

You better not cry



Augusten Burroughs
Hachette, 2009
ISBN: 9780733621437
RRP: \$31.95

Everyone has tales of Christmas times past, however the reminiscences of Augusten Burroughs will most likely surpass all, real or imaginary. In this collection of stories, an embarrassing childhood gives way to cunning teenage manipulation and adult alcoholic stupor, before concluding with the power that loved ones can have over our behaviour. Also the need to follow recipes when making gingerbread houses, as opposed to the gingerbread slum dwellings our narrator ultimately created.

This is definitely not your traditional feel good Christmas round-up of stories. For me, the power of the writing and the range of emotions I felt, from trying not to laugh out loud while reading on the train to wondering why a child psychologist wasn't called in, made this more memorable than 'nice' books on the subject ever have been.

It is proof that it doesn't matter if you cannot tell Santa from Jesus, Christmas is still there and, whether you observe it or not, it can truly account for some memorable experiences – and some embarrassingly funny ones too.

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Under the dome



Stephen King
Hodder General, 2009
ISBN: 9780340992579
RRP: \$34.99

King's latest novel generates the usual quota of bloodthirsty deaths and characters with sickening personal habits, yet the mayhem produces some thought-provoking themes, not anticipated by this first time King reader. There is an element of *Lord of the Flies* as the dome isolates a dysfunctional community from civilising forces. Corrupted government exploits the paranoia of its citizens to seize absolute power while ignoring the inevitable catastrophe confronting them.

Against these forces of greed are ranged a small, motley crew, lead by Barbie, a blow-in Iraqi war veteran. Barbie's concern is surviving the dome; the town powers are concerned with continuing habits of illicit drug manufacture and blackmail. As the physical quality of life deteriorates, so does society. When the dooped-out overseer of the manufacturing operation decides on a psychedelically induced revenge, apocalypse seems inevitable. In the end Barbie discovers that, as ants are toys to humans, so too is the civilisation under the dome to a more terrifying force.

King apologises for any scientific inaccuracies, and one must also suspend disbelief. But it is a galloping read and an indictment of American society. No one likes being treated like ants by anyone – human or otherwise.

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Stripping bare the body: politics violence war



Mark Danner
Black Inc., 2009
ISBN: 9781863954327
RRP: \$39.95

Mark Danner's extraordinary account of the last 20 years of American policy and power reveal a flawed and frightening world of ignorance, violence, and torture. This is a big book at 563 pages plus notes and index, daunting in size and topic. The revelations are both distressing and disturbing as they clarify what has really occurred 'behind the scenes' of international conflicts. Danner reveals death and torture in Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan as increasingly acceptable to post Cold War governments.

Despite the grimness of the subject, the writing is always interesting and lucid. It is quite confusing at times trying to keep the various protagonists, policies, battles, and coups, but this does not distract from the overall theme that through times of conflict and great upheaval the true nature of a society is revealed and for all its power and might, the ideals and morality of the United States of America and the western world have been and are still being challenged and found wanting. Power creates its own reality.

This is a book for those who are fascinated by international politics and the dynamics of history in the making.

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The slightly skewed life of Toby Chrysler



Paul Collins
Celapene Press, 2009
ISBN: 9780975074244
RRP: \$14.95

Toby Chrysler's life is "slightly skewed". Not only has his mother disappeared, but his father seems at a loss to be able to explain what has happened to her, whether to protect Toby from the truth because of his existing issues (Toby has some type of condition that makes his ability to relate to other people difficult) or to support the story's premise. This then starts Toby on his quest to find her.

The main character's best friend's quirky trait is misquoting well known proverbs and quotes, which become more common and convoluted throughout the book. This

could become confusing for younger readers but the author has provided a glossary of the correct terms at the end of the book.

From the point of view of the target audience of eight to twelve year olds the story could be seen as fast moving and captivating. It has many twists and turns that will keep the audience interested to the end.

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Meltdown



Ben Elton
Transworld Publishers,
2009
ISBN: 9780593061930
RRP: \$32.95

Ben Elton books serve two purposes: they make you laugh, and they break down complicated issues into stories with interesting characters. They might not be completely accurate (his first novel, *Stark*, predicted complete environmental breakdown by the mid-1990s) but you'll walk away with a better idea of how things work.

Meltdown focuses on the Global Financial Crisis in England, by telling the story of Jimmy, the son of a banker and an unemployed father of two. Through flashbacks, the novel shows the rise and fall of Jimmy's career – how he fluked his way to the top and the events that led to him being thrown down to the wolves below.

I'd recommend *Meltdown* for anyone who, like me, was aware of the GFC, but had little idea as to its genesis or the meaning of most of the buzzwords. The terms are explained so smoothly that it's not until after that you realise how much you've learned.

Meltdown is not Elton's his best work, but it doesn't disappoint. Whether it'll still be as enjoyable in 10 years time, I'm not sure, but at the moment it's educational, a good read, and delivers lots of laughs.

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Going rogue: an American life



Sarah Palin
HarperCollins, 2009
ISBN: 9780061939891
RRP: \$39.99

Like most books by living politicians, *Going Rogue* is an exercise in shameless self-promotion. On page after page, Palin tells the reader just how awesome she is. Only her occasional veering into self-pity interrupts Palin's self-congratulation, but this veering grows more frequent as the book continues and Palin attempts to blame everyone else for her problems and failings. It's all the fault of her political enemies, whether those are to be

cont page 32

from page 30

found in the “liberal media elite” or the mysterious higher ups in the Republican Party who apparently have the power to make presidential and vice-presidential candidates dance like puppets.

To make matters worse, Palin's prose style is repetitive. *Going Rogue* is dominated by clichés and expressions of Alaskan patriotism, and although Palin constantly mentions “the issues” and the need for practical politics, her book is conspicuously lacking in anything but the most general details of policy.

As an attempt to set the record straight, the book is interesting – especially considering how many of its claims have already been disproven – but as a reading experience, it is neither enjoyable nor particularly educational. Only the historical interest of it would justify the purchase of this book.

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The littlest pirate and the hammerheads



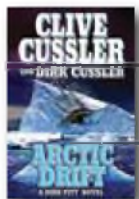
Sherryl Clark, illustrated by Tom Jellett
Penguin Group Australia, 2010
ISBN: 9780143503774
RRP: \$10.95

Nicholas Nosh may be the littlest pirate but he is not afraid to take on the likes of Captain Hammerhead and his boat, The Deadly Denture, to get back his stolen family treasure. Using Chief cook Gretta's undies against the sharks, Nicholas sails to the rescue and returns his treasure and himself safely to his family.

Tom Jellett's illustrations further enhance the descriptive writing of Sherryl Clark in the newest edition in the *Littlest pirate* series. If you haven't read one to your child this series is well worth seeking out!

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Arctic drift: a Dirk Pitt novel



Clive Cussler and Dirk Pitt
Penguin Books, 2009
ISBN: 9780141038919
RRP: \$32.95

As an established reader of Cussler's novels, my immediate response to *Arctic drift* is “the mixture as before”. From the introductory, fictionalised version of Franklin's search for the North-West Passage to the final thwarting of the scoundrel who threatens the world some 500 pages later, this work is classic Cussler.

However, although our all-American hero, Dirk Pitt, has featured in 19 previous novels and knowledgeable readers will welcome old friends, this story is complete, not relying on readers having previous knowledge. Like other Cussler novels, *Arctic drift* dissects contemporary world problems – global warming, carbon

sequestration, and a rare and expensive mineral to combat greenhouse effects. To control this mineral a greedy Canadian industrialist manipulates a corrupt network of Government ministers and others to ignite tensions between Canada and USA. Moving from one potential catastrophe to the next, Pitt and his team gradually neutralise the threats, while struggling for survival on the Arctic ice.

Of course we *know* that Pitt will prevail and the world will be saved, but this does not stop us zealously turning pages as the all-too-plausible scenarios unfold. For fans of adventure fiction, this is a cracker. Find a free day before starting to read.

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Twitterature



Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin
Penguin, 2009
ISBN: 9780141047713
RRP: \$16.95

Twitterature is the brainchild of two 19-year-old students at the University of Chicago, who have condensed over sixty classics into a series of 140 character tweets.

The authors interpret poetry and prose with equal fervour. The collection ranges from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Shakespeare receives special attention in the collection, with the inclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Purists will undoubtedly recoil in horror at the tweet, “2bomt2be”.

In addition to plot, the authors condense some of the great literary characters into one tweet or part thereof. A tweet from F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for example, describes the title character in the first four words, “Gatsby is so emo”.

Twitterature will divide audiences. Some will consider it an inspired, contextually relevant reinterpretation of the great works, while others will consider it a sacrilegious affront to the classical canon. Regardless of which category you fall into, I highly recommend reading it, if for no other purpose than to develop your understanding of the art of tweeting.

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Darkfall



Isobelle Carmody
Penguin, 2009
ISBN: 9780140278484
RRP: \$24.95

Darkfall, the first novel of the *Legendsong* trilogy, promises a captivating, if demanding, read. Stamped with Carmody's dark and enthralling brand of fantasy, this is the best kind of teenage fiction. Avoiding

the hackneyed clichés and absolutes common in fantasy novels, *Darkfall* offers believable heroines in a landscape of moral ambiguity.

Even before they are swept separately into the foreign world of Keltor, twin sisters Glynn and Ember feel adrift. Ember is dying; Glynn, while attentive to her sister's needs, lacks purpose. All changes on Keltor. This is a realm of otherworldly powers, where stones reveal the future, men walk on wind, and human virtue seems less common than mystical talent. Somehow, Glynn and Ember find themselves caught up in the web of prophecies woven by the soulweavers of the mysterious island, *Darkfall*.

Darkfall is a testament to Carmody's depthless imagination. As Glynn and Ember are thrown to opposite ends of Keltor, a veritable world of geographical novelty and political intrigue emerges. Just as absorbing is Carmody's perceptive exploration of human vice and virtue. Ultimately, it is Glynn's gritty courage and Ember's latent fighting spirit that set them apart in a world lapsing into chaos and despair.

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The Levels



Sean Cregan
Headline, 2009
ISBN: 9780755357857
RRP: \$32.99

The Levels is the kind of book that would make a perfect movie: jam-packed with violence, death, disease, and corporate conspiracy. Throw in an ex-cop, ex-CIA agent, teenage assassin, serial killer, and some mysterious lurking figures, and there you have it. But this book is so much better than your average blockbuster.

It is set in the levels, a failed housing development project, abandoned by the authorities and left to the homeless, destitute, addicts, and criminals. The only law in the levels is Shadow and his Furies, who use the Book to deal out justice to the people. Into this walks Nate Turner, ex-CIA agent thought to have been murdered outside his home. He meets Ghost, one of Shadow's Furies and with ex-cop Kate Friedman, they expose Sirius Bio-life's cover-up of medical experimentation on the residents of the levels.

Told from both Nate's and Kate's perspective, *The Levels* moves along at an increasingly frenzied pace, which fits perfectly with the events in the story. There are many deaths, all of which are violent and can make reading a little uncomfortable at times. However, the plot is a cracker and the writing excellent, which more than makes up for sometimes gratuitous violence.

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