

What do people read?

PENNY DOMMISSE

Librarian, Goodwood Library

Has anyone noticed how many men flatly refuse to read books written by female novelists? For a long time I put it down to chauvinism. But it is not that simple. A reader who shall be nameless mentioned to me that Dick Francis must be a pseudonym because he writes 'just like a woman'. 'What makes you think that?' I asked. 'His villains are so vindictive, only a woman could have created them', he said.

Be that as it may, John Francome, whose tales are also set in the horseracing world, is now pipping Dick Francis at the popularity posts.

For pure malice it would be hard to beat Fay Weldon's **The life and loves of a she-devil**. Weldon has a small following in our library, but nothing compared with the enthusiasm shown the creators of serial killers. Among the most ardent devotees are women. I was a huge fan until I read **Birdman** by Mo Hayder. If authors like Hayder, Thomas Harris, Boris Starling and Jeffrey Deaver were competing to see who could create the most brutal, blood-soaked scenes, Mo Hayder would be a hands down winner.

Those with a taste for heart-warming rather than spine-chilling tales are fortunate in the wide variety of choices open to them. Readers of Adriana Trigiani's first two books, **Big Stone Gap** and its sequel, **Big Cherry Holler** can look forward to her third novel, **Milk glass moon**, which is not yet available in our libraries. Unlike many of our readers I did not like Laurie Graham's **Perfect meringues**. To me it was 'chick lit' for the middle aged.

However, her latest book, **The future homemakers of America** is wonderful. The story spans the decades from the fifties to the nineties and revolves around the lives and loves of a group of American women whose husbands are test pilots on an air force base in England. The course of their future when they leave the air base is bound together by strands of friendship which

stand the test of time, separation, love and betrayal.

Another new book, **Waltzing through flaws** by Paula Sharp with its message of how fanaticism and inflexibility can lead to tragic consequences gave me much food for thought. Fanny Flagg of **Fried green tomatoes** fame has a new book, **Standing in the rainbow**, which is a must read.

A relative newcomer to our library is author Dorothea Benton Frank. I particularly enjoyed her second book, **Plantation**, which reminded me of the **Divine secrets of the Ya-Ya sisterhood**.

Lately it seems to be the fashion to have the word 'bee' in a title. One which stands out is **The secret life of bees** by Sue Monk Kidd. Set in America it is about a young girl who, in search of her mother, winds up living with a family of black women in the Deep South. Discomforting racial issues and unresolved family relationships are the chief concerns.

A book which made such an impression on me that I read it twice is Gretta Mulrooney's **Araby**. A son who returns to Ireland and his dying mother's bedside reflects upon a childhood dominated and mortified by the outrageous antics of his mother. Hilarious episodes seared with underlying pathos make this story linger in one's memory.

An extraordinary book which men like is **The officers' ward** by Marc Dugain, translated from the French. It is about a soldier who suffers a disfiguring facial accident on his way to the First World War and his time spent in a hospital ward with others as badly or worse injured than he is. A story one would expect to be melancholy and depressing leaves one filled with hope and optimism.

Talking of warfare, Afrikaans Mills and Boon translations are fast becoming a source of in-house hostilities. Senior citizens can be seen using tactics Rudolf Straeuli would applaud as they ruck and maul their way to the book trolley before

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emerging triumphant, brandishing their trophies in arthritic fingers.

'Oh, but these stories bring back happy memories', one old dear confessed.

Odd behaviour I have noticed among readers is the habit of first examining an author's photograph. If they don't like the face, they won't read the book. And who coined the phrase don't judge a book by its cover? Surely not a librarian. A high percentage of readers select a novel because of its cover. For some a burning building or a sinking ship will suffice, for others a romantic country scene or an attractive colour scheme is reason enough to take out a book.

That one cannot neatly divide the reading tastes of men and women were brought home to me by a young fellow who regularly reserves best-sellers. Courtroom dramas by John Grisham, thrillers by James Grippando, David Michie, Greg Illes and Phillip Margolin are among his favourites. Imagine my surprise when he urged me to read **Jewels** by Danielle Steel, saying it is one of the best books he has ever read. Then, he returned on several occasions to insist on

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my opinion of that book, which I have no intention, ever, of reading. Eventually with a straight face and fingers crossed I said: 'It's a charming story.'

Why did I lie? Well, although it is soppy and sentimental twaddle, I, like Danielle Steel, prefer not to be vindictive.