

Book Reviews



Alice I Have Been
Melanie Benjamin
HarperCollins, 2010
ISBN: 9780732291426
RRP: \$32.99

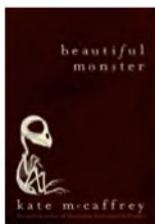
The publication of this historical novel about the 'real' Alice, the young girl who inspired *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is timely considering the current craze for all things Alice. Melanie Benjamin (real name Melanie Hauser) was inspired to write *Alice I Have Been* after seeing an exhibition of Lewis Carroll's (the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) photography at the Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition contained many rather unsettling images of young girls, among them seven-year-old Alice Liddell, daughter of Dean Liddell of Christ Church, Oxford, where Dodgson taught mathematics.

Benjamin researched the friendship between Dodgson and Alice Liddell, the circumstances of the original creation of the story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1862, the unexplained split between Dodgson and the Liddell family a year later, and Alice's adult life, and has combined historical facts and imaginative speculation in *Alice I Have Been*.

The author is strong on descriptions of domestic life and of the landscape of nineteenth-century Oxford, but weaker on dialogue and emotion. For some readers, these overwrought passages will mar what is otherwise an entertaining, highly readable novel.

Suzanne Lewis

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Beautiful Monster
Kate McCaffrey
Fremantle Press, 2010
ISBN: 9781921361982
RRP: \$19.95

Beautiful Monster, the new young adult fiction novel by Australian author Kate McCaffrey, is hardly groundbreaking stuff. Anorexia nervosa has become a commonplace concept for teenagers throughout Australia. Certainly, I found nothing of the "sinister thriller" promised by the media release in the novel. Having said that, *Beautiful Monster* was unexpectedly powerful.

We are introduced to Tessa Edwards on a day that ends with her younger brother's tragic death. Tessa, a fifteen-year old student at the local high school, watches powerlessly as her life falls to pieces around her. Throughout the ordeal, Tessa seeks comfort from the one source of stability in her life – her boyfriend, Ned. Ned is wise; Ned is honest. Ned rapidly undermines Tessa's sense of self-esteem. The path to an eating disorder is steep and swift from there.

Ned, of course, is not real; this imaginary friend represents anorexia's hold over Tessa. While Tessa believes she can control her life through scale readings, Ned's unassailable influence emphasises her ultimate powerlessness. The teenage reader of *Beautiful Monster* will find something she can empathise with in the potent simplicity of McCaffrey's writing. In a society rife with eating disorders, understanding the disease is crucial.

Fiona Keks

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Bright Angel
Isabelle Merlin
Random House Australia, 2010
ISBN: 9781864719635
RRP: \$17.95

Sylvie is a 17 year old girl who has a traumatic experience in

Australia so her parents send her and her older sister Clare to France to stay with their aunt to recover. There she meets 3 boys, one of which is a 5 year old who sees angels and another is his older brother with whom she falls in love.

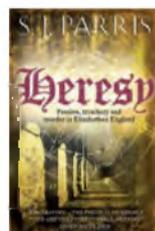
The plot has many interesting twists and is resolved nicely in the end, well-thought-out and well-developed with interesting description of the French town in which it is set and interesting historical references. It seems to be written almost conversationally, which was different and makes the reader feel as if they are being spoken to.

As another added twist the heroine has made YouTube clips that she describes in the book and these are actually available on YouTube and credited to the character. One of the characters does freelance work for GEIPAN, the French UAP research and information group, which investigates unidentified aerospace phenomena (UAP) and the author has included references to GEIPAN including their web address, which is another real life additional reference.

I would suggest that 10-year-olds and up would enjoy this book.

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Heresy
S.J. Parris
HarperCollins Publishers, 2010
ISBN: 9780007317677
RRP: \$32.00

S.J. Parris's *Heresy* is the first novel in a new series of historical thrillers featuring the novel's hero, Giordano Bruno. Set in Elizabethan England, the novel follows Bruno, a former monk who has escaped from Italy after being excommunicated for his

interest in the radical work of scientists like Copernicus, deemed heretical by the Roman Catholic Church. Bruno is now a respected philosopher who has managed to avoid the usual religious divisions, given his excommunicated status. This makes him an ideal political tool for Francis Walsingham, who sends Bruno to Oxford to infiltrate and uncover any Catholic dissension at the college. Bruno's job is made more difficult when several murders occur, all somehow linked to a secret Catholic society.

The distinctive and at times clichéd characters that litter Parris's Oxford each have their own secrets and agendas and it makes for a very beguiling mystery. No feel-good ending is possible when dealing with the moral complexities of religion and informing on friends, and Parris ensures that Bruno must face these challenges and deal with the consequences. The novel remains nonetheless an enjoyable read, with just enough mystery still unresolved to fill a few more books.

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In Lonnie's shadow
Chrissie Michaels
Ford St Publishing, 2010
ISBN: 9781876462918
RRP: \$19.95

Lonnie McGuinness, tired of taking the scraps life doles out, bets his future on the outcome of one illegal horse race round the streets of Melbourne. However, Lonnie soon learns that every action has a consequence and sometimes secrets must be revealed.

In Lonnie's shadow cleverly weaves the theme of artefacts from an archaeological dig into the tale of Lonnie, a young man living tough on the streets of a 19th century Melbourne where not everything is as it seems.

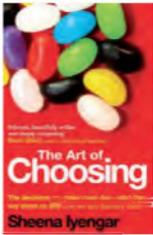
Michaels has written an unflinching narrative of the seedy backstreets, prostitution, and drudgery of Melbourne's 'Little Lon' with layer upon layer of storyline entwining to reveal a tapestry of experiences that young adults will relate to: love, first sexual encounters, abortion, gang warfare, mateship, and transitioning into the workforce.

Like Lonnie's beloved racehorse Trident, this story starts off slowly but steadily gathers momentum as it heads for a fast-paced finish, throwing in a couple of surprises for good measure.

Great historical content, gritty realism, and intriguing storyline make *In Lonnie's shadow* an ideal addition to Young Adult collections in high schools and public libraries.

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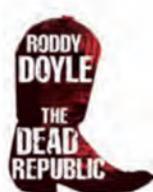


The Art of Choosing
Sheena Iyengar
Little, Brown, 2010
ISBN : 9781408700037
RRP: \$35.00

Our whole lives are a series of choices, ranging from the mundane to the potentially life altering. Most of us are never formally educated or trained in the skills we need to make successful choices. One day we can decide if it's going to be a 'full-fat' or a 'skinny' latte day today, and later the very same day we may decide to sell our house, walk out of a long-term relationship, or even emigrate. We arrive at our decisions informed by all the different cultural, psychological, social, philosophical, spiritual, and even biological impressions and perceptions we have absorbed over a whole lifetime.

Sheena Iyengar, a Professor at Columbia University, is well-placed to explore the notion of choice and its place in our lives, as she has been researching and writing about the topic for many years. Her explorations of several pervasive aphorisms such as: 'Be Yourself!'; 'Follow Your Dreams!'; 'Aim High!' and the like, makes for compelling reading. Iyengar asks us to think, too, about how much manipulation of the social values associated with 'choice' and 'decision making' occurs. Choice is a slippery art form for any of us. This title encourages us to think more fully about our decisions and their outcomes in a complex world.

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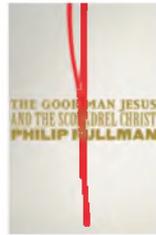
The Dead Republic
Roddy Doyle
Random house, 2010
ISBN 9780224090100
RRP \$32.95

In this third volume of the Henry Smart trilogy, Doyle employs some audacious conceits to complete his tale of one Irish rebel's path through the twentieth century. Smart narrates his own bizarre story, returning and revisiting his past life in Ireland as an authority on the IRA in the entourage of Hollywood director, John Ford. Ford promises and fails to make the, ultimately, successful movie The quiet man as a parable for Smart's life in the IRA. Instead it becomes a portrayal of a saccharine, pastoral non-existent Ireland. Betrayed, Smart stays on unobtrusively in Ireland, yet disconcertingly finds himself enmeshed in the republican machine, idolised as an IRA hero, confused by who is running what in this country.

Although it wanders a little, this is still a flavoursome and robustly engaging

read, pitting an outrageous reality against popular myth.

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The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ
Philip Pullman
Penguin Books, 2010
ISBN: 9781921656194
RRP: \$32.95

Ostensibly, this curious book is a challenge to, or commentary on, notions of truth, history, and Christianity.

The central premise is that Mary has twins – paternity presented as dubious, possibly God, possibly the boy who ogles her down at the well. One twin, Jesus, becomes a famous teacher, is crucified, and dies. The other twin, Christ, covertly chronicles the life of his brother, lives, and participates in a substitution which is passed off as a resurrection. He then strategically rewrites the chronicle to make it miraculous and compelling. He does these things at the instigation of a mysterious stranger who might equally be angelic, demonic, or an undercover agent of some kind. The stranger proposes that there is a 'truth', which is beyond fact or history, that Christ needs to propagate.

Throughout the book Pullman is inconsistent, and this diminishes its impact. Christ is by no means a scoundrel, despite the intentionally provocative title, and the 'de-miracled' Gospel recounts are at odds with an early incident which suggests that one of the twins actually has the power to bring inanimate objects to life. Ultimately, the book does not effectively illumine or critique historiography, theology, myth, or even the Gospels.

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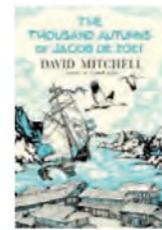
The Last Matchmaker
Willie Daly, with Philip Dodd
Hachette, 2010
ISBN 9781847443021
RRP \$32.99

With the popularity of Irish authors and stories, it is not surprising that the tale of one of Ireland's well known (and possibly last) matchmaking families – the Dalys of County Clare – has been published. This collection of anecdotes, directly attributed to Willie Daly, is constructed as non-stop reminiscences that roll out one after the other. It's a bit like being trapped with the family story-teller

at a party for a couple of hours; okay at the beginning but gets a bit repetitive after the first half hour has whizzed by.

Throughout the book, Daly provides details regarding some of the matches he has made (and almost made) over the years, with aspects of his own life thrown in, including the development of the matchmaking business by his father and grand-father. I would recommend this book for people who have a love of stories set in Ireland or enjoy reading light biographies, as well as those who don't need to or cannot read full chapters at one sitting, since the multiple mini-stories in each chapter make it an easy book to stop and start.

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The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet
David Mitchell
Sceptre, 2010
ISBN: 9780340921562
RRP: \$32.99

David Mitchell is a remarkable writer. Each of his books is so different from the others, but his storytelling is without fail always assured and captivating. Mitchell writes with lush prose full of accurate and often unsettling detail and he beautifully weaves together all the large and small tales of his characters.

In Japan's period of isolation, where the only point at which Japan and the outside world could look at each other was the tiny keyhole of a single walled and fiercely guarded port, and where incoming Europeans are searched for forbidden books and hemmed in by spies and self-interested interpreters, a young Dutch clerk Jacob de Zoet has been tasked to investigate corruption in the local dealings of the Dutch East India Company. He has the misfortune of becoming infatuated with a local midwife, and a gesture of admiration tumbles him into one compromise and betrayal after another. He slowly realises that he is caught up in the fringes of a much larger and more evil plot than anything he could encounter with his colleagues. Despite being restricted, watched, and betrayed he manages to win the trust of a local and find a way to affect the unfolding of much greater events around him.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet isn't an easy book and it doesn't have a neatly wrapped up happy ending, but the complexity of the story brings its own great satisfaction. Read everything that Mitchell publishes; you'll always be glad that you did.

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