

August September 2021 SAMU3A Book Reviews

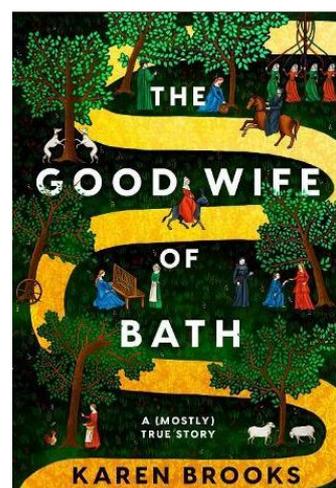
Well, here we are still in lockdown. Apologies for skipping July and August – I *really* went into lockdown, becoming a veritable hermit. Apparently others are doing it too. Must check email. Here are some book reviews. Luckily, there are many excellent writers to keep us entertained and informed.

Historical fiction

The Good Wife of Bath

Dr Karen Brooks

This is a retelling of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* story in the *Canterbury Tales* and is narrated by the wife in question. She's gutsy, feisty, stubborn, hard-working, warm hearted, not above being vain at times and has terrific business acumen. As a 12 yo servant a handsome young priest attempts to rape her. Caught in flagrante delicto she gets the blame for being a temptress, so Chaucer - a remote cousin who becomes her friend - brokers a deal: she'll be wed off to an ancient, grime covered farmer. Twelve-year-old girls were considered marriageable in the 1300s. At first aghast, she finds that he's actually a pretty decent guy and until she's 17, they have a pretty good, and equal, relationship as she becomes more confident at exercising her smarts. Then he dies of the Botch (plague). The fear of catching it is reminiscent of our COVID times.



Husband number two is a neighbour of higher social standing who's a hollow vessel: he doesn't have a head for business and he's living way beyond his means. Brooks offers interesting detail (but not too much) of how the international wool trade worked back then. When this one dies she accepts an offer from another old man, a successful wool trader in Bath who's so far resisted marriage because he's a sodomite. He values her for the right reasons and gives her a lot of freedom, but needless to say, there's no physical relationship. Which makes her a sitting duck for husband 4. Everyone warns her that this guy is a philanderer extraordinaire but she refuses to listen and suffers the consequences. He's found dead in a puddle one day in somewhat suspicious circumstances. She's now in her thirties and past her prime for the times, but inclined to be self-indulgent, she takes husband 5, a young scholar from Oxford who helped teach her to read and write when he was a youngster. Things go swimmingly at first but he turns out to have a vicious streak which is particularly misogynistic. After a horribly sad incident involving murder, Chaucer urges her to assume another identity and flee. She ends up in London trying to make a go of spinning and weaving but the Guild won't admit her as a member and takes a dim view of selling cloth illegally. She rescues some women and children from the mean streets but all does not go well. When Chaucer cannibalises her life to write his famous tale she feels betrayed and refuses to see him.

This is a very lively story indeed and super well researched. Brooks has done a magnificent job of bringing history to life. Its ending is both sad and happy, though you might not like the wife's eventual choice of career. Interesting to ponder the status of women then and now. In some respects we've come so far and in others, we haven't.

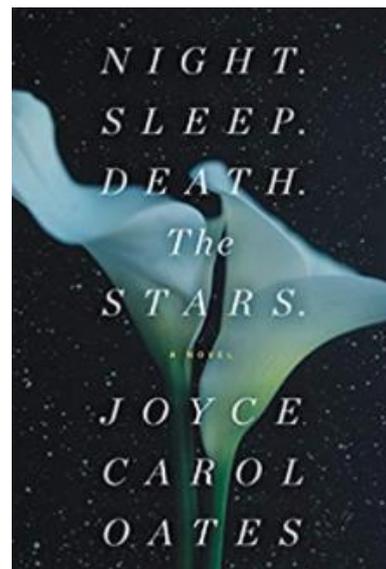
Fiction

Night, Sleep, Death, the Stars

Joyce Carol Oates

The McLaren family are big in their town. Paterfamilias Whitey has even done a stint as mayor. One day, driving along, he sees police beating up a young dark skinned man (who is actually Indian and a doctor at a nearby hospital), and stops to protest. The police rough Whitey up as well and - long story short - he dies. Newly widowed Jessalyn, the perfect wife, mother and lady, is completely unmoored and talks to Whitey constantly in her mind. The effect on their children is equally severe. Oldest Thom takes over the family publishing business unwillingly. His marriage is strained. Daughter Beverley (married with kids) is a mouthy worry wart who wants to boss everyone. Daughter Lorene is a young high school principal: quite hard, manipulative, disliked by staff and students.

She can't stop pulling out her hair. Daughter Sophia is a kind gentle scientist. Son Virgil is a hippie artist, a boy Whitey could never understand. When Jessalyn starts seeing Hugo Martinez, a photographer of Mexican origin, the three oldest kids are aghast, as are many in their circle. No one is impressed when she befriends a scarred old tomcat christened Mack the Knife either.



Oates is in fine form here as she delightedly pursues all the ripples as everything except Jessalyn's new romance spirals down. Thom finds out about the police brutality and tries to sue. The police have their own ways of warning people off and there's a disturbing scene where Sophia is monstered by one of them. It looks as though haughty Lorene is going to completely lose it but she comes good. Beverley gets crazier and crazier, slagging off her husband and finding too much solace in the bottle. Virgil tries to kill himself. Money, of course, is a major issue. How to make sure all the assets stay in the family? The book ends quite poetically as the aging lovers take a trip to Ecuador and the Galapagos. A stylistic habit that is occasionally annoying: Oates makes BIG use of (explanatory, funny, sarky) comments in parentheses. (!)

What Could Be Saved

Liese O'Halloran Schwartz

After a hiatus of 30 years, during which she worked as an Emergency Medicine doctor, Liese O'Halloran Schwartz has written another novel, and it's terrific. It concerns a family that relocates from Washington to Bangkok during the Vietnam war. There are three children: bossy Beatrice, dreamy Philip and Laura. The family is completely upended when Philip is abducted not long before he turns nine. Forty seven years later, back home in Washington, artist Laura receives an email from Bangkok saying that her brother Philip has to leave the place he's been staying. Beatrice, boyfriend Edward and gallery owner Sullivan warn Laura that it's most likely a scam, but Laura impulsively flies to Bangkok, meets the damaged guy, does a sibling DNA test and is convinced it really is Philip. She brings him home but he becomes very ill. Doctors have to put him in a coma, so it's some time before they get the full story. It's pretty horrific, but he ended up in a good place thanks to a Swiss German benefactor who ran a Buddhist community.

The great thing about this novel is the depth of knowledge the author has about a wide variety of subjects but even more, the subtlety and delicacy of the dynamics between the characters. Laura and Beatrice, for example, have always had a somewhat antagonistic relationship and the reasons for this become more obvious. The parents Robert and Genevieve both bear some responsibility for not collecting Philip from his Thai boxing class and their guilt sours their marriage. Genevieve sets up a charity for Bangkok street kids but has to question its usefulness upon discovering that a lot of them end up in the sex industry. The family is well off and rather patrician and very good at keeping secrets - a useful characteristic when it comes to Robert's real job.



Quotes from this book:

"You're too young to know how it is," Laura said. "We're all bursting with sadness."

"I will not be bursting with sadness when I am old," declared Kelsey.

"Hashtag life goals," said Laura. She closed her eyes. "I quit my family," she murmured.

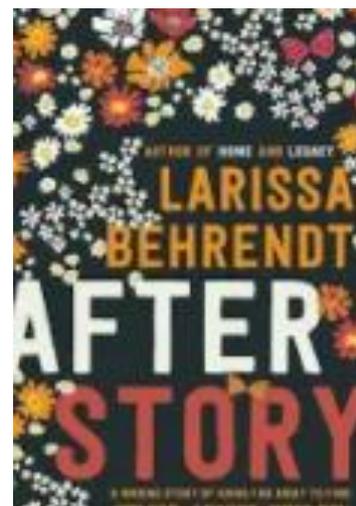
"Let me know how that works out for you," said Kelsey.

"The years had swiveled the telescope of Genevieve's self-absorption around, shown her to herself as tiny and unimportant; she understood now that events didn't happen because she was a bad mother or a selfish person. Although those things might be true, events occurred for other reasons, confluences of forces both obvious and invisible. Yet, understanding that her guilt was meaningless, she hadn't relinquished it—and it was not divisible."

After Story

Larissa Behrendt

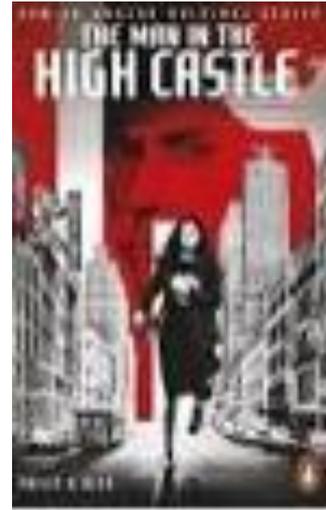
This is the story of uni grad Jasmine going with her half aboriginal mother Della on a British literary tour. Della is a bit scattered, occasionally tipsy, completely non-literary and can drive Jasmine mad. Of their fellow tourists, most are fine but Professor Flynn is a condescending misogynist. However, as they do the rounds in quest of Dickens, Virginia Woolf, the Brontes, Shakespeare etc, each mulling over their lives and family, various important memories and realisations come to light. Auntie Elaine's wisdom and warmth is remembered with gratitude. Feisty Kiki, Della's sister and even feistier Leigh-Anne, Jasmine's sister, are better understood. Even Professor Flynn is seen in a different light. When Jasmine reads something in Della's journal, she realises something profound about her mother that's never been told. There's the impact of the disappearance of Della's oldest daughter Brittany (that had a tragic ending) to continually deal with as well. A great story that helps us understand what it's like for indigenous people.



The Man in the High Castle

Philip K Dick

This is the guy who wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* which was the basis for *Bladerunner*. This book was first published in 1962 and although it envisages rocket travel, various other things - like the prices: very cheap! - seem dated. Not that that interferes with the enjoyment of the book. It's an "alternative reality" novel. What if Germany and Japan won WWII? The USA is divided. Germans rule the east, Japan the west, with a kind of DMZ in the middle. Americans are second class citizens. It's set mainly in San Francisco, to which a guy from the Abwehr comes to warn the Japanese that certain German factions are aiming to nuke Japan. The man in the high castle is an author who's written a novel based on the assumption that the Allies won the war, which is not a popular idea with the Germans in particular.

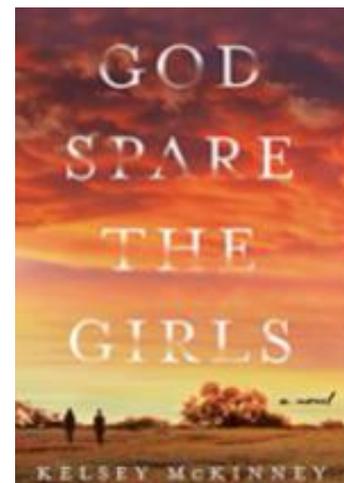


A lot of the book is internal monologue from various characters and what's striking is that even the Americans think and speak with Asian speech patterns: there's a lack of "the", "a" etc. You get used to it. The Americans have taken up the Asian habit of consulting the Book of Changes, an oracle that uses yew sticks or coins to form hexagrams with cryptic explanations. It's an interesting rumination on culture, psychology and politics with some great, well-delineated characters. There's a TV series of it.

God Spare the Girls

Kelsey McKinney

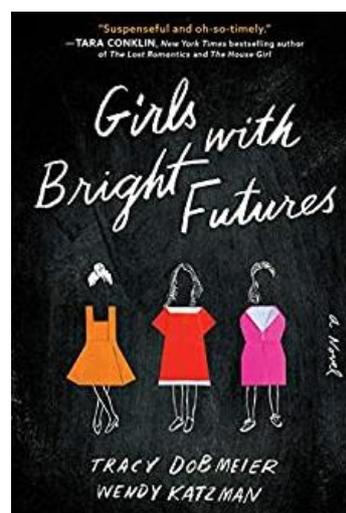
This is an interesting novel about Texan Baptists. Abigail, 24, is about to be married. Caroline, 18, despite taking the vow of purity, decides to have sex with the boy she's seeing. Their father is the pastor of their church and it turns out he's been having an affair with a congregant. He says it's been over for a year. He has to confess to the elders and go through a process of being forgiven and allowed back. The girls take off to the ranch their grandmother has left to them to process and get closer to each other. Abigail is a natural leader. Caroline discovers that Abby is still co-authoring their father's famous sermons. It's a very patriarchal church with women only allowed helping roles, so this is a big secret. Also secret till Caroline discovers it: the affair is not over and it took place at the ranch. Also: it's not the first time he has been unfaithful to their mother, who makes a big deal out of being understanding and forgiving. Schooled as they are in deeply moral values, this hypocrisy is hard to handle, as is their father's rather vainglorious attitude, which is beautifully conveyed. The novel takes Christianity seriously and leaves us to draw our own conclusions about how it should be practiced. There's a great scene near the end where at their father's re-induction service, Abby performs a riveting song and does some leading of the service without asking anyone's permission. The heat of a Texan summer sounds like Australian heat.



Girls With Bright Futures

Tracy Dobmeier & Wendy Katzman

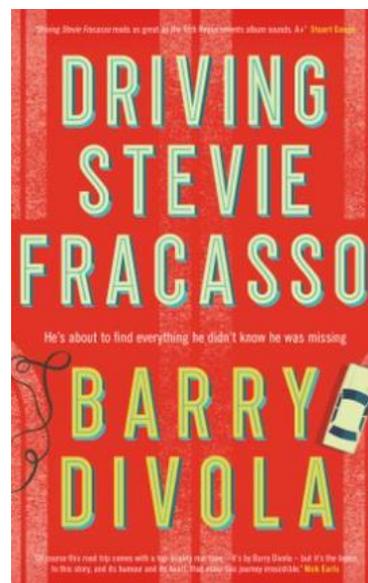
This is about the absolutely insane rigmarole Americans go through to get their kids into good colleges, so there's much scope for a lot of really bad parental behaviour. The scene is a posh private girls' school on the west coast and our heroines are single mum Maren and her clever daughter Winnie. It's a feel-good novel so you can guess how it's going to end already. It's a bumpy ride though, as we learn the story of who fathered Winnie and how, the reason his family is so desperate to get in touch, the nefarious behaviour of the superwoman CEO who is Maren's boss, the hit and run driver who knocks Winnie down and the desperate parental wrangling to curry favour with school staff. Calls for honourable behaviour go largely ignored. The authors are long-time friends who carefully plot their novels around a kitchen table. They went to some trouble to make Winnie's father bad but redeemed. Okay, I'm saying it's formulaic but it's a sprightly look at a crazy system.



Driving Stevie Fracasso

Barry Divola

Barry Divola is an Australian pop music nerd who's written for Rolling Stone and many other outlets. He's also a New York fanatic, visiting every year. The setup here is that Rick, a music journo based in NY and partly raised in Australia loses his job, his longtime girlfriend and a place to live on his fortieth birthday. The only thing he has going for him is the offer to write a bio of his musician brother Stevie, who flamed like a meteor for a brief moment in the seventies before crashing, burning and never being heard of again. Rick's task is to drive to Austin, Texas, pick up the non-flying Stevie and bring him to NY for a concert. They haven't been in touch for decades.



So begins a road trip with the drug damaged yet strangely wise Stevie and Rick driving through quixotic parts of the States (to put it nicely). Rick gets to realise a few unpleasant truths about himself. He's got a chip on his shoulder about his big beloved brother abandoning him to a somewhat bizarre mother and her new Australian husband that turns out to be undeserved. They meet a lot of interesting poor people. The police are interested in why Rick is driving a stolen car. Rick's girlfriend says she is pregnant, possibly to him. It's a great book, especially for music fans across practically every genre. Except classical.

Crime Fiction

The Last Thing to Burn

Will Dean

Like Emma Donoghue's brilliant *Room*, this is a book about sexual slavery, this time a Vietnamese captive on a drear fenland farm in Britain. The difference is that the woman has the run of the house and the socially moronic farmer keeping her there preserves the fiction that what they have is a contented life despite the fact that he has injured her ankle so that she can't walk off. Look: it's quite well written but depressing as all get out and now that the entire state of NSW is in lockdown you probably don't need to be reading about being trapped in place.

PS: he captures another woman and keeps her under the floor in filth.

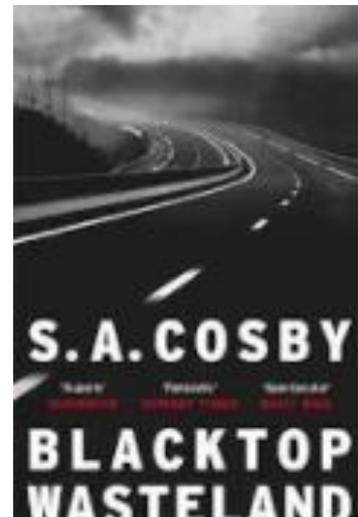
PPS: there's another captured woman on the property as well.
Nasty.



Blacktop Wasteland

S A Cosby

Beauregard is a black mechanic in small town America with an absolute genius for cars and driving. He's married to longtime sweetheart Kia and they have two little boys. They live in a "double-wide": a trailable house. Financially, he's going backwards. As a kid, Bug, as he's also known, did time in juvie for mowing down the guys who were going to kill his daddy, a charming but feckless gangsta. He was also in "the life", driving for robbers. His ability to plan and work out details and fallback positions is second to none. His acid-tongued mother is slowly dying in a local care home (expensive) plus he has a daughter from an old relationship who needs money for college and so ... When a local white ne'er do well offers him a chance to drive on a dead cert jewellery heist he gives in.



Turns out a person gets killed and they stole from the wrong people. So begins an entertaining tale of mayhem, double crosses, disasters, fantastic planning and gutsiness, rednecks and good ole boys which invites some suspension of disbelief as one criminal gang tries to thwart another with Bug the meat in the sandwich. He realises he's two people: the good husband father straight guy and the man who loves the adrenaline of crime. When his younger son ends up in hospital as part of it all Kia draws a line: stay, and change. Don't be like your daddy and just disappear.

Widow's Island

L A Larkin

Robin Williams interviewed Louise Larkin on ABC radio's Science Show, as her books tend to have science in them. Here, widowed climate scientist Stephanie plus teenage goth daughter Amy leave their home in Fayetteville to live on Whisper Island in the Pacific Northwest, not far from Seattle. Stephanie is the lead on a climate change report commissioned by the military and is due to defend it publicly. Amy is resentful and difficult. There's a serial killer on the loose who's targeting Stephanie. There's also a troll farm that's been paid by a billionaire investor in the energy industry to besmirch Stephanie's reputation by putting out misinformation. It does so with seriously devastating effect. Larkin says plainly that Russian troll farms affected the outcome of the Brexit vote and the results of the 2016 US elections that saw Trump come to power. Truth and facts, anyone? This is a major issue for our times and for democracy. And for Big Tech.



The deft plotting on the crime front involves a Black FBI guy and a sassy female detective (so far, so PC). Stephanie beats herself up by feeling somewhat responsible for her husband's death and is bracing to apologise to Amy but it's a bit of a red herring really. More spine chilling is the political process, where primed, (paid?), politicians savage Stephanie - and truth - at the behest of the evil energy capitalists who don't want to lose their power. After a vividly scary run-in with the killer, which Stephanie barely survives, she and Amy are thoroughly reconciled and all the bad guys get their just deserts. If only.

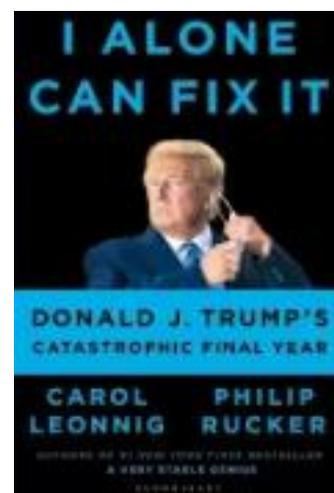
Non-fiction

I Alone Can Fix It

Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker

Aloha! Just when you thought there'd be no more mention of Trump books, here's another. This is by the Washington Post reporters who brought us *A Very Stable Genius*. Both titles are Trump quotes. Below are 2 quotes from the prologue. The rest of the book is devoted to proving why these conclusions are valid in forensic, fact-checked detail.

"The characteristics of Trump's leadership, blazingly evident through the first three years of his presidency, had deadly ramifications in his final year. He displayed his ignorance, his rash temper, his pettiness and pique, his malice and cruelty, his utter absence of empathy, his narcissism, his transgressive personality, his disloyalty, his sense of victimhood, his addiction to television, his suspicion and silencing of experts, and his deception and lies. Each trait thwarted the response of the world's most powerful nation to a lethal threat."



“Most of Trump’s failings can be explained by a simple truth: He cared more about himself than the country. Whether managing the coronavirus or addressing racial unrest or reacting to his election defeat, Trump prioritized what he thought to be his political and personal interests over the common good.”

So You Think You Know What’s Good For You?

Dr Norman Swan

The ABC’s health and medicine guru writes in a very reader-friendly way about all matters health, including diet, exercise, sleep, mental health, LGBTQI issues, etc etc. He bombs a few myths and provides facts, facts facts.

“Lack of this sense of control creates chronic stress, which can be damaging to your heart, metabolism, immune system and brain.”

Dr NORMAN
SWAN

So you think you know
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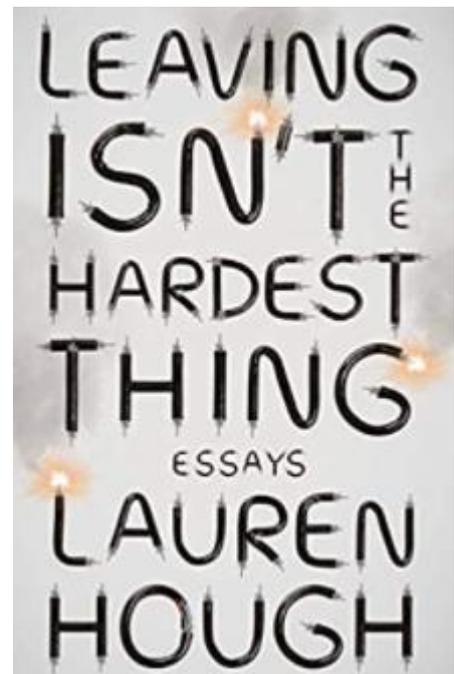


The ultimate health guide
from Australia’s most trusted doctor

Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing

Lauren Hough

This is the memoir of a person who was raised in the Children of God cult, growing up in various countries. This cult is infamous for its bizarre practices, including paedophilia. She and her mum eventually escaped. She joined the American Air Force but left when her lesbianism became an issue. Then it was time to tend bar in a gay club, followed by a long stint as a “cable guy”, dealing with a variety of customers (often horrible, demanding, unreasonable or all three). With low self-esteem, her relationships with women didn’t go so well either. Sounds like a depressing saga, right? It is, but Hough’s writing style is plucky and unsentimental. Through her eyes we get a glimpse of low wage America: the people who are only one disaster away from penury and homelessness. Her final chapter reveals a justifiable anger that the land of the free where anyone can make it big is illusory for the majority. It reminded me of *Nomadland*, the film starring Frances McDormand that came out last year, which shows older people living a precarious and itinerant life working low wage jobs in Amazon warehouses and the like, who live in loose, gypsy-like communities along the roads.

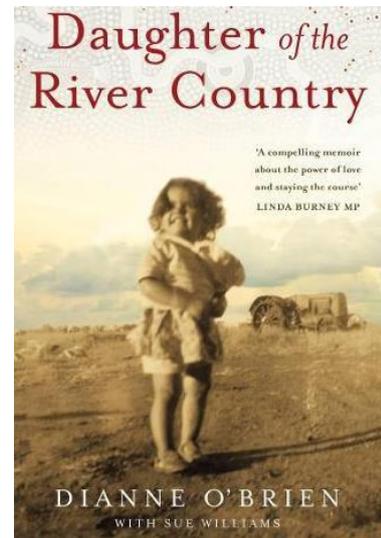


Note: Amazon is trialling AI mechanisation of its picking and packing, so even these jobs may disappear. Minimum wage in the US is \$7/hour, meaning such workers need to work 90 hour weeks.
Second note: plenty of expletives and drug taking in this one.

Daughter of the River Country

Diane O'Brien

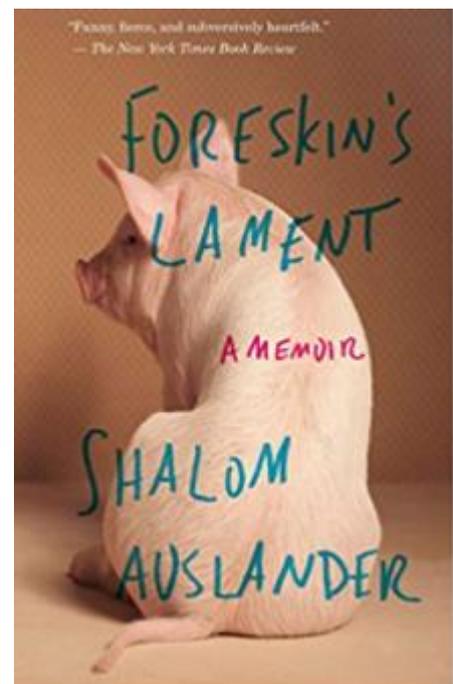
This is a memoir of an interesting - and at times really heartbreaking - life that triumphed in the end. Diane's early life was pretty good but as her mother got sicker and eventually died, it took a distinct turn for the worse. Her father was horrible and her time in Parramatta Girls' Home was dreadful. There has since been an apology to people incarcerated there. She was stunned to discover what everyone else knew: she is Aboriginal. And adopted. With such a bad start it's not surprising that her choice in men (some forced on her by circumstance) wasn't terrific. She had various partners, children and homes in NSW and Victoria and after a temperance beginning ended up too fond of the bottle. However, she became a hard-working and highly effective advocate for her people and is much honoured. A useful insight for those of us who've led more privileged lives.



Foreskin's Lament

Shalom Auslander

Oi vey! This is one very cranky Jew who takes extreme pleasure in outing the Deity as mean, irascible, vindictive, cruel and just plain nuts. He describes an orthodox upbringing that instilled a deep fear of God that despite adult agnosticism/atheism still had him worried about divine vengeance when his wife became pregnant. Fortunately, he's very funny about it, even when describing his father's drinking, swearing, non-yarmulke-wearing, holy ark-building, violent behaviour. The laws for keeping kosher and various other Jewish practices come in for heavy lampooning. When he learnt that before puberty a kid's sins are considered to be the father's, he engaged in a wide-ranging campaign of naughtiness in hopes that his father would be felled by divine retribution. He also became the family clown and klutz to steer paternal violence away from his mouthy brother. Despite the humour, it left its mark, leading him to break completely with his parents in the end.



Passionate Spirit: The Life of Alma Mahler

Cate Haste

You might remember the funny song about Alma composed by Tom Lehrer decades ago. He introduces it by saying that she was the wife or lover of most of the top creative men in Europe between the wars. She was married to:

1. Gustav Mahler, composer and conductor
2. Walter Gropius, architect of Bauhaus fame
3. Franz Werfel, author, whose works include *The Song of Bernadette*, later a Hollywood movie.

Another big love was the artist Oskar Kokoschka.

Cate Haste is British and has an excellent CV. For this book she mined primary sources and was careful not to rely on imagination or interpretation, so we're left with the impression that this is a reliable picture of Alma, who was both revered and reviled in her time. She was certainly magnetic, even when she was irritating. She could also be anti-Semitic and jealous of others getting attention.

She certainly had her troubles: three of her four children didn't reach adulthood. In common with all Austrian girls she didn't go to school, being home tutored instead. Nevertheless she read widely and always moved in cultured, intellectual circles. What comes across as her biggest problem was that she was a talented composer as a young woman, setting poetry to music in what are still described as technically difficult and interesting settings. You won't be surprised to learn that women were not considered able to compose at the time and when she consented to marry Mahler, a man almost twice her age, he set down plainly that she would of course, give up her own ambitions to serve his greater genius. The idea that women were intellectually inferior has only slowly subsided.

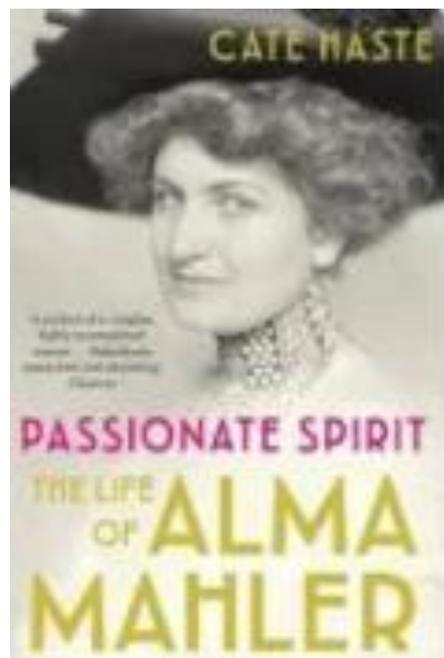
Funnily (sadly) enough, she became depressed being a mere server of genius. It was Freud who convinced Mahler to encourage her back to composing, which he did, but it came too late. She began to see herself as the Muse and helpmeet of genius rather than its source. I think it warped her. Her diary outpourings show a woman of extreme and sometimes flighty emotions who was often at war with herself. I was also reminded of a theory that highly talented and energetic people often have a big libido. Bill Clinton and Mae West were cited as examples, among others.

When the Nazis made it necessary to flee Austria, Alma and Werfel had a gruelling time in France before escaping on foot into Spain - something that Alma, then in her sixties, did uncomplainingly; more stoic than her husband. They lived a quite successful emigre life in the States. After Werfel's death Alma became the keeper of the flame, the Grand Widow, until her death in 1964.

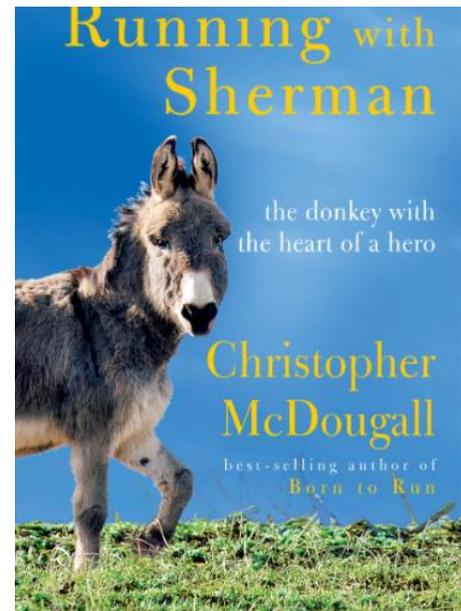
Running With Sherman

Christopher McDougall

This your typical heart-warming story of rescuing a badly mistreated donkey and all the people who helped return him to health and happiness. The first photo of Sherman shows him with hooves so uncared for they go down, then curl up like Turkish slippers. By the end, Chris and Sherman are running alongside each other in the annual Colorado human-donkey race at high altitude.



It's the various diversions that add interest. The McDougalls live alongside Amish and despite peculiarities such as not driving cars but being allowed to accept lifts from people who do, Chris notes that their horse and carriage, farming lifestyle makes them a society with less crime and better mental health than most. He also has some interesting things to say about exercise, being a former couch potato who now runs for fun. The various donkey-human races are open to all ages and genders (indeed, women often beat the men) and have proved healing for many people with physical and mental challenges. The personalities and peculiarities of the various donkeys themselves are also fascinating. Nice to hear a good news story.



These are overgrown hooves on a horse, similar to what Sherman had.

That's all for now. Please feel free to send me your reviews at erylacarter@gmail.com.

Cheers, Eryl.

Happy reading!