

Our books of the year

It's been a big year for many facets of life including the literary sphere. Here are our experts' top reads from 2017.

By **STEPHEN ROMEI**

December 23rd, 2017 28 MIN READ



Charles Massy, author and farmer, on his property Severn Park in Cooma, NSW.

Welcome to our annual books of the year wrap-up. Just when I think my to-read list cannot be any longer, someone mentions a book I have never heard of that I realise I must read. Gabrielle Carey, Gideon Haigh and Alex Miller do that here today. I also like to check such lists for books I do know about and have a feeling are going to be important. One that is popping up a lot is *Call of the Reed Warbler*, a manifesto on the agricultural future by former wool farmer Charles Massy. That's why I have chosen him as the main photograph.

As it happens, my holiday reading is set as I am judging the fiction prizes in the 2018 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Without pre-empting that process in any way, I will — given it is books of the year day — name two Australian novels I liked a lot this year: Michael Sala's *The Restorer* and Shaun Prescott's debut *The Town*. My co-judges, Delia Falconer and Jane McCredie, and I still have a bit of reading to do, however, before we come up with the shortlists.

In international fiction I'll go for David Vann's brutal Jason and Medea retelling *Bright Air Black*. In nonfiction it's Michael Finkel's *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit*. And my top children's book is Bruce Whatley's haunting *Ruben*.

I am taking a few weeks leave over Christmas and the New Year. Festive best to all.

James Bradley

Novelist

Many of the novels I enjoyed most were engaged with questions of environmental crisis and its psychic and social implications. Sometimes that engagement was relatively direct, as in Megan Hunter's gorgeous novella about motherhood in a flooded England, *The End We Start From*. Sometimes it was more oblique, as in Jon McGregor's portrait of unsettlement and continuity in rural England, *Reservoir 13*. Sometimes it was fantastical, as in my favourite Australian book of the year, Jane Rawson's weird reimagining of the historical novel, *From the Wreck*. I also loved Philip Pullman's sequel to his wonderful Northern Lights Trilogy, *La Belle Sauvage* (which perhaps, not coincidentally, also features an epochal flood), Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Elizabeth Strout's masterful exploration of class and damage, *Anything is Possible*, and Carmen Maria Machado's darkly beautiful and savagely sensual debut story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*. But for pure enjoyment I'm not sure anything matched Alan Hollinghurst's glorious *The Sparsholt Affair*, a book that combines an astonishing grasp of social and historical detail with sentences of such elegance and wit I didn't want it to end.

Taboo book by Kim Scott

Gabrielle Carey

Author

Possibly my most important literary discovery since James Joyce is Elizabeth von Arnim. Born Mary Beauchamp in Kirribilli, her family moved to London when she was three, so she is often claimed as a British novelist. Yet, like her cousin Katherine Mansfield, she retained a restlessness all her life that I fancy reflects a continuing sense of belonging elsewhere. *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* was her first novel, written in diary form, and therefore interpreted by many as directly autobiographical. It made her so famous that her subsequent 22 books appeared simply as “By Elizabeth” or “By the Author of *Elizabeth and her German Garden*”. It was a bestseller, as were many of her other novels, and von Arnim went on to become that most unusual and enviable of celebrities: a fabulously wealthy writer. Her masterpiece, it is generally agreed among the small but growing group of aficionados, is *Vera*, apparently based on her second marriage to Lord Francis Russell (brother of Bertrand). Such is her skill that she succeeds in portraying the true nature of domestic violence without a raised voice, a threatening fist or a single bruise. It stands out from the other novels, which are essentially satiric and a showcase for her Wildean wit. But what makes von Arnim really special is her ability to write about happiness. No other writer comes near to the joy she can invoke on the page. If you want entertainment that also acts as an antidepressant, this is your woman. She should be known as one of our great Australian writers.

Simon Catterson

Author and critic

Four nonfiction titles that relate to Australia’s longest war stand out for me. Australia has been in Afghanistan since 2001 as part of the US-led coalition, an involvement whose human complexity is captured wonderfully in three excellent personal stories, each of which describes an experience very different from the others. Apart from anything else, the triptych formed by Eddie Ayres’s *Danger Music*, Rob Langdon’s *The Seventh Circle* and Ben Mckelvey’s *The Commando* serves as a reminder that none of us ever visits exactly the same place as anyone else. From Ayres’s compelling memoir of teaching poor children in Kabul and there undergoing a transformation in gender; to Langdon’s harrowing autobiographical tale of a military contractor wrongly accused of murder who languishes for years in an Afghan prison; to Mckelvey’s poignant biography of Corporal Cameron Baird, a heroic soldier posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, each is a remarkable story of courage and resilience in dangerous conditions. Equally fascinating is Chris Masters’s *No Front Line*, a characteristically immersive and empathetic account of combat operations carried out in Afghanistan by Australian special forces soldiers likewise a long way from home.

Tegan Bennett Daylight

Author and critic

The best new books I read are Edouard Louis’s *The End of Eddy* and Teju Cole’s *Known and Strange Things*. The former is a short, autobiographical novel about the author’s childhood in a village in northern France. It’s a clear-sighted, coldly furious book about growing up gay and cruelly poor in a place that rejects everything you are but is still home. All literature should be a dispatch from places unknown, and this one opened my eyes to a strata of French life I did not know much about. Cole’s collection of essays, following his brilliant, Sebaldian novel *Open City*, is a superb hybrid of erudition and rage. Cole is a Nigerian American, a photographer, digital artist and critic as well as a novelist, and his essays on race, literature, photography and travel are properly disquieting. His is the sort of writing that makes you want to read more, see more, so that you can commune more closely with the writer’s thinking.

Peter Craven

Literary critic

Vivienne Kelly’s novel *The Starlings* is a delicious exploration of childhood and its losses in the popular mode. Richard Ford’s *Between Them* is a staggering depiction of his parents by a master of fiction. Fay Weldon’s *Death of a She Devil* has the crispness, sparkle and perfect pitch that has characterised her work for a half-century. JM Coetzee’s *Late Essays* has nuggets of critical insight including pieces on Patrick White and Gerald Murnane. And Murnane himself in *Border Districts* shows he is always the same and always different, another masterwork. Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *Autumn*, a book of extended epigrams, does not contradict his reputation as today’s Proust. Two political savants, Britain’s Chris Patten and Australia’s Gareth Evans, have written memoirs that beguile and enlighten the mind. Rob Drewe’s *Whipbird* is a weird and charming portrait of a family celebration in the country,

ghost-ridden and densely imaginative. Helen Garner's collections of fiction (*Stories*) and nonfiction (*True Stories*) corroborate her reputation as a great stylist and a great witness. Fay Zwicky's posthumous *Collected Poems* was rich and wise. Robert Harris's *Munich* gets the highbrow trash award of the year and shares some of a cast list with Nicholas Shakespeare's *Six Minutes in May*, as good a book about Winston Churchill and World War II as has ever been written.

Whipbird by Robert Drewe

Miriam Cosic

Journalist and author

First, two excellent books about the Middle East. Shiraz Maher's *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* is essential reading. He examines the theological underpinnings that Islamic State, al-Qai'da and other extremist groups share with Salafist allies of the West such as Saudi Arabia. Shokoofeh Azar's shimmering novel about post-Revolutionary Iran, *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree*, is set half in Tehran, where the ayatollahs' political repression fractures comfortable middle-class life, and half in the countryside, a dreamy botanical otherworld stalked by ancient Zoroastrian spirits. Australian academic Jurgen Tampke's *A Perfidious Distortion of History* is a compelling revisionist account of Germany after the postwar Versailles Treaty, which he refuses to see as a get-out clause explaining the rise of Nazism. *The Internationalists and Their Plan to Outlaw War*, by American law professors Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, covers a similar period and traces the 20th-century intellectual shift from war seen as regrettable but inevitable, through the 1928 Paris Peace Pact, to war made illegal and aggressor states seen as pariahs. Away from war, Melbourne journalist Gabriella Coslovich's *Whiteley on Trial* is a beautifully written, fast-paced, true-crime story.

Gregory Day

Novelist and poet

A few years ago a white-haired, blue-eyed sheep farmer called Charles Massy came into the Lorne fishing co-op to talk to me about a poem celebrating the transformative magic of tadpoles. Now all this time later Massy has produced his own such magic with *Call of the Reed Warbler*, a thoroughly researched yet personal account of how Western agricultural land can metamorphose into healthy and productive ground for the future. Meanwhile in India, Arundhati Roy has said that after a long period of writing nonfiction she got tired of winning the argument but losing the battle. She returned to fiction because she felt it capable of something stranger and more affecting than sensible and intelligent commentary, of which there is no shortage. As a novelist this perspective makes perfect sense to me. Criticism of Roy's new work, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, as being somehow untidy or too sprawling only confirms the dangers of our enslavement to screen-glossing and the hyperbrief. Roy's is a song of a novel, a full-tilt hybrid of beauty, pain, community portraiture and metaphysical empathy. It is deliberately built for a flesh-and-blood world.

The Life to Come by Michelle De Kretser

Ceridwen Dovey

Novelist

My book of the year is Michelle de Kretser's *The Life to Come*, a sharp and unsettling novel — narcissism of all kinds is skewered here — that is deeply pleasurable to read (a bonus for Sydneysiders is how brilliantly de Kretser writes about Sydney, a "city governed by flowers"). My other favourites were Kim Scott's *Taboo*, Elizabeth Tan's novel-in-stories, *Rubik*, and Wayne Macauley's *Some Tests* (a Kafkaesque medical drama about how illness turns a person's world inside out). Elena Ferrante's *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, a collection of her letters to her publishers as well as letters in which she responds to interview requests, often to explain why she is turning them down, provided much food for thought in this age of endless self-promotion. As Ferrante puts it, "I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors."

Michelle de Kretser

Novelist

From its stunning first chapter, Kim Scott's *Taboo* is effortlessly haunting. It shifts between realism and magical modes as it examines the fallout from a tragedy. Nature is vividly present in a novel packed with all kinds of wonderful observation. The ironies and nuances of reconciliation politics are rendered with flair. Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* shares similar concerns: the aftermath of loss and great feeling for the natural world. McGregor overturns readerly expectations by having no main character; instead he traces the meandering course of multiple lives in quietly hypnotic prose that is itself a technical feat. I've just got around to Helen DeWitt's *The Last Samurai* and wish I'd discovered this marvellous novel about a child prodigy sooner. Written with great verve, it's ruthlessly unsentimental about parenting. It's also funny and intelligent with an endlessly imaginative narrative given to exhilarating swerves. Stephen Edgar's luminous *Transparencies* showcases this poet's breathtaking formal control. The collection, dedicated to his late mother, is profoundly moving, an unsparing meditation on loss and change. A sequence of poems inspired by a Hopper painting is particularly striking, but there are memorable lines on every page.

Delia Falconer

Novelist

My big fiction discovery this year (I know I'm late to the party) was Scottish novelist Ali Smith. *Autumn* and *Winter*, the first two novels in Seasonal, her planned quartet, are luminous, strange and urgent, like the early work of Jeanette Winterson in their myth-blending, but completely contemporary. Time seems to be the big literary theme of this decade, and Smith's books are passionate, poetic attempts to capture humanity in the face of time out of whack, whether through climate change or the daily structures of corporate contempt.

I also loved *Taboo*, by two-time Miles Franklin winner Kim Scott. As the Noongar characters travel by bus to a Western Australian massacre place, Scott combines road trip and gothic into a novel that, like Smith's, galvanises with its intelligence, imaginative daring and heart. I also found myself revisiting Masuji Ibuse's *Black Rain*, his deeply human portrait of a family and city in the wake of the Hiroshima bombing; its portrait of the horror of the nuclear bomb is devastating and timely, more than 50 years after its first publication in 1965. My nonfiction pick is Richard Lloyd Parry's *Ghosts of the Tsunami*, a forensic account of why only one school in the disaster zone suffered losses during the 2011 Japan tsunami and a moving portrait of those left behind to face the unthinkable. I was delighted by Vanessa Berry's gently melancholy *Mirror Sydney*, a series of itineraries through a shadow Sydney of old theme parks and forgotten dreams, which brought parts of my lost childhood city back to life.

David Free

Writer and critic

After the shock of last year's Trump moment, which made you wonder if writing still had any point at all, 2017 proved books won't go down without a fight. An invigorating genre began emerging this year: a spate of books contemplating the crisis of democracy in America, but not just in America, and proposed strategies for a fightback. Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* is a memorable book of this type. Brief and deliberately startling, it urges beneficiaries of democracy to defend and revitalise their inherited institutions, instead of passively permitting their decay. "To make history," Snyder observes, "young Americans will have to know some." Kurt Andersen's *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire* is a far more sprawling book. Andersen began writing it well before the events of 2016, but his persuasive argument that American irrationality began with the Pilgrims, and never went away, suggests Donald Trump was more a culmination than an anomaly. Philip Collins's *When They Go Low, We Go High: Speeches that Shape the World* isn't just a fine primer on the history of rhetoric; it mounts a rousing general argument that liberal democracy is the last and best word in political philosophy. On purely literary grounds, though, my book of the year was Martin Amis's *The Rub of Time*, which shows the great stylist and provocateur in peak form.

Gideon Haigh

Journalist and author

Many, if not most, writers harbour a notion of themselves as neglected or misunderstood. Few can have so expertly skewered this fantasy as Austrian playwright Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931), whose previously unpublished novella *Late Fame* was released this year by *The New York Review of Books*. One day, office worker Edouard

Saxberger returns home to find a young man waiting with the question: “Are you Saxberger the poet?” On the basis of a slight volume of youthful verse published decades earlier, he has become the pin-up of a literary circle styling themselves The Hope of Young Vienna. His taste of celebrity is comic, rueful, absurd and universal by turns. The most provocative work of nonfiction I read was *Private Government*, a collection of lectures by philosopher Elizabeth Anderson that argues corporations in their labour relations have grown as coercive and authoritarian as any tyranny. The examples of corporate power and its abuse are American; the arguments are universal.

Lincoln In The Bardo by George Saunders

Ashley Hay

Novelist

Presuming that loads of people have already urged you to read George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo* — it’s stunning — I’m co-opting a Stella lens to list some extraordinary books by extraordinary Australian female writers. Jesse Blackadder’s *Sixty Seconds* is a poignant triptych of family grief and redemption that sees the author’s prose leap to a new level of magnificence. Krissy Kneen’s *An Uncertain Grace*, too, shows a writer taking transformative bounds in the story she tells — interlinked iterations of the future woven with the science and poetry of desire, sentience and, sometimes, jellyfish — and the beauty of its words. Heather Rose’s *The Museum of Modern Love* transfixed me with its exploration of love, performance and creativity, built around a powerful evocation of performance artist Marina Abramovic. Kate Cole-Adams’s *Anaesthesia* propelled me towards new ways of thinking about thinking itself: experience and consciousness and how we make in and make up this world. And my pitch-perfect summer-read suggestion? Lisa Shanahan’s *The Grand, Genius Summer of Henry Hoobler*; a warm and perfectly rendered version of life at eight, with a bike to learn to ride, a beach to camp at and a family to laugh with: the beginning of so many things.

Stephen Loosley

Visiting fellow, US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney

William Faulkner’s words apply in the best of our literature. The past is, indeed, never dead. It is not even past. This is driven home in John le Carre’s *A Legacy of Spies*, where the Circus is in danger of being overwhelmed by the descendants of Alec Leamas, le Carre’s most convincing spy. However, the most compelling novel of 2017 must surely be Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, where the savage cruelty of American slavery is eclipsed by the magic and fantasy of the escape. The past remains a constant on the 38th Parallel on the Korean Peninsula, where the war of 1950-53 has never been resolved. Immersed in those times, TR Fehrenbach’s *This Kind of War* graphically tells the tale of the North’s invasion and the UN “police action” that followed. Where it all began a century ago is recaptured by Catherine Merridale brilliantly in *Lenin on the Train*, which retraces Vladimir Lenin’s 1917 journey from Swiss exile to St Petersburg soviet. *Talleyrand in London*, by Linda Kelly, is the eloquent diplomatic dispatch of the year. Finally, Troy Bramston’s *Paul Keating* is an outstanding political biography, while JD Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* provides the most insightful explanation of Donald Trump’s triumph in the blighted communities of the American mid-west.

A Legacy Of Spies by John leCarre

Alex Miller

Novelist

Carl Seelig’s *Walks With Walser* is one of the most beautiful and satisfying books I’ve read in years. Seelig, like his subject and the companion of his walks, proves to be a consummate artist of the short literary mode. Each walk, each meeting with his friend and hero, is a perfect gem, often profound and deeply moving, humorous or biting, honest, flawed and fearful, a whole life and its confusions, its beauties and its simple joys and moments of despair, the charged melancholy of the human condition in the face of nature’s persistence, it is all here in this small volume of less than 200 precious pages. I was so enthralled with the pleasure of reading Seelig’s book that I abandoned my own work to be alone with it. How awful it is to finish such a book! To have to leave the company of such friends! One cannot live and write without love and go unpunished. The recorded conversations during the

walks between these two remarkable friends are rich with such examples of Walser's unpretentious wisdom: calmly and modestly going one's own way is the surest path to happiness.

Louis Nowra

Writer

Throughout the decades Iain Sinclair has written about London, exploring its reality and myths through solo walks or with companions. *The Last London* is his swan song and, like his other marvellous books, is a brilliant evocation of this great metropolis. Yuri Slezkine's *The House of Government* is an exhaustive and exhausting history of a huge Moscow apartment building that housed communist officials and their families who were eventually killed or jailed during Stalin's purges. A frightening and true story of privilege and horror. *The Diary of a Bookseller*; Shaun Bythell's diary of a year selling and buying second-hand books in Wigtown, Scotland, is funny and poignant. His rueful observations take in his struggles with the brutal Amazon juggernaut, his eccentric staff and daily interactions with a mix of customers who include the clods, the curious, the rude and the decidedly odd. A must for book lovers.

Peter Pierce

Literary critic

Getting old affords the chance to re-encounter classics that one first read when too young. Thus I went back to two great French novels: Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* and Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. Back home, the funniest novel by an old hand was Robert Drewe's *Whipbird*, while Susan Fealy's *Flutes of Milk* was a fine verse debut. Best of the grand narrative histories were Peter Cozzens's *The Earth is Weeping* (the American Indian wars) and Richard Evans's *The Pursuit of Power (Europe 1815-1914)*. Discoveries in detective and spy fiction respectively were series by Tana French (set in Dublin; start with *Faithful Place*, also a grim incisive study of family) and Mick Herron (London, M15, kicked off by *The Slow Horses*). George Saunders won the Man Booker Prize for *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a work of daring and strangeness that impelled one to go deeper into his essays and short fiction. Elizabeth Strout's *My Name is Lucy Barton* can also begin a happy journey through a funny yet tough dissection of provincial life in America. Dark horse for me was Canadian Heather O'Neill's novel, *The Lonely Hearts Hotel*. The best literary (and psycho-medical) biography I read was Kay Redfield Jamison's of *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire*.

Felicity Plunkett

Poet and editor

I read *Winter*, the second novel in Ali Smith's proposed seasonal quartet, surrounded by crickets, cricket and mangoes, immersed in a parallel icy world with its bad news cycle ("like walking around in a blizzard the whole time") and its frosty and ossified lives. Just how heat, **green** and courage unfurl despite these conditions is part of Smith's genius, along with her delightful digressive energy and imaginative spark. Arundhati Roy's sprawling *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a demanding and compelling assemblage of "a shattered story" bearing witness to histories lost in that same news cycle. Michelle de Kretser's *The Life to Come* is magnificently crafted and absorbing. *The Correspondence of Paul Celan and Ilana Shmueli* illuminates the making of Celan's late poems. Flakes and sketches of poems flicker between the two writers in a correspondence Celan evokes when he writes: "Through you I translate you over to me." Mythic and fictive, Reinhard Kleist's *Nick Cave: Mercy on Me* is a swashbuckling graphic confabulation of Nick Cave's universe. Next, 1400 pages of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, meticulously edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil.

Paul Keating by Troy Bramston

Mandy Sayer

Writer

This year I've been particularly impressed by debut Australian novels. *The Town*, by Sean Prescott, is a wildly original tale about a young writer living in a small town of the central west of NSW, who is writing a book about

the disappearing towns of that region. The tone of the story is sustained and mesmeric, as it examines the unthinking rituals of our everyday lives, and our complex relationships with the past. It's also very funny. *Bridget Crack*, by Rachel Leary, inverts the bushranging myths of Australia by narrating the novel from the point of view of a female outlaw struggling through the rugged terrain of Tasmania. Leary's descriptions of the beautiful yet brutal landscapes are breathtaking, and the ending is as restrained as is it inevitable. *Dancing Home*, by Paul Collis, is a rollicking ride through NSW, as we follow an indigenous man recently freed from jail, Blackie, and his two mates, who have stolen a car and are heading back to Dubbo to avenge the cop who falsely charged him and had him imprisoned. The narrative is so agile it can embrace references to Fanon, Shakespeare, Keats, ancestral ghosts, Dreamtime myths, amphetamines, pyromania and familial loyalties. I look forward to the second novels of each of these authors.

Gretchen Shirm

Author and critic

Early in the year I discovered Claire Louise Bennett's unusually extraordinary *Pond*. Described as a fractured novella, it follows the day-to-day life of a young woman living alone in a thatched cottage on the west coast of Ireland. Bennett's slim book is an eccentric masterpiece, in which the minutia of everyday life are placed under a magnifying glass, described in intimate, sensuous detail. It may well be as close as fiction comes to showing us what it is like to live as another person. After reading Jennifer Down's first novel *Our Magic Hour* last year, I was keen to read her short story collection *Pulse Points*, which showcases her range and talent. Though Down's stories travel from regional Victoria to Middle America and Japan, they are distinctly Australian and overwhelmingly about class. The standout novel for me was Michael Sala's ferocious family drama *The Restorer*. In a year that made me think again and again about why men do terrible things, Sala's emotional tour-de-force dares to confront some of those causes and the implications of violence at a social level.

Beejay Silcox

Writer and critic

Had I not been asked to review Sarah Sentilles's *Draw Your Weapons* for these pages, I wouldn't have read it; I would have skimmed the blurb and scoffed at its idealism. "What difference can one person make in this beautiful, imperfect, and imperilled world?" Sentilles asks. This of all years, I am mightily thankful I was challenged to confront that question, and form my own answer. Her book is a vital antidote to political despondency and a testament to the transformative power of art. "We are not a normal family," Patricia Lockwood writes in magnificent understatement. Her father is a Catholic priest, her mother is a one-woman risk assessment team, and her sister "a highly literate female Tarzan". Lockwood's memoir, *Priestdaddy*, is gloriously acerbic and irreverent, but also quietly unsettling: "Part of what you have to figure out in this life, Who would I be if I hadn't been frightened? What hurt me, and what would I be if it hadn't?" Hard questions to ask; much harder to answer. Finally, a hearty thank you to this year's Miles Franklin judges, whose shortlist introduced me to Ryan O'Neill's *Their Brilliant Careers*. His canny satire — which rewards literary enthusiasts — is riven with joy.

Draw Your Weapons by Sarah Sentilles

Diane Stubbings

Literary critic

This year I caught up with Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. One of the most compelling books I've read in a while, it charts the impact on ordinary Russians of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Full of hope and disillusionment, humour and anger, it's a moving testament to the lives history leaves in its wake. Another highlight was *Days Without End*, Sebastian Barry's tender love story set during the American civil war. Barry has a striking ability to capture the shifting moods of a landscape, and he embeds within the novel's central romance a truth and an ease that defies the extraordinary circumstances under which it blooms. Irish novelist Sara Baume's second novel, *A Line Made by Walking*, also impressed. A delicate piece of writing, it tells of a young artist who, suffering from depression, anchors herself to life by mentally cataloguing the artworks that have influenced her. Finally, Steven Carroll's *A New England Affair* was an inspired addition to his series of novels probing the life and work of TS Eliot.

Louise Swinn

Publisher and critic

Because it's hard to narrow down, I've picked the two books that I was incredibly reluctant to put down. Briohny Doyle's *Adult Fantasy* explores the difficulty of modern adulthood for the millennial. Doyle articulates the puzzlement and strangeness of living in a world where the normal markers for adulthood have eroded or moved wholesale beyond reach, striking the balance between frank memoir and discursive cultural criticism without becoming indulgent or facile. She explains the economic system that has allowed these conditions to prevail, recalibrating the burden so that it isn't so much something that needs fixing, as something that requires acknowledgment and acceptance, a shift in the way we think and talk about adulthood. Michelle de Kretser's *The Life to Come* is a novel I just didn't want to finish. It has an ambitious structure that never becomes hard work. De Kretser's unapologetic arch wit is so refreshing. Her observations of contemporary life and those who live it — them, you, me — are the observations of someone with 20/20 vision who's just taken a truth-telling serum. Fiction of this calibre, so delightfully opinionated and packed with one-liners, is such excellent company, like carrying a warm and intelligent friend around.

Ashleigh Wilson

Arts editor

As much as I'd like to nominate Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*, a modern fable teeming with life, the master storyteller falls short with two whoppers: an Australian accent that sounds like a New Zealand caricature and a chess error most amateurs would spot at once. So from Rushdie's magical world to the world around us: my highlights are on the nonfiction shelf, two very different books full of ideas that linger long after the pages end. Sarah Sentilles's *Draw Your Weapons* is an intriguing meditation on violence, imagery and language.

I'm still coming to terms with Michael Finkel's *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit*. Christopher Knight wandered into the Maine woods and stayed there, alone, for 27 years. This book has plenty of details about how he survived and evaded detection. But while Knight is reluctant to explore the deeper meanings of his withdrawal — he wants to sever all connection from everything, including his own story — Finkel's account leaves us with profound questions about socialisation and personality, how we construct our identity in relation to those around us, and what happens when we take that mirror away.

The Stranger in The Woods by Michael Finkel

Rohan Wilson

Novelist

I was lucky enough to meet Nicola Lagioia in Toronto recently and hearing him talk about his home town, Bari, and the huge disparities that exist between the wealthy and the working classes where he grew up grabbed my attention. Who doesn't love a bit of class warfare? His book *Ferocity* is a vivisection of an Italian city that brings these economic and social forces down to a human level. It opens with a young woman, Clara, wandering naked, drugged and distressed along a highway. In a sort of *Twin Peaks* narrative style, Clara's apparent suicide becomes the axle around which the novel spins. The questions mount. Did she really kill herself? What did her corrupt, property developing father have to do with it? Why was she pursuing affairs outside her marriage? We learn the secrets of Clara's life through the many (many!) people whose lives she touched: old boyfriends, magazine editors, morticians, the wives of powerful men. It can feel like you're sifting through the clippings of police investigation at times, but the mystery is so compelling that you just want the next clue. A shocking story, and viciously told.

Ed Wright

Writer and critic

I enjoyed being surprised by a couple of genre benders, Claire Coleman's *Terra Nullius*, an invasion novel with a twist, and Jane Rawson's *From the Wreck*, a historical novel featuring a shapeshifting alien octopus. Both are fine arguments against the idea that the novel form is exhausted. Shaun Prescott's *The Town*, the story of a disappearing

town in central western NSW, was a fantastic debut. George Saunders's short story collection *Pastoralia* is hilarious, fresh and wise. I've been dabbling in reading young adult fiction and was impressed by Scott Westerfield's *Uglies* series as well as the John Marsden classic *Some Much to Tell You*. In poetry I've been reading bitsily, dipping into works by Philip Salom, Michael Farrell, Melinda Smith and the late John Ashbery. In nonfiction I thought George Megalogenis's *Australia's Second Chance* was almost essential reading about Australia, its place in the world and its future. I've been reading about emotions too. Adam Phillips's *Unforbidden Pleasures* is a wonderful, psychoanalytically founded exploration of why we privilege the pleasures of transgression over those such as gardening, while William Ian Miller's *An Anatomy of Disgust* is a brilliant account of the critical role this acquired emotion plays in our interaction with ourselves and the world.

Fiona Wright

Writer and poet

My favourite poetry books this year are hugely different from each other, which is testament to the wildness and variety of our contemporary poetry scene: Michael Farrell's *I Love Poetry* is a romp of a book, witty and occasionally absurd, interested in the kitsch iconography of this country, and its uncomfortable politics as well; whereas Elizabeth Allen's *Present* is a slower, more meditative book, by turns sharply funny and achingly sad, and concerned with a personal, ordinary experience of the world. In nonfiction, I loved Briohny Doyle's *Adult Fantasy* for the way in which it speaks to so many of the often-unconscious anxieties of our (shared) generation in a world so different from the one in which our parents came of age; and Jessica Friedmann's *Things That Helped*, which shifts between ordinary objects and individual artworks and the wider world, in its discussion of post-partum depression. My favourite work of fiction this year was Michelle de Kretser's *The Life to Come*, easily her funniest work to date (especially where it pokes fun at our obsession with food and elaborate, ancient-grained meals) and also wide-ranging, almost epic, in its examination of its characters' lives.

STEPHEN ROMEI

Literary Editor [@PairRaggedClaws](#)

Stephen Romei is The Australian's literary editor. He blogs at A Pair of Ragged Claws and can also be found on Twitter and Facebook. When pressed, he nominates Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as his favourite book, though sometimes it's *Moby Dick*.