

May to July REVIEWS

BOOKSELLER+PUBLISHER's star rating system gives readers an indication of the quality of the publication being reviewed in its context. Our reviewers have been asked to use the following guidelines to rate the book:

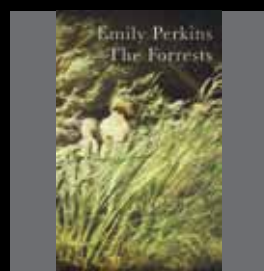
- ★★★★★ an exceptional book of the very highest quality, regardless of genre
- ★★★★☆ an excellent book
- ★★★☆☆ good book, within its genre
- ★★☆☆☆ a passable example of the genre
- ★☆☆☆☆ caution advised

Each issue, BOOKSELLER+PUBLISHER asks booksellers and writers to review books due to be published in the following month or thereafter. All books reviewed originate in Australia or New Zealand.

ebooks
(simultaneous release unless otherwise specified)

audio

Top Picks Among our reviewers' top picks this issue are:



The Forrests
★★★★★
Page 23



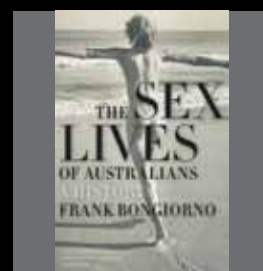
My Hundred Lovers
★★★★★
Page 24



The Remnants
★★★★★
Page 24



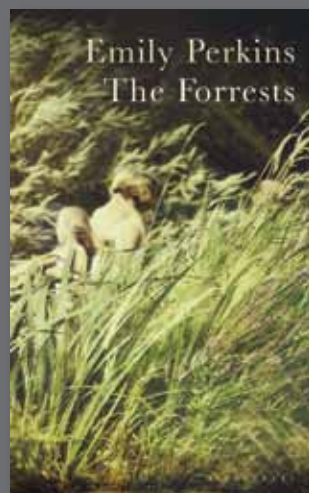
The Rest is Weight
★★★★★
Page 24



**The Sex Lives of
Australians: A History**
★★★★★
Page 26

'Nuanced, compelling and a treat for the mind, senses and emotions'—Angela Meyer on *The Forrests*
Emily Perkins' novel scored five stars. Not far behind was *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* with four-and-a-half stars

Feature review: Fiction ▼



The Forrests (Emily Perkins, Bloomsbury, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN9781408809235, May) e ★★★★★

Dorothy Forrest is seven years old when the Forrests move from New York, with dwindling money, to New Zealand. At the opening of the novel, Frank, the father, is capturing his children on a movie camera, trying to make them participate in a special effect. The children run off in different directions, bored of their father's instructions. But a fragment, a celluloid memory, is captured, and as the novel skips forward in time with each chapter, the past—and the figures in it—hover at the edges of Dorothy's life.

Emily Perkins, acclaimed author of *Novel about My Wife*, chronicles a person's life with depth, poignancy and passion. She manages to find the right, often surprising, words to describe the sensation of being in the world, both in the moment and over time. She never resorts to cliché. Often Dorothy exists both in the past—with her first love and family friend, Daniel, or with her beloved sister Eve—and in the present. She is bemused at how quickly time passes; in later chapters she fails to recognise her own reflection. The novel is, overall, a metaphor for this, with an entire life nestled between the front and back cover. It reflects the deep sadness of time passing, but also the potent joy of 'the little things'—sensations—of which Dorothy reminds herself and is grateful. Dorothy is perpetually surprised by who she seems to be, and where she has ended up, through choice and life's inevitable turns.

The Forrests is partly about survival, not just how we survive the often difficult and tragic events in our lives, but how we survive each other: our parents, our lovers, our children. It's also about how we survive ourselves;

how we deal with remnants of the past that remain with us, and how we deal with new fears that crop up and change us. How, too, do we deal with getting older? At one point Dorothy's brother mentions their family friend and her first love: 'Flickered with adrenaline, caught out as always at the mention of his name, [Dorothy] told Mike that last she heard he'd gotten married. Adulthood was like this—your voice calm, your face normal, while inside white turmoil squirted, your heart still seven, or twelve, or fifteen.'

The Forrests is a work of art as well as a successful narrative. It is nuanced, compelling and a treat for the mind, senses and emotions. Comparisons to Virginia Woolf, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith and Ali Smith are all valid in the way they deal, in some of their works, with members of a family over time. (See interview, page 27.)

Angela Meyer is a writer, literary blogger and former acting editor of Bookseller+Publisher

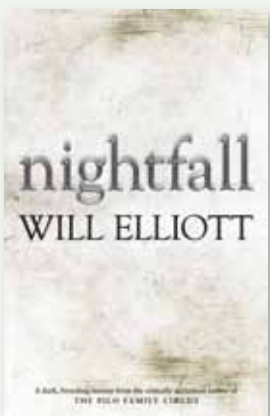


My Hundred Lovers (Susan Johnson, A&U, \$27.99 pb, ISBN 9781741756357, June) ☹ ★★★☆☆

You may know of Susan Johnson for her brave memoir of motherhood, *A Better Woman*, or her novel about writer Charmian Clift, *The Broken Book*, among other titles. Her seventh novel, *My Hundred Lovers*, opens with a woman in middle age who is feeling overpowered by memories. Passages about her relationships and human connections are interspersed with vignettes recalling the joy of different sensory experiences. Amid passion, despair and humour, the fallible-yet-likeable Deborah provokes sympathy as she realises the untruth of romantic love. Johnson reminds us of the inherent sensuality of all kinds of experiences, from patting a dog to wearing a dress, taking a bath and eating gelati. Deborah's erotic encounters do not dominate the plot, demonstrating there is much more to a sensual

existence than sex, and much romance to be found in life. Expected to attract a mostly female audience, this rich and meaningful novel deserves a broad readership. It is easily readable and poetic; Johnson's gift for language delights and some of her descriptions are to be savoured. With much of the novel set in France, it may also appeal to those with a penchant for the Gallic. I found *My Hundred Lovers* uplifting, due to its sumptuous language, and the mirror it shines on the beauty and intrinsic preciousness of life. (See interview, page 28.)

Joanne Shiells is a former retail book buyer and editor of Bookseller+Publisher

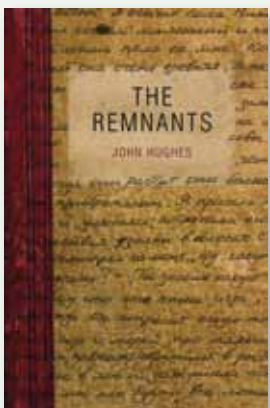


Nightfall (Will Elliott, HarperCollins, \$27.99 pb, ISBN 9780732289508, July) ☹ ★★★☆☆

Aden wakes up in a blood-filled bathtub in a strange place. He knows he has killed himself, but remembers only fragments of his life. As he explores his surroundings he is struck by a sense of familiarity, reminded of the stories his grandfather used to tell about a book he wanted to write. Gradually Aden comes to realise he is *in* the story, locked in the mind of his grandfather. As dementia slowly destroys the old man's memory, and with it his imaginary world, Aden and the other creations struggle for their own existence. This book sits somewhere between Will Elliott's first book *The Pilo Family Circus* and his 'Pendulum Trilogy'. It has the feel of a fantasy, but it also has a darker, surreal element and plays out in a deliberately confined space, much like *Pilo*. Elliott has chosen to give some of

his characters self-awareness, allowing them to know they are creations and thus inverting the traditional narrative. Elliott uses this to engage in some interesting meta-fiction before leaving the reader with an enigmatic finale. This is a book for more adventurous fantasy and spec-fiction readers, who should find it an intriguing, if somewhat strange read.

Stefen Brazulaitis is a freelance reviewer and the owner of Stefen's Books, a specialist genre fiction bookstore in Perth

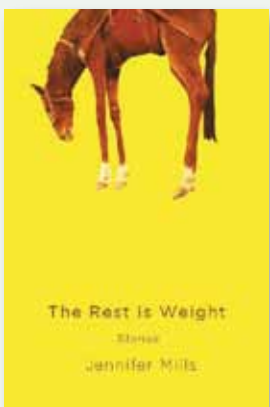


The Remnants (John Hughes, UWA Publishing, \$29.95 tpb, ISBN 9781742583327, June) ☹ ★★★☆☆

What a challenging novel this is. Readers familiar with the author, via his prize-winning collection of autobiographical essays, *The Idea of Home* (2005), will know that he never chooses the easy option as a writer. *The Remnants'* starting point is a manuscript written by an Australian art historian and discovered after his death by his son. The historian claims to have discovered a series of lost paintings by Piero della Francesca in Arezzo—Tuscan Italy. The manuscript involves not only Renaissance Italy but post-Revolutionary Russia, due to the father's relationship with Anna, an émigré who claims to have nursed the poet Osip Mandelstam in his final days. Other characters are also permitted their own voice, including Anna's son Kolya, husband Sura and lover Evgeny.

Interrupting the story's flow are frequent commentaries by the art historian's son as he strives to understand his father and make sense of the increasingly disparate series of events he discovers, and footnotes that, for me at least, were one complication too many in an already intricately constructed and beguiling tale. John Hughes requires his readers to concentrate, to retain several plotlines in their head, to recognise each change of voice, occasionally identified only by an initial and to remain focussed on the book. The rewards are certainly there for those who persevere.

Max Oliver has just completed his 55th year in the book trade



The Rest is Weight (Jennifer Mills, UQP, \$19.95 pb, ISBN 9780702249402, July) ☹ ★★★☆☆

Australian novelist and poet Jennifer Mills' first collection of short stories offers an evocative and thought-provoking exploration of the human condition in its rich emotional complexity. Although *The Rest is Weight* spans seven years of Mills' short fiction, it has a graceful coherence of style and theme. With crisp, vivid prose, Mills inhabits the inner lives of individuals confronting their thoughts and desires in diverse circumstances: an expat in China barely tolerates a visit from his well-meaning parents; a girl in Quintana Roo, Mexico, wonders what her mother does with the mysterious tall man who visits at night; a woman drives to Adelaide to visit the sister she hasn't spoken to for 15 years. Mills has a knack for capturing moments that define what it is to be human. At the heart

of these tales is our universal search for meaning, love and belonging, and Mills illuminates these powerful themes with dry wit and lyrical expression. Mills has compared assembling these stories to crafting the perfect mix tape. It's an apt analogy for this intriguing and elegantly crafted collection, which cements Mills' reputation as one of Australia's most versatile young writers.

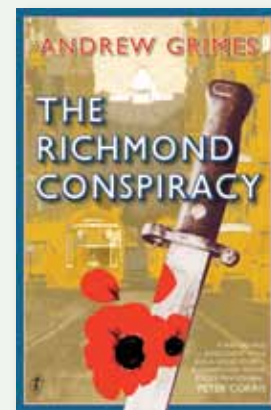
Carody Culver is a bookseller at Black Cat Books in Brisbane, a PhD student and a freelance reviewer

The Richmond Conspiracy (Andrew Grimes, Text, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN 9781921922664, July) ☹ ★★★

It's January 1933 and in a warehouse in Melbourne, two policemen start their investigation into the murder of businessman and war veteran Victor Radcliffe. Radcliffe was respected rather than liked and as the potential motives for his murder mount, inspector James Maclaine and his deputy Harry Devlin try to unravel the likely from the unlikely. Suspects come from business, political and personal areas and Radcliffe's military service provides more possibilities. The backdrop to these events include the Bodyline cricket series on the wireless, with the English captain Douglas Jardine's tactics threatening to become an international incident; Maclaine's unhappy marriage; and Devlin's gassed lungs. Also on the sidelines is the Praetorian Guard, a mixed bag of war veterans who

share an attachment to the Empire, a fear of communism and an opposition to non-white immigration. The history sits lightly on the page and adds interest to the story. Fans of Kerry Greenwood's 'Phryne Fisher' and Sulari Gentill's 'Rowland Sinclair' series will find much to like in *The Richmond Conspiracy*.

Heather Dyer is the owner of Fairfield Books in Melbourne



Rotten Gods (Greg Barron, HarperCollins, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN 9780732294342, July) ☹ ★★★

In the not-too-distant future, the world is on the brink, with unchecked pollution, environmental catastrophes, collapsing food supplies, debt-ridden Western governments and unprecedented inequality. Enter the latest proponents of militant Islam, al Muwahhidin, who capture a UN summit in Dubai, taking global leaders hostage and threatening annihilation if their demands are not met. As a thriller should be, *Rotten Gods* is hefty—perfect for a long-haul flight or a holiday. Over seven days, we follow events as a female Australian intelligence officer, a British pilot, a Somali security operative and various others work to save the day. The action moves from Dubai to Yemen to Somalia, from the headquarters of desert warlords to islands inhabited by pirates, as the clock ticks down.

Despite the countdown—a mirror of the biblical seven days of creation—the action sometimes lags because there aren't many real cliffhanger moments. The shifting focus from character to character should heighten the tension, but to me the only mystery was how the hostages would be saved, not why or whether they should be. The book raises big questions about how we should live, but in the end I felt there was more attention given to concepts than character development. This is a worthy page-turner that would translate well to the big screen, but it doesn't break any new ground.

Lachlan Jobbins is a reviewer, editor, ex-bookseller and presenter on For the Love of Books on STUDIO (Foxtel)

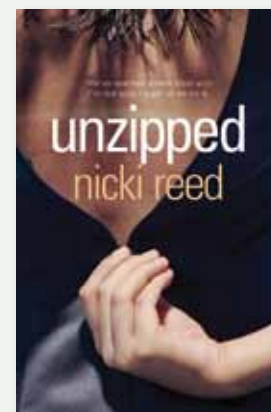


Unzipped (Nicki Reed, Text, \$29.95 tpb, ISBN 9781921922459, July) ☹ ★★★

Peta refers to life before the couch and after the couch. Before the couch she is happily, if not blandly, married to workaholic lawyer Mark, half-heartedly toying with the idea of having a baby, and part of a happy extended family. After the couch she is pursuing a passionate affair with a 22-year-old female student named BJ. Unfortunately what sounds like a complicated romantic drama about how life rarely ends up where we think it will turn into a narrative of soap-operatic proportions. The characters—Peta, her foul-mouthed sister Ruby, and the dynamic BJ—all find themselves in a veritable *Bold and the Beautiful* of relationship twists and turns, and there is a certain emotional nuance lacking in the depiction of these characters and their often spur-of-the-moment decisions.

A time of great emotional upheaval and passion is told in an almost perfunctory manner, making it difficult to connect with the characters and even harder to sympathise with them. Nicki Reed has assembled a colourful cast of characters and thrown them into some tricky emotional territory, but has utilised the shock value of brazen dialogue rather than the substance of really setting a scene or feeling. That said, the occasional references to various soap operas are fairly tongue-in-cheek and *Unzipped* can be an entertaining read.

Portia Lindsay is a former bookseller who works at the NSW Writers' Centre



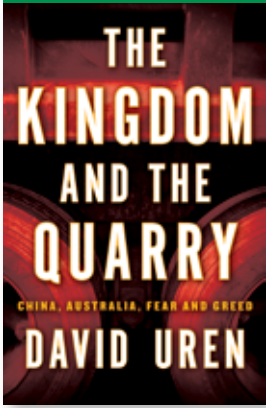
Winter Be My Shield (Jo Spurrier, HarperVoyager, \$32.99 tpb, ISBN 9780732292522, June) ☹ ★★★

In the first book in her 'Children of the Black Sun' series, Jo Spurrier manages to avoid the traps that many debut fantasy novelists fall into. Her characters are credible, their actions are rational, and the villains are evil but not stupid. While this is a fairly standard fantasy for the most part, Spurrier has worked a few variations into the mix. A small group of rebels finds a girl half-frozen in the snow. One of the rebels, Isidro, has recently been rescued from the powerful torturer-mage Kell, and recognises the girl as one of Kell's servants. But Sierra is much more than that. Kell, and his apprentice Rasten, are bloodmages who draw their power from rituals of pain and suffering, while Sierra is a natural sympath, converting all pain around her into potential magic that the mages can tap into.

With the rebels being hunted by the Crown, Sierra being hunted by Kell and Rasten, and the threat of betrayal on both sides, there is a constant undercurrent of angst. To her credit, Spurrier manages to navigate the intensity of her characters' situation without the story becoming too bleak. It's not quite a 'dark fantasy' but it's close. This is a solid recommendation for fans of Glenda Larke, Jennifer Fallon, Fiona McIntosh and Trudi Canavan.

Stefen Brazulaitis is a freelance reviewer and the owner of Stefen's Books, a specialist genre fiction bookstore in Perth



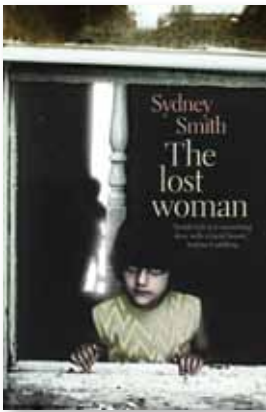


The Kingdom and the Quarry: China, Australia, Fear and Greed (David Uren, Black Inc., \$29.95 tpb, ISBN 9781863955669, June) Ⓢ ★★★☆☆

Australia's relationship with China is at the forefront of public discourse yet it is portrayed in wildly different ways. On the one hand China is the foundation of our prosperity and on the other it is a threat to our very way of life. David Uren shows how the actions and policies of our business and political leaders have swung between these polar opinions. It's a complex relationship in which economic and strategic imperatives intertwine and often conflict, which is further complicated by our partnership with the US. Uren's book traces the often rocky path of Sino-Australian relations and is full of insider detail, including what the Chinese really thought of Kevin Rudd's language skills. The character sketches of Australian and Chinese politicians and business leaders are astute and

sharply drawn. Uren shows that the biggest source of friction has been caused by mutual suspicion and distrust, and that this still threatens to derail the relationship. This is a fascinating book that is sure to get a lot of press. It will appeal to a broad audience but especially readers of quality Australian current affairs books, such as Peter Hartcher's *The Sweet Spot* and David Marr's *Panic*. Uren is a journalist for the *Australian* and author (with Lenore Taylor) of *Shitstorm: Inside Labor's Darkest Days*.

Dave Martus is the manager of Dymocks Neutral Bay in Sydney. He has many years' experience as a bookseller and buyer in Australia and the UK

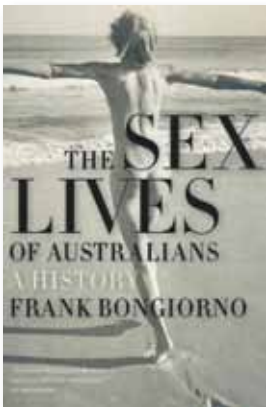


The Lost Woman (Sydney Smith, Text, \$32.95 tpb, ISBN9781921922480, June) Ⓢ ★★★☆☆

Reviewing a memoir with this much disturbing content is challenging, but I highly recommend this book for the strength and courage of the author's voice, and the beauty of her writing. It is poetic, complex and powerful, filled with the anxiety of a trapped daughter with an emotionally deadened, controlling and damaged mother. For the author, her mother was 'a problem I had to solve', and we travel with her young self in the failed search for the solution. Sydney Smith was born and grew up in Wellington, New Zealand. She lived in fear of her Maori mother, and never knew what sort of parent she would be from one day to the next. Often, she was unfathomably cruel. Meanwhile, Smith's anxiety-ridden pakeha father worked long hours in a butchery, and spent most of his

free time drunk. They formed a family that provided little sympathy or understanding for any of its members, and Smith's three brothers sought eventual escape that proved almost impossible for her. There is survival and hope, and a striving for understanding of her mother's behaviour, which lifts this memoir above the crowded field of the genre.

Sue Bond is a Brisbane-based writer and former bookseller



The Sex Lives of Australians: A History (Frank Bongiorno, Black Inc., \$32.95 tpb, ISBN 9781863955676, July) Ⓢ ★★★☆☆

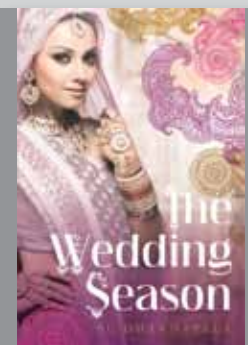
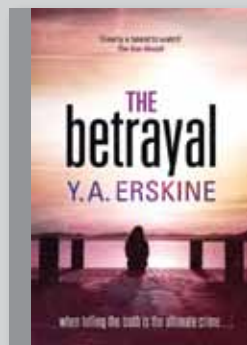
Frank Bongiorno's *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* is an important and fascinating account of Australia's past through the lens of sex. With the kind of minute detail and first-hand accounts that bring to life an era and its people, Bongiorno draws his reader into the tangled sexual web of our history as colonisers and colonised, gold diggers, immigrants, bushrangers, overseas troops, homosexuals, feminists, victims of disease and sexual legislators. Bongiorno's writing style is engaging, open-minded and humorous. He shows great insight into the ideologies and politics of each of the time periods he examines, from the concerns over perceived rampant sodomy during transportation, to present-day 'left-wing intellectuals concerned about unrestrained capitalism

making common cause with moral conservatives worried about widespread sexual immorality and disorder'. His sources are well chosen for their entertainment value but Bongiorno has clearly also invested a great deal of research and time into making this history so accessible. This is a fascinating, unique book that will be enjoyed by a broad range of nonfiction fans. (See interview, page 28.)

Kate Sunners is a social sciences student at the University of Queensland. She is also a creative writing graduate and ex-bookseller

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