

# BOOKS ...

## in which to lose yourself

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### Book Selector

With summer and the festive season comes the time for holiday reading lists. I am not sure if anyone actually reads them, or finds them useful, but if you want some ideas about what to read over the summer holidays or, perhaps more importantly, what to recommend to patrons, here are some suggestions. I have tried to include a mixture of titles, hoping to cater for a variety of reading tastes. Most of the books will have arrived in the libraries over the last year or so, but I have added some earlier titles too - books that may have been overlooked, but also books that were popular but that perhaps do not spring to mind immediately because it seems like everyone's already read them. Obviously the bulk of the books are ones that I have read and enjoyed, and can recommend.

High on my list of favourite books read over the past year is Susan Hill's **The various haunts of men**. She is a well-known writer with many novels and awards to her name (the adaptation of her ghost story **The woman in black** has been running in London for 18 years), but this is her first crime novel and the first in a trilogy set in the English cathedral town of Lafferton and featuring the enigmatic policeman, Detective Chief Inspector Simon Serrailer. He is an attractive, intriguing character and the reader is aware of him most of the time, but, strangely enough, he does not really take centre stage in the story, and actually is absent from the scene for most of the book. A serial killer has abducted four people and it is DS Freya Graffham, who has recently moved to the area, who leads the search for the victims. This is controlled, skillful writing that keeps the reader enthralled. The ending, when it came, was completely unexpected, shocking in fact, and left me impatient for the sequel. Fortunately, I had a chance to read a pre-publication proof of **The pure in heart**

so did not have to wait too long. In this one a little boy is kidnapped as he waits outside his garden gate for his lift to school. Both these Serrailer crime novels are wonderful reads; I loved them both and would recommend them to anyone but particularly to PD James readers.

Another favourite, but something completely different, is **Eventide**, Kent Haruf's latest novel and the sequel to his critically-acclaimed and best-selling **Plainsong**. It continues the story of the elderly McPheron brothers and the young Victoria Roubideaux (who is now off to college), but introduces a whole new cast of characters too, interweaving their stories seamlessly. The setting once again is small-town rural Colorado, vividly evoked in Haruf's clean, spare prose. But this is no rural idyll, life can be harsh and usually is in the small community of Holt. Haruf manages to make the reader care about almost all his characters and reluctant to leave them at the end of this captivating book.

Something in a similar vein and that will appeal to Haruf fans is Mark Spragg's **An unfinished life**. Haruf has called him: 'one of the truest and most original new voices in American letters.' Set in rural Wyoming it tells the story of the tense reunion between a rancher and his estranged daughter-in-law. He blames her for his son's death, but is persuaded to let her stay when she turns up on his doorstep with his young granddaughter, Griff, in tow. This really is very good and a wonderful read which should appeal to readers of contemporary westerns too. A Miramax movie version starring Robert Redford and Jennifer Lopez was shown at the Sithengi Festival this year, but I would advise people to read the novel first; it is a real gem.

And now something for the romance readers, although Nora Roberts's latest is certainly not a genre romance; in fact I am not sure it can be called a romance at all. Incredibly popular; she has really improved as a writer over the years. **Northern lights** is set in a small town in Alaska where

big-city Baltimore policeman, Nate Burke, has moved to take up the position of Chief of Police. Roberts seems to have borrowed a bit from the popular television series, **Northern exposure (Goeimôre, Alaska)**, and the result is a thoroughly entertaining read. A cast of colourful and eccentric secondary characters, her evocation of the Alaskan landscape, and just enough humour, suspense and, yes, romance, make this something for not only her fans.

Two other books with an Alaskan setting spring to mind. Sarah Quigley's first novel **Shot** is described as 'a novel of love, comedy - and almost dying for a donut...' The story begins with the heroine/narrator having her ear shot off, caught in the crossfire of a drive-by, drug-feud shooting. We learn about her life through flashbacks as she recuperates and undergoes plastic surgery. She realises that she no longer wants to be a stand-up comic, and starts to recreate her life: leaving California and her boyfriend, buying a camera, and travelling to Alaska to photograph people. It is a wonderfully absorbing and enjoyable novel. The other book is Mitchell Smith's **Due north** about a young widow struggling to carry on living in her cabin in the harsh Alaskan climate. The previous year, her husband had been eaten by a grizzly bear, while she watched helplessly. She leaves to visit her sister and dying mother in Seattle, but finds that she longs for the wilds. This is a moving story, both poignant and humorous. These books have been around for a while but both are still worth recommending.

Moving from the icy north to the icy south, we find another romance worth recommending. The setting for **Sun at midnight** by Rosie Thomas is a small research base in Antarctica. **The Bookseller's** description: 'This is terrific. The Antarctic backdrop is stunning, it is intelligent, exciting - and a gripping romance. What more could one want?'

Something a bit more literary and that I would describe as stunning is Kazuo Ishiguro's **Never let me go**. It is a wonderfully engrossing, elegantly-written novel that I can recommend wholeheartedly. I won't describe the contents more than to say that in it a 31-year-old woman recalls her childhood spent in the cloistered, privileged school of Hailsham. While it is disturbing it is not harrowing, and one comes away glad to have read this beautifully-rendered story. It was definitely my favourite to win this year's Man Booker Prize.

Zoe Sharp is a relatively new writer. Our reviewer described **Hard knocks** as: 'The third title featuring Charlie (Charlotte) Fox, ex-army, SAS trained, physically tough but emotionally vulnerable, with some traumatic events in her past. Working undercover at a training school for bodyguards in Germany, Charlie has to cope with kidnappings, murder and mayhem.' We also have the second Charlie Fox book in stock. **Riot act** is a gripping crime thriller with a realistic, gritty urban setting. I thoroughly enjoyed both of them and would certainly recommend them for holiday reading. It is just unfortunate that we never saw the first book, **Killer instinct**.

For all those Dick Francis fans out there, I strongly recommend Lyndon Stacey's books. There are four novels so far, all horsey thrillers which I think really fit the bill for those looking for a Francis-style read. All are good reads and I think they actually have a bit more substance than some of the Francis books and, of course, a more modern feel. **Cut throat**, set on the British show-jumping circuit, is pacy, action-packed and enjoyable. It is also a bit over the top, and our hero, American rider, Ross Wakelin, a bit too good to be true - but it certainly makes great entertainment. The author is an animal portrait painter and the main character in the second book, **Blindfold**, is Gideon Blake, animal portrait painter and animal behaviourist. The hero in **Deadfall** is Lincoln Tremayne, heir to a viscountcy, manager of his father's Dorset estate, and competitive rider hoping to be selected to ride on the British Olympic three-day eventing team.

The hero in **Outside chance** (on order) is Ben Copperfield, a freelance journalist specialising in horse and horse-racing news. The story he is pursuing is the kidnapping of a racehorse, the favourite to win the upcoming Cheltenham Gold Cup. All Stacey's books are exciting, very readable horsey thrillers - just the thing to be enjoyed on the beach.

Another book ideal for the beach is Fiona Walker's latest, **Tongue in cheek**. Her books with their mix of romance and humour, and a kind of Jilly Cooperish appeal, are popular. The Cooper formula of family relationships, sex, love, horses, lots of drinking, and loads of jokey dialogue and puns has worked well for Walker; she has developed quite a following. This new novel is the first in a

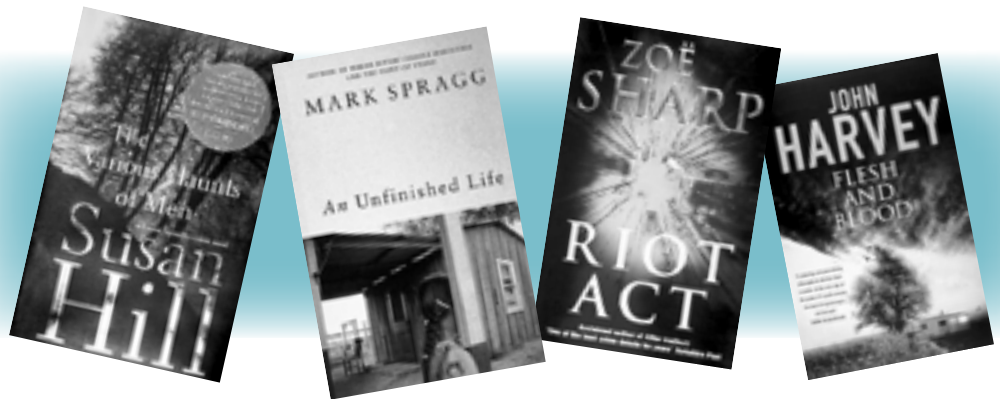
series called **The Lodes chronicles**, about the people who live in the fictional Lodes Valley. She introduces a wide cast of characters (some colourful and eccentric), but focuses mainly on three women who move to the valley: a young schoolteacher, a socialite and a dressage rider. I was pleased to find that there is more about horses and riding in this one. **The Bookseller** describes it as 'a great blockbuster...full of rural romance, comic capers, and sex with other people's husbands.' For those wanting something light and entertaining but where the reader can really get involved in the lives of the characters this is ideal. I think it her best to date.

There are a number of new crime novels to recommend. Fans of John Harvey's **Charlie Resnick** series will be pleased to know that he has started a new series with

the victims; the other an informant he was meeting in a remote spot. Sharp has to find the murderer but at the same time keep her past a secret. This is gripping stuff. **Phoenix** is Connor's first novel, but I hope it won't be his last.

Worth mentioning here are Gay Longworth's enjoyable crime stories: **Dead alone** and **The unquiet dead**. **The Bookseller's** description of **Dead alone**: 'Chick lit meets crime in this tale of sassy, sexy, no-nonsense London female, motorbike-riding DI Jessie Driver. Urban madcaps and violence temper the humour.' She is on the trail of a vicious killer who appears to be targeting B-list celebrities, but then finds herself becoming involved with one of the celebrities who is also a suspect. This is great fun.

Moving away from crime to other



the same setting. The first book is **Flesh and blood**. Resnick does appear in it, but only as a minor character. The main character is Frank Elder, a retired police detective who goes to live alone in Cornwall after his wife leaves him. With little to do he starts obsessing over one of his old cases, the unsolved disappearance of a 16-year-old girl. When a girl is murdered and Elder starts receiving mocking postcards from the killer he is drawn into doing a bit of investigating of his own. This is multi-layered, gripping and completely absorbing; this is Harvey at the top of his form. The sequel **Ash and bone** has been ordered too.

Also worth recommending is a debut novel from John Connor, a British criminal lawyer working in the Crown Prosecution Service. **Phoenix**, a police procedural set in West Yorkshire, has an intriguing central character. Karen Sharp is an ex-M15 undercover agent now working as a police detective. The main thrust of the book concerns a double murder investigation. Her partner, Detective Sergeant Leech, is one of

genres, another favourite of mine was **The last crossing** by the multi-award-winning Canadian author, Guy Vanderhaeghe. It is a literary western that should appeal to fans of McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy, Luke Watson and Thomas Eidson, as well as those who enjoy a good historical novel.

A new Le Carré is always something to be welcomed and this new one does not disappoint (although it may surprise some of his many fans). **Absolute friends** reveals more of the author's own political views than his previous books, in particular his feelings about the war in Iraq. In **Time** magazine it was called 'a searing, startling novel...[that] shows us without sentimentality or self-righteousness that a deeply moving, deeply personal story can be alloyed with a powerful political argument.'

Readers who enjoy spy stories should try Charles Cumming's books. His accomplished debut novel, **A spy by nature**, is an espionage thriller, but not a big action book. The setting is contemporary London and the narrator a 24-year-old LSE graduate



in a dead-end job. In his second, **The hidden man**, two brothers try to learn more about their father's life and his death. He had turned up out of the blue after 20 years, started to tell them about his secret life as a spy and then was murdered. These are both gripping, multi-layered novels which I recommend highly. He really does write well.

Another new name in this genre is David Wolstencroft, the creator of the most enjoyable and original British Broadcasting Corporation television spy series called

good a story teller he is. It is a wonderful, unforgettable fantasy trilogy which, although written for children, has immense crossover appeal. We have copies in both our juvenile and adult collections. (These are also useful to have at hand if there are bored children or teenagers around.) Another book to consider is **Eragon**, the first in a fantasy sequence by a precocious new author (he was only 15 when he wrote it). This, and its sequel, **Eldest**, were bought for our teenage collection, but both definitely have adult appeal.



**Spooks.** His debut thriller is a great read, described in the **Observer** as 'a rollercoaster ride of a book which manages to be both a traditional spy story and a hip tale of friendship and trust between two seemingly ordinary blokes working in a photo kiosk in a London underground station.'

I have long been a fan of Russell Banks. His powerful new novel **The darling** is described in the **Bookseller** as: 'absorbing literary novel by a big American writer (a Pulitzer Prize finalist) exploring modern-day Africa. Hannah, in her youth a privileged drop-out who joined a terrorist group, flees the FBI and goes to live in Liberia in West Africa. There she marries an ambitious politician - but a terrible act of desertion takes place.' Although not likely to be wildly popular it is compulsively readable and may appeal to those who enjoyed **The poisonwood bible**.

While on holiday earlier this year I re-read Philip Pullman's **His dark materials** trilogy. One of my companions (a non-fantasy reader) had brought a copy of **Northern lights** along at a friend's recommendation and was absolutely loving it. After reading that, it was a frantic struggle to get the next two books. All three were devoured by us and then passed along to the next beach-house. It brought back to me just how

I hope the following reading list proves useful. I have added brief annotations to those titles not mentioned in this article or in the book review section of this journal.