

Sunday Sundowners

Nostalgia rules!

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The Sundowners have all been caught up with balancing the whirlwind thrills of family, work and social commitments during the festive season and school vacations. What reading we've done has been sporadic, brief spells paging through magazines rather than thoughtful literary excursions to relax and evaluate our places in the universe.

What is it about the juxtaposition of 31 December and 1 January that drives us all into a frenzy of compiling lists of 'Best of ...', 'Top 10 ...' and 'Best Top 10 ...' of the past year and the hopeless wish list of New Year's resolutions for the next year? We could just as easily tidy up our lives every quarter with shorter lists or wait a while and do them every decade. So in the absence of the gathering of kindred reading friends, I had to improvise and ask for ... you guessed it! The Sundowners had to e-mail or even SMS me their 'favourite reads ever'.

So here I am, a solitary Sundowner on my verandah, admiring Chapman's Peak with its wreath of low clouds, dodging the little umbrella in my glass. (One must maintain certain standards of civilised behaviour after all.)

The literary updates that Akeela sends out so promptly are crisp and professional, keeping us ahead of the market we serve. Our book discussions at work, both formal and informal, give us a sense of the scope and range of our product. But what I have in my small collection of hurried cryptic electronic messages from my friends reveals more about them than about the books themselves.

My own 'best of all time' is a toss-up between Jean Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs** and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim**. The first one is for pure sentiment: fearing spiders, I had refused to read it. My mother sneakily enticed my interest by dropping hints of one or two key

passages while talking with my aunt in my presence until I could no longer contain my curiosity. Years later she confessed the ploy, and it will always be a symbol of her gentle guiding influence on my life. *Kim* gave me India with its turbulent colourful history and complex colonial relationship with Britain, both similar to and so different from that of South Africa.

Kay has been generous with her contribution – four titles. Her best ever is Gene Stratton-Porter's *Keeper of the bees* (Indiana University Press, 1925), a heart-warming story of a First World War veteran and his recovery from the horrors of that Great War. Most of us are more familiar with *Freckles** but all her work is known to older generations, and the nostalgia of that apparently simpler, more innocent time is enduring. Introducing grandchildren to these historical novels might strike a chord with them. The *Billabong** series by Mary Grant Bruce is of the same era but set in Australia.

Asked for 'best reads', all contributors became hesitant and Kay was no exception. She would rather offer two 'highly recommended' authors: Jojo Moyes and Noel Barber. From Moyes, she has recently found *The horse dancer* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2009) featuring the Lippizzaner horses. The writer's personal knowledge of horses gives an authentic voice to the content and the story is both sad and inspiring. Barber's *A farewell to France* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1983) is one of several of his works combining history and romance, this time World War II and the German occupation of France. The story is woven around the Champagne region and the fortunes of a family of vintners.

By contrast, Kay says 'Avoid Kirsten Tranter's *A common loss* (Washington Square Press, 2012)!' Despite an erudite writer and great language, the characters are shallow, unappealing and boring. Don't waste precious time on angst-ridden American navel gazing.

Well, JS started with a caveat – 'I don't usually read fantasy, you know.' So why has he started reading *The Kingkiller chronicle* series

by Patrick Rothfuss? And why can't he stop? The trilogy (what else?) so far comprises **The name of the wind – day one** (DAW Books, 2009) and **The wise man's fear – day two** (DAW Books, 2011). The working title of the third as-yet-unpublished book is *The doors of stone*. According to some reviews Rothfuss has spent over seven years writing his story. When you discover the intricate world he has created and the numerous 'inner' stories within the main theme, it is quite clear why he has no idea when the third book will be completed or published. As with many fantasy series, the first trilogy is just one facet of this new world; other stories will follow but don't hold your breath – Rothfuss will be taking his time to get it just right. To quote the best web sites and reviews, if you enjoyed discovering new worlds in Herbert's *The Dune** sagas and Tolkien's *The Hobbit** and *Lord of the Rings**, you will love this creation.

A bitter-sweet recommendation from JS is **The diving bell and the butterfly** by Jean-Dominique Bauby (Editions Robert Laffont, 1997). Bauby had been France's editor of *Elle*, an energetic sophisticated socialite celebrity when in 1995 he suffered a stroke. Emerging from a 20-day coma, he has 'locked-in' syndrome and can move only his eyes. He eventually learns to communicate by blinking and after 10 months work with a writer; and 200,000 blinks, his memoir is published describing his former active life and his current restricted life. Two days after publication, Bauby dies, leaving us with a precious insight and new perception of life.

Enter 2013 with a bit of a laugh and some questions of your own – dip into **Quirkology** by Richard Wiseman (Basic Books, 2007) or visit the web site *Quirkology.com*. Don't take it or yourself too seriously. Think of Bauby and plan to use this year to explore and read about all things weird and wonderful, and to quote another famous dead person, 'stay foolish'!

**Please note that as the publishers of these titles are many and varied, it is not possible to indicate any one in particular.*

