

September 2020 SAMU3A Book Reviews

Lethal White by Robert Galbraith

Narrated by Robert Glenister. An audio book from Audible

Reviewed by Sue O'Neill

I have just finished a story called 'Lethal White'. It is the fourth in the Cormoran Strike private detective series written by Robert Galbraith and narrated by Robert Glenister.

The stories are set in and around present-day London. His cases are usually murders but we don't focus on too many gory details or violence, although some of the murders are quite creative and grisly. We take a lot of twists and turns to find our murderer but I think what I enjoy most is the behind-the-scenes lives of Cormoran and his lovely secretary/assistant, Robin. Robert Glenister has the perfect voice for how I picture Cormoran as described in the stories and I find his reading style easy to listen to and understand, with different voices for the different characters and using the right expressions and connotations from the text.

You don't need to have read the books in correct sequence to understand what's going on, but it probably helps. A really interesting thing I discovered during the credits at the end of the third book (I guess I don't normally bother with all the credits at the end), is that 'text rights' go to J.K. Rowling! I didn't know I had been 'reading' her books!

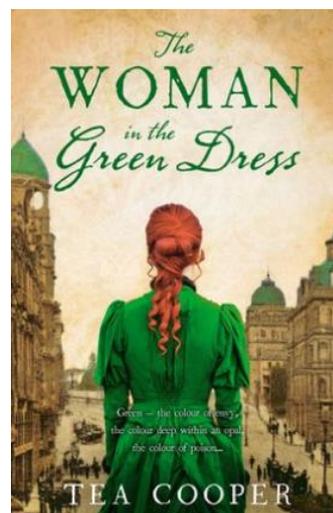
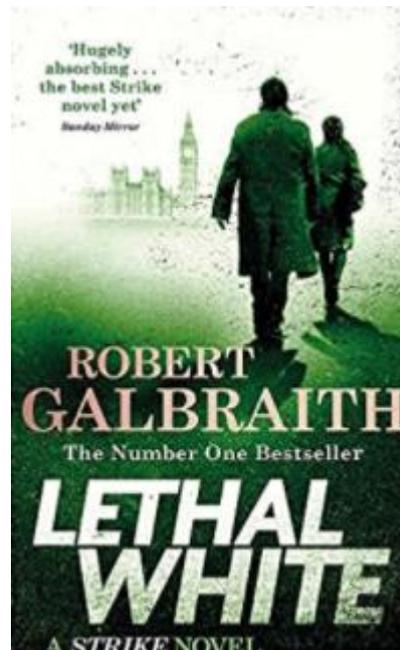
This is the last book available in the series but apparently book no. 5, 'Troubled Blood' is set for release very soon. I'm eagerly awaiting the audio version to be available.

So there you have it - I hope you found this a little bit interesting.

The Woman in the Green Dress by Tea Cooper

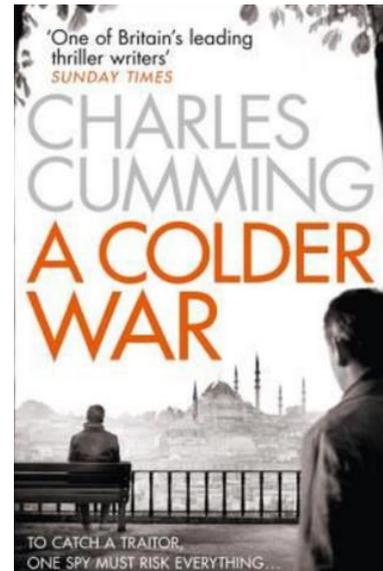
Reviewed by Margaret Edwards

I have just finished reading a book called *The Woman in the Green Dress*. Although it was depicted as fiction it has been well written by Tea Cooper about early life in the Hawkesbury and since I grew up there it was great to be reminded of what a great area it is and always has been.



A Colder War by Charles Cumming
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

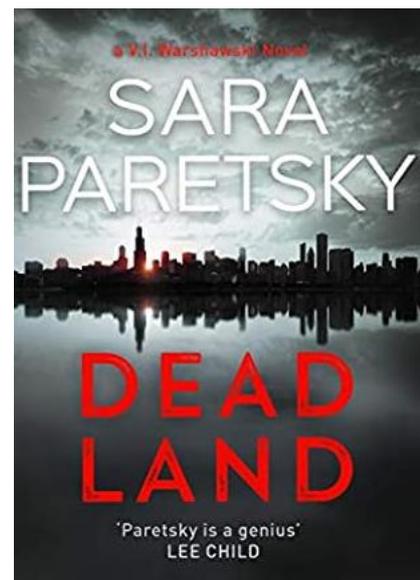
This is the second outing for Thomas Kell, a recently divorced spy who's currently languishing on the outer following some nasty events in Kabul perpetrated by a CIA officer in which Kell was involved. C - Amanda Levene - has reasons for asking him to investigate the death of a senior MI6 operative in a light plane crash in Turkey. Accident, suicide or murder? Bigger events overtake, however, when it becomes obvious that there's a mole either in MI6 or the CIA. Kell and his trusty team of experts get to do their thing in Turkey, Odessa and Kiev in their attempt to find the mole and bring him to Britain. Cumming is extremely good at portraying the settings, their life and character, the tradecraft of espionage and all the tension, distrust and manoeuvring that go with the job. So much so that it makes you terrifically glad that you're not a spy yourself. It's a world in which bleak things happen and it's not as though you can chat about it to just anyone. Very reminiscent of Le Carré's George Smiley but with more technology.



Dead Land. V I Warshawski 20 by Sarah Peretsky
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

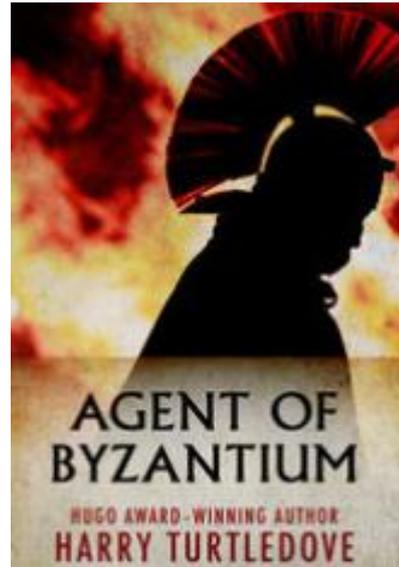
Although this is the twentieth Warshawski book, it's the first one I've read and I can see why Sarah Peretsky has such a good rep. The characters, including Warshawski herself, are often wittily and feistily laconic. The plot is a hummer, and just enough hints are dropped that you think you know where this is going. The summing ups that remind us of what we know so far are so deftly incorporated that you welcome them.

In this one a homeless woman bashing out music on a toy piano turns out to be iconic singer-songwriter Lydia Zamir whose partner and fellow activist (Hector) was among the victims of a mass shooting at a concert in Kansas. Hector was of Chilean descent and the story has tendrils that stretch back in time to the brutally repressive regime of Pinochet. Warshawski gets herself into considerable hot water figuring out the connections at Chicago's big end of town and who exactly is responsible for bumping off two ordinary folk who knew a little too much about the redevelopment of some prize lakeside land. She comes up with a highly innovative way - working as a single P.I. - of forcing a denouement. It may stretch credulity a little but it's jolly good fun seeing the bad guys (corrupt neocons) getting their comeuppance. There's some terrific lampooning of a right wing show on a Global Media channel, an outfit that bears some resemblance to Fox News.



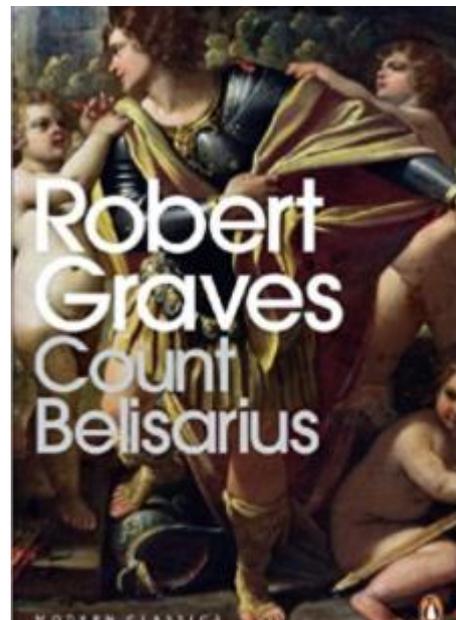
Agent of Byzantium by Harry Turtledove
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

In order to write some convincing words to a song I'm calling "Byzantium" I've downloaded a few books on the subject, both fiction and non. This is a piece of alternative history; a genre Turtledove was famous for though he wrote science fiction and other genres as well. He has a PhD in medieval history, specialising in the Byzantine Empire, so he knows his stuff. The supposition here is "What if Islam hadn't happened and Constantinople remained Christian?" His hero is Basil Argyros, at first a scout in the Roman Army, then a functionary/secret agent based in the capital. It's interesting enough, but basically the plot is a spindly scaffold erected to allow Basil to discover: a primitive telescope; vaccination against smallpox by using cowpox; the chemical secret of a better form of Greek Fire (used to such good/devastating effect in *Game of Thrones*) and moveable type. He somewhat unconvincingly persuades the master craftsmen of Alexandria to go back to work on restoring the Pharos (lighthouse). Theological debate forms part of the story, as it was apparently a hugely popular pastime with EVERYONE in the empire, even the blokes in taverns. He also gets entangled with a comely Persian spy and helps see off some marauding heathens. It's kind of a boys' own adventure story set in a historical context without much in the way of psychological sophistication.



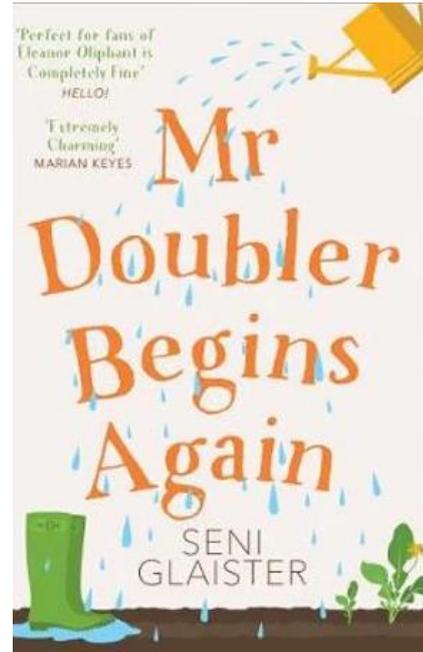
Count Belisarius by Robert Graves
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

On the other hand, there's this book, first published by poet Robert Graves in 1938. You'll probably remember the fantastic BBC series based on his books about Emperor Claudius. This is a different kettle of fish to Turtledove entirely. It's narrated by eunuch slave Eugenius (fictional) who was the long-time attendant of Antonina (real), the dancer / acrobat / singer and promiscuous wife of the noble general Belisarius (also real) who had a not always comfortable relationship with Emperor Justinian I and his empress Theodora. Belisarius won back for the Byzantine Empire much of the Western European territory it had lost. Historians rate him as behind Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great, but not by much. He lived from 500 - 565AD. I haven't finished this yet, but it's far richer in complexity and depth than the Turtledove book, which is not to imply that it's hard to read: it isn't and it's fascinating. Graves really knew how to write history.



Mr Doubler Begins Again by Seni Glaister
Reviewed by Eryl Carter

There's a new genre about: curmudgeonly old (sometimes young) person gets out of a rut and has a new lease of life. Mr Doubler is a reclusive lone potato farmer with two unsatisfactory children and four unsatisfactory grandchildren. For decades he's been doggedly perfecting a new blight-resistant strain of potato. As a sideline he turns potatoes into vodka and the vodka into a very superior gin, which he barter for groceries etc. When Mrs Millwood, his cleaning lady, goes into hospital he finds himself missing their lunchtime conversations. Gently encouraged by Mrs Millwood over telephone, he starts to get out and about and begins to win friends, influence people and climb out of his long depression. The local large-scale potato grower Peele wants to buy up his farm.

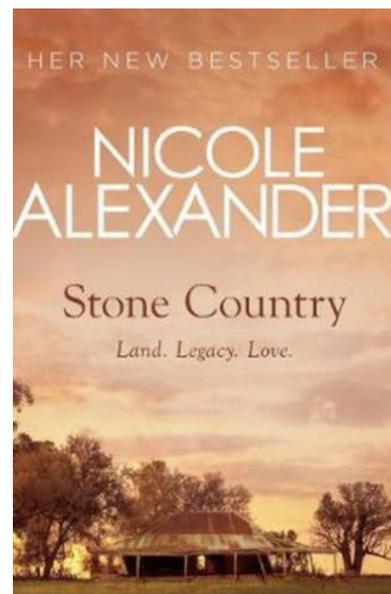


This is marketed as a “feel-good” novel and as such you don't expect any literary pretensions, but there are some very thoughtful conversations among the characters as to the meaning and purpose of life and a lot of down-home truth gets spoken, especially about children, getting old and dying. It seems a bit sophisticated for the characters as presented but hey! Maybe that's my prejudice showing. As to whether Doubler's incredible domestic skills are realistic, I can't say. He *is* represented as perfectionist and pedantic. There's a surprise to do with the absence of Mrs Doubler at the end and some pretty funny scenes sprinkled throughout, such as mad Maddie Mitchell trying to steal back her donkey from the animal shelter with a stolen horse trailer. The ending leaves us in suspense as to the outcome of his great project but by then it matters more that he values his new connections to others.

Stone Country by Nicole Alexander
Reviewed by Pauline Williams

This novel explores expectations and obligations and the toll these take on family relationships over a span of forty years.

Set initially in South Australia and then moving to the Northern Territory it follows the life of Ross Grant, younger brother and through circumstances out of his control, heir to the powerful Grant family. South Australia, 1919. Ross Grant has always felt like the black sheep of his wealthy Scottish family. An explorer by nature, he dreams of life on 'Waybell', their remote cattle station in Australia's last remaining wilderness, the Northern Territory. This all changes when Alastair, his older brother, is branded a deserter after going missing during the Great War.



To help restore the Grants' damaged reputation, Ross is coerced into marrying his brother's fiancée, a woman he has never met. Disgusted by his manipulative family, Ross turns his back on his unwanted bride and heads to Waybell with no plans to return. He

carries with him the hope of carving out his own empire in the far north. Matters become complicated when he meets Maria, a young woman of mixed heritage, who will change his life. The story outplays in a wildly beautiful yet untamed land which has the capacity to heal and destroy at the same time. From nineteenth-century Adelaide and the emerging multicultural centre that Darwin becomes to the cattle stations and buffalo plains of the far north, Ross's journey is one of desire, adventure and determination.

*****Last year some of us went to Muswellbrook Library for an author talk by Nicole Alexander. She explained how she spends months researching material for her novels and in this particular story the recent history of Australia's northern frontiers is a very interesting read.***

Upcoming

Fans of Louise Penny will be pleased to know that her new Gamache novel will be released in September. How we'll love to re-acquaint ourselves with the eccentric denizens of Three Pines.

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.

Five hours later he was touching down in Athens, cradle of civilization, epicentre of global debt.

The people at the party – intellectually incurious, devoid of self-doubt, somehow making a virtue of distilled greed and social ambition – had happily wallowed in the euro-trash nirvana of the bar.

A Colder War by Charles Cumming

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The coffee shop wouldn't let Bear inside, even when I explained that I was his emotional support human.

The long-suffering Bear followed me to Kawasaki's car, a late-model BMW. I thanked her for coming down to the station, but really, fees from people like me allow her to drive a car like hers, so she should have been thanking me.

If it weren't for coincidences, we wouldn't have any novels by Dickens, so I know they exist.

In the Park District office, I told a woman at the information counter what I was looking for. She slowly wrote it down and handed it to another clerk, who disappeared with it into the bank. Patronage-rich fiefdoms like the Park District build support by employing two people per task.

Caffeine is not a substitute for sleep: it just makes being awake more bearable.

Dead Land by Sarah Peretsky

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Thanks to the reviewers for our September SAMU3A online book club. It was good to get a review of an Audible book from Sue. These are very handy if you're going on a walk or a drive.

Please feel free to write a review of your own reading loves (or hates) for the October edition of SAMU3A Book Reviews. Email to 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!