

Best reads of the year: The books that writers loved in 2023

By Various

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The books that writers loved in 2023 MARK STEHLE



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In the lead-up to Christmas, a selection of authors from home and abroad told us about the books they enjoyed most this year.

Fintan O’Toole’s *We Don’t Know Ourselves* (Head of Zeus) is “a personal history of Ireland since 1958”, the year of his birth: 600 pages and life sparkles on every one. Another Irish writer, Claire Keegan, takes aim at the grotesque injustice of family life in her tiny novel *So Late in the Day* (Faber): a three-word phrase (can you spot it?) explodes on page 41 like a hand grenade tossed through a kitchen window. Annette Trevitt, in her non-fiction work *I Had a Father in Karratha* (Upswell), tells how she devoted two and a half years of her life to cleaning up the financial mess that her bolter of a father, whom she loved,

left behind him in the Pilbara when he died: an endearingly gritty, furious tale of family redemption, and my favourite of the year.

Helen Garner's most recent book, [How To End a Story](#), is published by Text.

It's not that easy to narrow down my favourites of 2023, but at the top of the list is [Tom Lake](#) (Bloomsbury) by Ann Patchett. A hopeful story that reminds us to find happiness in the smallest things, I loved it. I was also gripped by [The Wager](#) (Simon & Schuster), by David Grann, [The Fraud](#) (Hamish Hamilton) by the amazing Zadie Smith, and [Where Are You From Really?](#) (Hachette) by Adam Rutherford, a funny, accessible science book written for kids about what makes us human.

[Bonnie Garmus](#) is the author of [Lessons in Chemistry](#) (Transworld).



Sometimes a book is an experience felt almost in the body. Richard Flanagan's [Question 7](#) (Knopf) is such a book. It holds a life between its covers and while you read, it holds you too. A celebration of all life, it is also a reckoning with the 20th century and what it revealed about us to ourselves. It is intimate, beautiful, unsparing and profound. It nudges at eternity, and then comes back home, to decency and love. Kylie Needham's [Girl in a Pink Dress](#) (HH) is exquisite and fierce and beautifully observed. I was immersed in close-up view, from the first page to the last – in the narrator who is so much more interesting – and powerful – than she gives herself credit for. And in the deft, unshowy art of Needham's prose. I loved being in the artworld with all its beauties, ambition, its heresies, politics and petty tyrannies, and watching a relationship of artists blossom. I enjoyed the deft brushstrokes of Needham's writing so much that only when I finished did I see the whole, perfect canvas she's painted. Edith Wharton is always wicked, wonderful, wise. I could read her [Collected Short Stories](#) (Da Capo) over and over all summer, and then go back to [The Age of Innocence](#) (Vintage) and bask in my admiration for her longform.

[Anna Funder](#) is the author of [Wifedom](#) (HH).

In [The Last Woman in the World](#) (Hachette), Inga Simpson gives us an Australia destroyed by pandemic and bushfires, with unseen forces feeding off our despair. Claire G. Coleman's [Enclave](#) (Hachette) terrified me with its near-future of authoritarianism, surveillance and racial scapegoating. And yet, both novels are uplifting. Simpson renders the natural world with her trademark stunning prose and an ending that is profound and surprising. [Enclave](#) is a powerful allegory. As Coleman herself says, "I must do what I can to change how this country sees itself". And finally, Rebecca F. Kuang's [Yellowface](#) (HarperCollins) delivered a biting critique of cultural mis/appropriation, the publishing industry and social expectations that had me horrified by the protagonist, laughing out loud and wanting to read entire paragraphs to my agent.

[Shankari Chandran's](#) recent novel is [Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens](#) (Ultimo).

In a starry year for First Nations writing, [Melissa Lucashenko's](#) mesmerising [Edenglassie](#) (UQP) brilliantly illuminates a slice of history that was largely obscure to me. Expertly twining a contemporary narrative and a historical one, [Edenglassie](#) is wrenching at times, very funny at others, and always arresting. Lucashenko is an exhilarating writer, and this generous book is her most remarkable to date. I'm a footballphobe whatever the shape of the ball, but I was riveted by Ellen van Neerven's shapeshifting [Personal Score](#) (UQP). It effortlessly warps the conventions of the sports memoir, deflecting attention from the individual to the collective, and replacing triumphalism with a thinking-through of what it means to play sport on stolen land. And its narrative voice is a marvel: direct, poetic, inquiring, intimate and frank.

Michelle de Kretser's most recent book, [Scary Monsters](#), is published by Allen & Unwin.

Playhouse (Knopf) by Richard Bausch is a big, spacious novel you can immerse yourself in. Bausch is one of the US' great literary realists and possesses a story-writer's finesse and diamond-point verbal deftness. *Playhouse* is full of vivid characters, intriguing/interesting intellectual threadings, much riveting incident, and Bausch's incomparable wit-on-the-page. In *The Lock-Up* (Faber) by John Banville, the Booker Prize winner has it all cooking: two care-worn constabulary figures, now older and nicely re-purposed from his previous policiers; a murdered Trinity College lady professor; settings stretching from the war-torn Bavarian Alps to the cold, shadowy, secret-keeping purlieus of 1950s Dublin. It's a novel you'll want to sit down with on a chill 'n' windy winter night and read all of.

Richard Ford's [Be Mine](#) is published by Bloomsbury.

I thought the novel *Brotherless Night* (Penguin) by V.V. Ganeshanathan was truly spectacular, an epic, devastating, brilliant and gorgeous depiction of one young woman's experience during the Sri Lankan Civil War. The story is told from the perspective of teenage Sashi and follows her through the 1980s as she's recruited to work with the Tamil Tigers and her family life is completely upended. Admittedly, I know Ganeshanathan — we both live in Minneapolis — which is how I know she spent 18 years writing this book. But it sincerely amazed me to finally read it and to think, Wow, this is the incredible piece of art you've been creating all this time.

[Curtis Sittenfeld](#) is the author of [Romantic Comedy](#) (Doubleday).

A good book lingers and, for me, affirms any curious return to its pages. [Anam](#) (Hamish Hamilton) by André Dao, the story of a grandson's desire to make sense of his family's past and his grandfather's long imprisonment, is just this. Dao never reduces, but complicates with layer upon aching layer. The prose is meditative, recursive and serpentine. It is a work that wrestles with its own form and, like the best literature, escapes easy definition. This year, I also read Marguerite Duras' *The Easy Life* (Bloomsbury), translated for the first time into English. Here she experiments with the relationship composition that would reoccur in her later works: a young woman and her lover, a beloved younger brother and a violent older one. While an early attempt, the novel still hums with Duras' uncanny, incantatory voice and style. Finally, there's *Roman Stories* (Picador) by Jhumpa Lahiri, written in Italian and translated by the author herself, told with her usual timeless simplicity and grace.

[Jessica Au's](#) novel [Cold Enough for Snow](#) is published by Giramondo.

[Barbara Kingsolver](#) has the capacity to tell stories and be a fabulist while addressing the issues of the world in *Demon Copperhead* (Faber) so organically that you barely know she's doing it. This is a superb narration from the mouth of America's white disinherited. I am a sucker for books that take European sensibility and bury it deeply in the Australian bush. Leah Kaminsky's *Doll's Eye* (Vintage) is a great and engrossing novel from a woman richly qualified to write it. Narratively it works too and is set at a time when people were so pressed by global cruelty and the strangeness of this new refuge that they moved in shock. And indeed, this reminded me of Mirandi Riwoe's [Sunbirds](#) (UQP) and the authenticity of her story, the nearly forgotten crisis of the fall of the Dutch Empire in Indonesia in 1942. Riwoe, like Kaminsky was not even at the disturbed times they write of, but they both write so authentically and well about it. Suzanne Leal's training as a lawyer serves her very well, as she negotiates the court system very smoothly in [The Watchful Wife](#) (Allen & Unwin). The story-telling moves without apparent effort in this novel of a cult childhood and a child-abuse case from the angle of the accused. Catharine Lumby's [Frank Moorhouse](#) (A&U) is one of the finest literary biographies, in which a friendship as well as a splendid lifetime is under a humane analysis. Frank was a disarming man, and he laid down the positive aspects of the literary culture writers work in today.

[Tom Keneally's](#) most recent book is [Fanatic Heart](#) (Vintage).

Professor of Political Philosophy Lea Ypi's *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (Penguin) is my book of the year. How a memoir about growing up in the world's last socialist state can be so laugh out loud funny, and yet so profound, is beyond me. I admired both the intent and execution of Shannyn Palmer's ground-breaking work of cross-cultural history, *Unmaking Angus Downs* (MUP). Russell Marks' *Black Lives, White Law* (LaTrobeUP) brings history into the present; a masterful indictment of over 200 years of incarceration regimes in Australia. Christos Tsiolkas' novel *The In-Between* (A&U) is quite simply his best: a raw, deeply romantic, visceral investigation of love in its many guises. What's read cannot be unread. And I adored Ann Patchett's latest, *Tom Lake* (Bloomsbury). Pure Patchett: gentle, generous, intelligent and the perfect antidote to everything else happening outside the page.

Clare Wright is the author of [You Daughters of Freedom](#) (Text).

I really liked Melissa Lucashenko's antic *Edenglassie* (UQP). She's bashed out a space for herself in our literary culture with work that's both demotic, funny, and uncompromising. I was lucky enough to read James Bradley's forthcoming opus, *Deep Water* (HH), in proofs, and it feels like the book he's been working up to all his career. I absolutely loved Kate Mildenhall's *The Hummingbird Effect* (Scribner). Here's a novelist taking big risks and huge strides in her craft – hats off, comrade. Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* (A&U) is remarkable – I'm still trying to figure out how she pulled it off. The best thing she's done. And speaking of exceeding oneself, Richard Flanagan's *Question 7* (Knopf) is the strangest and most beautiful memoir I've ever read. Magnificent.

Tim Winton's most recent book is [The Shepherd's Hut](#) (HH).

West Heart Kill (Bloomsbury) by Dann McDorman reminded me what the crime genre can still do to surprise me. It's set in 1976 in a private hunting club in upstate New York on the July 4 weekend. Private eye Adam McAnnis is there to ferret out who has it in for his mysterious client. So far, so what? Well, the "what" are the diversions along the way, the nods to so many different tropes and sleuths of the past. It's a meta mystery that I suspect will divide the room, but if you consider yourself a real connoisseur of the genre, it'll bring a smile to your face and give your little grey cells a run for their money.

Val McDermid's most recent book, [Past Lying](#), is published by Sphere.

I read many novels this year. My favourite was Briohny Doyle's *Why We Are Here* (Vintage), a story of love, disabling grief, and the raw courage of the novel's protagonist, "BB". This is a book I will return to again and again. Graham Akhurst's debut novel, *Borderland* (UWAP), deals with issues confronting young First Nations people. The central characters in the story, Jono and Jenny, embark on a journey, discovering their true selves, their shared heart and Country within a contemporary Australian landscape. For those (like me) who know that Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* is one of the greatest musical albums of all time, Warren Zanes' *Deliver Me From Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska* (Crown) affirms our conviction.

Tony Birch's latest novel is [Women & Children](#) (UQP).

Lately I've been neck-deep in books on what I've tentatively termed "female-coded loneliness". A few of these were Guadalupe Nettel's *Still Born* (Fitzcarraldo) and Claudia Rankine's *Plot* (Penguin), both of which explore varying attitudes towards motherhood; and Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman* (Penguin), which evinces all the doom and dread of adolescence. Another standout was Lynne Tillman's *Mothercare* (Peninsula Press), an unflinching and economical account of looking after, and palliating, a chronically ill parent. Among Australian books I enjoyed was Madukka *The River Serpent* (UWAP) by Burruberongal author Julie Janson. If you didn't already know that Janson is a playwright, her dry, cracking dialogue would tip you off. I loved [George Haddad's](#) masterful *Losing Face* (UQP). And John Morrissey's debut short-story collection, *Firelight* (Text), was exhilarating – it blends and bends genres.

Jennifer Down's most recent book is [Bodies of Light](#) (Text).

Paul Murray's *The Bee Sting* (Penguin), set in a small Irish town, tells the story of a once-prosperous family on the brink of collapse. The novel is funny – the funniest book I have read in years – at the same time as deeply empathetic. [August Blue](#) (HH), a novel about identity, and transformation, by Deborah Levy, is both delightful and enigmatic. Every idea, symbol, and scene used in the most beautifully balanced and clever of ways. Playful, most of all. Deborah Conway's memoir, [The Book of Life](#) (A&U) is a wild ride through rock 'n' roll and beyond. Honest, and full of energy, Conway's personality shines through this story about family, fathers, careers, cultural heritage and most of all music.

[Sofie Laguna's](#) most recent novel is [Infinite Splendours](#) (Allen & Unwin).

In a year of chaos and violence, Benjamin Labutut's *When We Cease to Understand the World* (Pushkin) captures the bewilderment. There was relief, maybe diversion, in Nick Hornby's [Dickens and Prince](#) (Viking), which paralleled those two creative lives. The epic Korean history novel *Mater 2-10* (Hwang Sok-yong, Scribe) and Andrew Nette's stylish noir, [Orphan Road](#) (Down & Out), were both excellent. Other favourites - the Philbrick edition of *Moby-Dick* (Penguin), Bruce Nash's forthcoming *All the Words We Know* (A&U), Edwina Preston's *Bad Art Mother* (Wakefield), Stan Grant's [The Queen Is Dead](#) (Fourth Estate), Robert Gott's hilarious [Naked Ambition](#) (Scribe) and Lucy Treloar's *Days of Innocence and Wonder* (Picador). And Richard Flanagan's memoir, *Question 7* (Knopf), might be the standout of all these.

Jock Serong's most recent book is [The Settlement](#) (Text).

Serhii Plokyh's [The Russo-Ukrainian War](#) (Allen Lane) is an analysis of great historical clarity that lays out the genesis of the war, and lucidly sets before the reader the impact of that war on the new bipolar world order that has arisen as a result of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine; a world order in which Washington and Beijing now confront each other instead of Washington and Moscow. André Dao effortlessly discards the established form of the novel in *Anam* (HH) and goes convincingly and mesmerisingly his own way with a level of brilliance that entranced me. The result is the most richly poetic and intelligent novel I've read in many years. Dao's search for his own inner truth is beautiful and profound. A deeply satisfying, ground-breaking work of art.

Alex Miller's *A Kind of Confession* is published by Allen & Unwin.

We Come With This Place (Echo), by [Debra Dank](#), should be on the school curriculum. Beautiful and thought-provoking, it is a tapestry of stories about her family's connection to place since colonisation. Dank's writing is poetic, precise and full of humour, but she never shies from the harsh truths of being Indigenous in a colonised land. I laughed, wept and was thoroughly engaged. After the referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, I wished more people had read it. *Sunbirds* (UQP), by Mirandi Riwoe, also has colonisation at its heart. Set in Java during WWII, the writing is rich and evocative. A beautiful read. *The Hummingbird Effect* (Scribner), by Kate Mildenhall, was a surprise and delight. It is about being human in an ever-changing world. Loved it. Finally, Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (Faber). Perfect.

Pip Williams' latest book is *The Bookbinder of Jericho* (Affirm).

It's been a bad year in many ways, a year of blood and smoke and hatred, but it's somehow been a great year for fiction. I adored *In Ascension* (Atlantic), by Martin MacInnes, a book that concerns the deepest fathoms of our planet, the outer reaches of space and the beginning of life itself. It's solemn, gorgeous and epic. I can't recall reading anything like it. I was eagerly anticipating Lauren Groff's frontier survival novel, [The Vaster Wilds](#) (Hutchinson Heinemann), and wasn't disappointed. Visceral, evocative and

hugely compelling — I loved it. [Biography of X](#) (Granta), by Catherine Lacey, was also a standout. It follows the widow of a notorious, multi-disciplinary artist as they write a biography about their deceased wife and, in doing so, discover a much more damaged, complicated and hurtful person than the one they thought they knew. Finally, I had the wind knocked out of me by *Kick the Latch* (Daunt), by Kathryn Scanlan. Through a series of interviews, Scanlan has captured the life and distinct voice of Sonia, a former racehorse trainer from Iowa. A person's whole, hard life is thrust onto the page, dense with pain and love and sacrifice. Reading it feels like being dragged into another world.

Robbie Arnott's most recent book is [Limberlost](#) (Text).

The Letters of Seamus Heaney (Faber), edited by Christopher Reid, offers us an extraordinary portrait of the poet. Heaney emerges here as a much more uneasy figure than I had expected. He worries a lot, tries to do his best, often feels guilty about small things. And then in some letters he is funny and confident and in possession of a magisterial tone, especially when he writes about poetry. Mike McCormack's novel *Solar Bones* (Canongate), published in 2016, remains for me one of the great achievements in fiction in the past few decades, or, to put it more clearly, it is a book I love and admire. His new novel, *This Plague of Souls* (Canongate), is a more shadowy book, filled with mystery and a sense of the uncanny, but it has the same stark power as *Solar Bones*.

Colm Toibin's essays, [A Guest at the Feast](#), are published by Picador.

Soccer and non-fiction sit parallel as two of life's mysteries: I admire and consume both, increasingly when they're more than fields of men, but I'm certainly not a natural. Ellen van Neerven's *Personal Score* (UQP) unmask these forms through an intimate exploration of what it means to play and be on First Nations land. Angela Saini's *The Patriarchs* (HarperCollins) is another non-fiction I've become evangelical about for its sparkling exploration of oppression. As a George Orwell fan, I'm grateful for Anna Funder's biography *Wifedom* (HH), which only makes me love Orwell's work more because, of course, he didn't produce alone — Funder deftly brings the influence of Eileen O'Shaughnessy to light. And Kris Kneen's [Fat Girl Dancing](#) (Text) is the perfect memoir — moving, wry, spellbinding.

Laura Jean McKay's *Gunflower* is published by Scribe.

This year I reread all of Michelle de Kretser's published work, a profound experience recommended to all. I gloried in *Fassbinder: Thousands of Mirrors* (Fitzcarraldo) because the author, Ian Penman, is an (almost) de Kretser-tier stylist of English. I was seduced by Deborah Levy's dreamy *August Blue* (HH) and pierced by the emotional intelligence of Yiyun Li's *Wednesday's Child* (HarperCollins). My most rewarding discovery was *Bird* (Puncher & Wattmann) by Adam Morris, a coruscating and courageous Western Australian novel which received scant attention on publication in 2020 and deserves readers. The local literary scene is small and too often influenced by personal connections, so I am appropriately embarrassed to recommend [I'd Rather Not](#) (Black Inc.) by Robert Skinner. Full disclosure: I launched it. However, no other book brought me as much joy as this hilarious and deceptively artful collection, and in these uncertain times that is worth plenty.

[Michael Winkler's *Grimmish*](#) is published by Puncher & Wattmann.

The best novel I read this year was *The Bee Sting* (HH) by Irish writer Paul Murray. It's an ambitious epic about the spiritual and financial crash of the Barnes family after the 2008 world economic crisis. Pitched somewhere between George Eliot and a Catherine Cookson novel we get to see the internal and external causes of this family's collapse. The patriarch Dickie Barnes was a successful car dealer until no one could afford to buy cars any more. His beautiful but troubled wife begins selling their possessions and their angsty kids do not thrive in the new circumstances. If this sounds grim, it's not really as grim as all that because Murray writes with humour and élan and just a touch of optimism. The best non-fiction book I read this year is so niche I'm afraid to mention it. However, if you inhabit that Venn intersection between D-Day nerd and analytic philosophy nerd you will love the jauntily written *J.L. Austin: Philosopher and D-*

Day Intelligence Officer (OUP) by M.W. Rowe.

Adrian Mckinty is the author of [The Island](#) (Hachette).

Among my favourite books this year were Laura Elizabeth Woollett's funny and very frightening [West Girls](#) (Scribe), Lauren Aimee Curtis' stubbornly enigmatic *Strangers at the Port* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) and Laura Jean McKay's *Gunflower* (Scribe), which bent my brain. All those authors have three names in their names, and the first one starts with LAUR. I don't know if that means anything. Less superstitiously, I also loved Alexis Wright's extraordinary, maniacal and hilarious mega-novel, [Praiseworthy](#) (Giramondo), and André Dao's brilliantly restless *Anam* (HH). My favourite thing of all though – and maybe of all time – was an old book that I finally summoned the courage to finish this year: Clarice Lispector's *Hour of the Star* (Penguin). Holy moly. It made me fall down on my knees and pray.

Miles Allinson's [In Moonland](#) is published by Scribe.

I think Anna Funder could well be Australia's finest fiction writer and also Australia's finest non-fiction writer all wrapped up in one brave and seriously creative woman, so I wasn't surprised at all by how brilliant *Wifedom* was (HH). One of the most fun crime reads I had this year was Bryan Brown's *The Drowning* (A&U), a grim and grisly murder mystery where the coastal Oz town setting becomes the lead character in an ensemble cast of crooks and can't-do-wells. I had two profound audiobook experiences this year with Quentin Tarantino's [Cinema Speculation](#) (HarperCollins) and *Rememberings* (Penguin) by Sinead O'Connor. The last wondrous and deeply heartfelt paragraph of Tarantino's breathless ode to enthusiasm was a great reminder that it's never too late to say thanks. I was listening to *Rememberings* when the world received word of O'Connor's death. I listened to every subsequent page with a heavy heart and a half-smile because every second page is a useful reminder that it's never too late to tell someone to f--- off.

Trent Dalton's most recent book is [Lola in the Mirror](#) (Fourth Estate).

When you have a new book out, you find yourself at festivals paired with writers in the same boat, so you read a lot of new fiction. Lucky for me, it's been a great year for novels by women: *Demon Copperhead* (Barbara Kingsolver, Faber), *Tom Lake* (Ann Patchett, Bloomsbury), *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (Gabrielle Zevin, Vintage) among the most pleasurable. But it is two works of non-fiction that made my hair stand on end: [Graft](#) (HH), by Maggie MacKellar, a beautiful, poetic page turner about a year on a Tasmanian coastal sheep farm, rich and deep with observation and emotion. *Wifedom* (HH), by Anna Funder, reinvents the art of biography and is simultaneously engrossing and enraging.

Geraldine Brooks' novel [Horse](#) is published by Hachette.

This has been another bountiful year for Irish novels, and apart from Booker-nominated books, I think Claire Kilroy's *Soldier, Sailor* (Faber), a short motherhood-survivor epic, stands radiantly in a glittering field. Nicole Flattery moved the Irish novel into Andy Warhol's factory with *Nothing Special* (Bloomsbury), and Darragh McKeon's enviable writing illuminated *Remembrance Sunday* (Penguin). Just published is *The Letters of Seamus Heaney* (Faber), which every writer on earth will read I am sure, in an immaculate editing job by Christopher Reid. There is a sadness in it, because he died all too soon, and as his wife Marie Heaney wisely said, "There is no such thing as a free Nobel ..." The captivating eloquence and deep thoughtfulness of the man shine out. To lose such a person!

[Sebastian Barry's Old God's Time](#) is published by Faber.

This year I've really enjoyed wading through *The World: A Family History of Humanity* (W&N) by Simon Sebag Montefiore. Monumental, audacious and truly global in scope, Montefiore takes the reader on a sweeping journey through thousands of years of human history. Not exactly a light read, this tome

deserves to be digested over months, or even years. Sean Turnell's moving memoir, *An Unlikely Prisoner* (Viking), is a surprisingly uplifting account of one of Asia's most horrific prisons, and an important ode to survival and the power of the human spirit. Isabelle Oderberg's *Hard to Bear* (Ultimo) tackles the difficult subject of miscarriage and reproductive healthcare inequalities with sensitivity and nuance. A must-read for anyone touched by pregnancy loss.

[Kylie Moore-Gilbert's *The Uncaged Sky*](#) is published by Ultimo.

The year's greatest surprise was Alice Nelson's [Faithless](#) (Vintage). The novel, and the author, had been unfamiliar to me. If I say that *Faithless* is a gorgeous, moving story about love and literature, understand that that's a bit like saying *Moby-Dick* is about a man seeking revenge on a whale. On the other hand, I've been reading Anne Enright for years, and this year's [The Wren, The Wren](#) (Vintage) is a great one. Almost every line could be on display in a sentence museum. Lorrie Moore upset almost everyone with [I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home](#) (Faber), which in no way resembles anything else she's written in a successful 40-year career. I loved it for itself and for Moore's reckless defiance of expectations. But wait, what about Claire Keegan's *So Late in the Day* (Faber), what about Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* (Faber), what about Ocean Vuong's poetry collection *Time Is a Mother* (Vintage) ...? **Michael Cunningham's latest novel, *Day*, is published by Fourth Estate.**

In a year of strong late-career novels by perennial favourites like J.M. Coetzee, Sigrid Nunez and Paul Auster, a few lesser-known names really stood out. Criminally under-appreciated Ken Kalfus gave us *2 A.M. In Little America* (Milkweed), an end of empire novel that imagines the collapse of the US, after which the population is forced to seek refuge in new, hostile lands. It is as gripping as it is frightening. *The Glutton* (Granta) by A.K. Blakemore is a delightfully grotesque 18th-century tale of greed, obsession, exploitation and ruin. Squeamish folk beware! And three novels of motherhood – *My Work* (Lolli Editions) by Olga Ravn, [How to Love Your Daughter](#) (Bloomsbury) by Hila Blum and *Soldier Sailor* (Faber) by Claire Kilroy – upend the traditional mythos with piercing, urgent force. **Bram Presser is the author of *The Book of Dirt* (Text).**

The books I've enjoyed this year have been histories and non-fiction texts that stayed on my bedside table long after I finished them. *Graft* (HH) by Maggie MacKellar is an absolute standout, a beautiful account of a year on a farm, that weaves place, family and memoir. I'm showing my footy allegiances here, but I also loved Eddie Betts' autobiography, *The Boy From Boomerang Crescent* (S&S), which is a generous and heart-felt window into football and Aboriginal identity and says so much about Australia. Several history books I read for work have also stayed with me and remain on my teetering pile, such as *Wifedom* (Anna Funder, HH), *Courting* (Alecia Simmonds, LaTrobe), [Bennelong and Phillip](#) (Kate Fullagar, Scribner) and *The Floating University* (Tamson Pietsch, Chicago UP). **Anna Clark is the author of [The Catch](#) (Vintage).**

I started the year reading two wildly different books, not knowing that by year's end these two books would come to command, for me, fiction's counter-horizons, and its strangest, strongest sites between. Fernanda Melchor's [Hurricane Season](#) (Text; trans., Sophie Hughes) is assaultive, rageful, demonic, a journey into the heart of hate; while [Jon Fosse's Septology](#) (Giramondo, trans., Damion Searls) is stilled, self-effacing, holy. Both books push the long sentence to its limits: the prose in one mangled and matted, in the other clear as basin water. But the moral courage driving the prose is what truly stuns. Closer to home, I was also stunned by the power and beauty of Fiona McFarlane's *The Sun Walks Down* (A&U) and André Dao's *Anam* (HH).

Nam Le's *36 Ways of Writing a Vietnamese Poem* is published in March by Scribner.

I can't recall a better collection of multi-authored short fiction than [New Australian Fiction 2023](#), edited by Suzy Garcia and published by Kill Your Darlings. So even a collection is this that it seems invidious to single out one author, but I have a weakness for the Sydney satirist Julie Koh who delivers a bleakly comic postmodern take on Kerouac's classic *On the Road*. Jeanne Ryckmans' [Trust: A Fractured Fable](#) (Upswell) is a mind-boggling account of Ryckmans' relationship with an Irish academic conman and self-styled professor of ethics who fleeced some of our leading universities and businesses when he persuaded them to fund his proposed research into, of all subjects, the decline of trust in western cultures. [Mick Cummins'](#) novel *So Close to Home* (Affirm) is a heartbreaking account of a young addict on the streets of Melbourne. You think you've heard it all before, but there are new insights here. Robert Caro's [Working](#) (Knopf Doubleday) offers a fascinating compilation on how the US' greatest living biographer goes about his research and the difficulty of arriving at what we understand to be any kind of objective truth.

Amanda Lohrey's latest novel, *The Conversion*, is published by Text.

This year, my reading leaned toward the weird and the wonderful. Emily Spurr's *Beatrix & Fred* (Text) is possibly the strangest love story I've ever read – funny and chilling, it made me consider what it means to be human. Chris Womersley makes the suburbs seem an unfamiliar, dangerous place in [Ordinary Gods and Monsters](#) (Picador), where teenager Nick is caught up investigating the hit-and-run death of his best friend's father while at the same time avoiding both the collapse of his own family and the vengeance of local speed-dealing bikies. And Kate Mildenhall's *The Hummingbird Effect* (Scribner) is the kind of unfolding, time-bending saga I adore. It's ambitious, tender and a little experimental, like an Australian *Cloud Atlas*.

Toni Jordan's [Prettier If She Smiled More](#) is published by Hachette.

I've been struck this year by several works responding to conflicts: their proximity, dread progression and aftermath. Standouts were Ann Shenfield's exquisitely observational poetry collection *A Treatment* (Upswell), which explores post-Holocaust family trauma, and Paul Lynch's disquieting *Prophet Song* (Oneworld), set in a horrifyingly plausible dystopian Ireland (standing in for any number of countries) in which a family struggles to survive. Melissa Lucashenko's *Edenglassie* (UQP) is a wonderfully expansive exploration of Queensland's past and projected future, its voices immaculately inhabited. Extraordinary. Two other treats: the fabulous Nick Cave-themed short-story collection *Into Your Arms* (ed. Kirsten Krauth, Fremantle Press) – so many brilliant authors – and the astonishing, funny and wildly original *The Vitals* (Picador) by Tracy Sorensen, about what makes us human.

Lucy Treloar's *Days of Innocence and Wonder* is published by Picador.

Laszlo Krasznahorkai's *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East* (New Direction), for its sheer beauty, describing for example, the task of many, many years of close observation by the myya daika (the artistic master of the carpenters) in watching the growth of cypress trees on a certain mountain in Japan, who knew what to do, because all of his ancestors going back centuries had also known what the task was, now, and in the years to follow from the wise counsel of ancient experience ... for every aspect required of precisely constructing sanctuaries for embarking upon a thousand years of devotion, and that the knowledge of how to do all of this, was within the tree itself. *Native Title is Not Land Rights* (Common Books) is a generous gift for Australia's post-referendum reading from the high-voltage, razor-sharp intellect and common-sense mind of its authors, Jacqui Katona, Gary Foley and Tony Birch. My holiday reading includes *Sun Shadow: Art of the Spinifex People* (Upswell), editors John Carty and Luke Scholes, and returning to the treasured books of Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, and Amos Oz.

Alexis Wright's most recent book is *Praiseworthy* (Giramondo).

It's not just about literary merit. Sometimes a book lands at just the right moment to change your opinion – or life. Novels with autistic protagonists have that power, and it's getting easier to complete the

sentence: “If you liked (or hated) *The Rosie Project*, you should read...”. We’re seeing more “own voices”, female voices and young characters. This year, Holly Smale’s wonderful *The Cassandra Complex* (Penguin) and *Finding Phoebe* (Andersen Press) by Gavin Extence are my picks. The book that resonated for Anne Buist and me, insightfully addressing issues we’re tackling in our upcoming novel and our lives, was Ben Bravery’s *The Patient Doctor* (Hachette) chronicling his fight with cancer and the medical system, and his experiences as a trainee psychiatrist.

Graeme Simsion and Anne Buist’s *The Glass House* will be published by Hachette in April.

In a year rich in reading, I feel particularly grateful to the authors who offered books that plumbed deeply into questions of morality and personal freedom, often within landscapes vast and sublime. Ethical reflection within threatened or contested natural environments feels necessary at the moment. Charlotte Wood’s mesmeric *Stone Yard Devotional* (A&U), about a woman seeking retreat in a secluded Australian monastery in full cognisance of wider environmental catastrophe, was one such example. Lauren Groff’s *The Vaster Wilds* (Hutchinson Heinemann) was another. The story of a young woman escaping the plague and famine of a 1600s settlement in the “New World” and running alone, through the wilderness, to seek freedom, is utterly gripping. Its narrative of self-actualisation wrought through resistance, and divinity attained through nature, is exhilarating.

Hannah Kent’s [Devotion](#) is published by Picador.

The Maniac (Pushkin) by Benjamin Labatut is a celebration of the beauty and terror of mathematics that can be enjoyed by someone, like me, who failed matriculation calculus. It reads like the most artful non-fiction but is actually a novel, named after a 1000-pound computer built at Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory in 1953. There is also a human maniac, the mathematician John von Neumann, an entrancing evil genius whose central adventures are told in the voices of his fellow mathematicians and his family. In fact, these voices are not as distinct as I would like, and I sometimes forgot exactly who was speaking to me, but for once in my picky reading life, I did not give a damn. Nothing could prevent me following this author and his amoral protagonist who thinks nothing of vaporising whole nations, but also, in the years before the double helix was discovered, conceives self-replicating non-human digital intelligences that bring us slam-bam, face-to-face with the Artificial Intelligence we may have already begun to serve. Richard Flanagan’s *Question 7* (Knopf) is a profoundly moving love song for the writer’s parents, a forensic excavation, a lament, a confession, a jig-saw puzzle in which Hiroshima connects to HG Wells, and the Martians colonise Tasmania. We are all competitive, of course, so this is not an easy thing to say: but *Question 7* may just be the most significant work of Australian art in the last 100 years.

Peter Carey’s most recent book is [A Long Way from Home](#) (Penguin).

The book I recommended most often this year is Maggie MacKellar’s *Graft* (Penguin), her superbly crafted memoir of one year on her Tasmanian sheep farm, drought, loss and motherhood. Two debut collections of poetry stunned me: Madison Godfrey’s queer coming-of-age memoir, [Dress Rehearsals](#) (Joan) and Wergaia and Wemba Wemba poet Susie Anderson’s exploration of Country and self in *the body country* (Hachette). A “stuck in the mall” YA novel *Royals* (S&S) from already adored writer Tegan Bennett Daylight kept my big kid and I both glued to the page until the very end. [Lioness](#) (Bloomsbury) by Emily Perkins, *Trust* (Picador) by Hernan Diaz, *Nightbitch* (Vintage) by Rachel Yoder and *How to Build a Boat* (Harvill Secker) by Elaine Feeney were the international titles that delighted me.

Kate Mildenhall is the author of *The Hummingbird Effect* (Scribner).

One of my favourite contemporary writers, the Sudanese-American poet Safia Elhillo, once said, “Books aren’t a replacement for actual people” ... but these books sure came close to convincing me otherwise this past year. [Tracey Lien’s *All That’s Left Unsaid*](#) (HarperCollins) follows a woman investigating her teenage brother’s murder in Little Saigon, Cabramatta. This is a visceral exploration of the pressures of family, fitting in a society that doesn’t want you, and addiction – set against a satisfying mix of mystery-solving and `90s nostalgia. *A Line in the Sand: 20 Years of Red Room Poetry* (Pantera) is a confluence of over 80 artists and public figures traversing poetic form and voice to offer us this stand-out collection. [Isabella Hammad’s *Enter Ghost*](#) (Vintage) is a reimagining of the classic *Hamlet* in present-day Palestine. A provocation in the most unexpected of ways, it asks, what does it mean to be an artist and create art under occupation; and can a work of art act upon the world, and the self?
Sara M Saleh is the author of [Songs for the Dead and Living](#) (Affirm).



I was deeply moved by Peter Polites’ portrait of a migrant mother, [God Forgets About The Poor](#) (Ultimo). Through his dignifying eye for detail, Polites proves that loving someone is a matter of paying close attention. I also read *The Transit of Venus* (Little, Brown) for the first time and I actually can’t speak about it in lofty enough terms. It expanded my conception of what a novel is capable of. I have to thank Brigitta Olubas’ biography ([Shirley Hazzard: A Writing Life](#); Little, Brown) for introducing me to this new favourite. And the old favourites delivered this year, too. Zadie Smith’s *The Fraud* (HH), like all her novels, is full of stunning aphorisms, funny situations, and characters who feel recognisable precisely because they’re irreducibly themselves.

Diana Reid’s [Seeing Other People](#) is published by Ultimo.

This year I’m judging the Stella Prize, so I’m forbidden from spilling the beans on Australian women’s and non-binary writing. But I can tell you to get your hands on *Boulder* (And Other Stories), a 2022 novella by Catalan poet Eva Baltasar, shortlisted for the 2023 International Booker. Spiky and delightfully weird, it’s a queer take on love and motherhood, destined to be a cult classic. I’d also urge Hilary Mantel fans to go back to her overlooked 1995 novel *An Experiment in Love* (HarperCollins). I discovered this coming-of-age novel after learning that Zadie Smith included it on the syllabus for a fiction seminar at Columbia. After reading, I can see why. Not since Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* (Little, Brown) have the horrors of being a smart young woman been so vividly rendered.

Yves Rees’ *All About Yves* is published by A&U.

In 2023, the debut YA novel [Burn](#) by Melanie Saward (Affirm) stood out for me as unputdownable. I devoured Debra Dank’s multi-award winning *We Come With This Place* (Echo). Lyrical, generous of heart and welcoming, even when challenging. Memoirs that transported me to different locations and mindsets were [Susan Johnson’s *Aphrodite’s Breath*](#) (A&U) and Krissy Kneen’s *Fat Girl Dancing* (Text). The team spirit of the Matildas shone in many ways in 2023, including in the picture book *We Are Matildas* (Penguin) written by Shelley Ware and illustrated by Serena Geddes. Finally, Armando Correa’s *The Night Travellers* (S&S) was one of the most powerful and emotionally charged novels I have ever read.

Anita Heiss’ most recent book is [Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray](#) (S&S).

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