licence plate, the driver's full name, and a stool sample in case you might need it.' "

The Madness of Crowds

Louise Penny



The incomparable Louise Penny gives us another episode in the life and work of Armande Gamache, the brave, philosophical Quebec policeman of many virtues. She imagines a post-COVID world where vaccines have made us safe, but a mild-mannered statistician is becoming popular for her view that fiscal recovery might require the mandatory death of the elderly and infirm. A death occurs, but there's a very tangled web surrounding the backstory, which dare I say it, becomes somewhat tortuous. Also included are the real life, horrendous psychological experiments of a former doctor at McGill University - a blot on Canadian scholarship. It's wonderful to read about the people of Three Pines again and the descriptions of a Canadian Christmas make us glad that we never suffer such extreme cold, despite the mulled wine.

"Having lived for years not only in the forest, but in his spacious ego, Dr. Vincent Gilbert had grown to expect he'd be the center of wonderment and awe at any gathering."

Billy Summers

Stephen King



This is actually the first King novel I've read. Mercifully it contains only a hint of the supernatural. An ex-soldier who's been making a living as an assassin of bad people does his thing and accrues a young woman as a sidekick. The ending is doubled: what really happened and what might have happened. Well written. I can see the attraction.

'The house is also lit, the better to show off its wretched excess. To Billy it looks like the bastard child of a supermarket and a mega-church. This isn't a house, it's the architectural equivalent of red golf pants.'

The Night She Disappeared

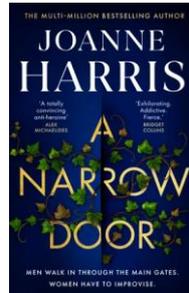
Lisa Jewel



Set in a school in England, this story involves some entitled rich people whose mansion contains an old secret tunnel. A young single mum and her possessive boyfriend disappear but nothing is found. The book is good at describing the lonely ache of the mother of the girl as she rears her baby grandson. Given the character of the rich people, I thought the ending was somewhat unlikely, but Jewel delivers a happy result.

A Narrow Door

Joanne Harris



Joanne Harris is the Anglo-French writer responsible for "Chocolat", which was made into a movie. This book though is the latest in a series about two Yorkshire private schools. St Oswald's is now co-ed and run by a woman: Becky Buckfast, née Price. She's a very determined woman, who often muses on what it takes to achieve a position like hers. It turns out that when she was five, her fourteen-year-old brother disappeared, causing complete stasis in her parents. The book is more or less written as a conversation between Becky and Classics master Roy Straitly after some students find what might be human remains at the school. What's unusual about this whodunnit is who the culprit turns out to be ... a very original twist.

'Remember when I first came to you and told you I was gay, Sir? You never asked me how I knew. You just asked me if I thought it was going to interfere with my Latin.'

There's nothing like a lockdown to provide a good time for reading. Now that it's lifted I guess we'll all be reading less, so do feel free to email reviews of what you do read to erylacarter@gmail.com so we have plenty of books to follow up on next month.

Happy Reading!