



BOOKS

WELL READ

REVIEWED BY MARGOT LLOYD

FICTION

The Lost Child Suzanne McCourt, *Text Publishing, \$29.99*

The Ice-Cold Heaven Mirko Bonné, *Duckworth, \$29.99*

There seems to be a sub-category of Australian literary fiction, specifically first novels, that deals with family disturbances in isolated towns, written in beautiful, slow prose. Suzanne McCourt's first novel, which follows a broken – or breaking – family living on the Limestone Coast in the 1950s, falls squarely into this group.

Nearly five-year-old Sylvie Meehan steals her brother Dunc's comic books, is never far from her mother's apron strings and lives in fascinated awe of her father and his whipping-whip. When Mick Meehan takes up with The Trollop across the lagoon Sylvie, Dunc and their mother react in different ways. The small community holds them in disdain and pity by turns and the betrayal will eventually have much larger consequences.

McCourt, a Limestone Coast native, knows her characters and setting well: Sylvie Meehan has a unique voice which develops as we follow her through adolescence, her mother's fragility and father's actions are exposed with skill and the sunburnt salt-aired world of the fictional Burley Point is lovingly drawn. But the story moves slowly. When Sylvie's older brother Dunc finally goes missing – the lost child of the title – the disappearance lacks urgency, and the events surrounding it never gain deep impact. After the sharp-tongued witticisms and barbed endings of McCourt's short stories, it is impossible not to feel that *The Lost Child* lacks punch. All the same, this is a promising debut, and in it McCourt has dealt with the

aforementioned OzLit sub-category thoroughly. You can't help but be keen to see what she does next.

Mirko Bonné's *The Ice-cold Heaven* is another work with a strong taste of salt, but it couldn't be further from the world of Sylvie Meehan. In this fictionalised version of Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914 voyage to Antarctica, Bonné has created a rollicking tale of adventure and endurance out on the ice, culminating in a reimagined version of Shackleton's journey to South Georgia Island for help.

Translated from the original German by Alexander Starritt, this is not the first retelling of Shackleton's voyage, nor even the first from the perspective of the ship's stowaway, Perce Blackboro. Bonné has taken broad liberties with his material though, renaming his stowaway Merce and giving him a colourful backstory which involves a limping Jewish sweetheart back home in Wales. The 28 men on board are characters and adventurers, with Merce the perfect, lively young foil for each of them: from the irascible cook, Green, to Shackleton himself, who is held in awe by almost everyone on board.

Bonné makes the most of the near-mythic stories surrounding the trip, from Shackleton's original advertisement for crew, which detailed the dangers of the voyage and received 5000 responses, to a crew member's hilarious fall into the abdomen of a whale carcass, earning him the "Order of Jonah" award. In the tradition of great adventure tales, the desperation of the crew's situation is palpable, but the story is borne upon Shackleton's famous optimism. This is personified by Merce himself, who is indomitable in the face of even the gravest dangers and, frankly, makes the whole thing sound like damn good fun. ●



CRIME**Tatiana****Martin Cruz Smith, *Simon & Schuster*, \$29.99**

You have to wonder about Arkady Renko. The Moscow police investigator we first met in *Gorky Park* (1981) has a very unhealthy lifestyle – not just his terrible diet and smoking habits, but his relentless determination to do right whatever the cost. That means hardly anybody likes him: not his superiors and certainly not the crooks. Yet armed with a curious mix of cynicism and romanticism, he's outlived the old Soviet Union and now finds the new Russia produces plenty of bad guys to catch, and girls (for inexplicable reasons) to fall for him. In his eighth outing it's the Russian mafia and a beautiful crusading journalist, wrapped around a cryptic murder mystery and even a momentary diversion into the world of expensive bicycles. In the author's spare and elegant hands, you are finished before you know it.

Roy Eccleston *****HISTORY****The Unknown Anzacs****Michael Caulfield, *Hachette Australia*, \$50**

In 1918, as the carnage on the Western Front looked like it would continue forever, librarian William Ifould placed an ad for soldiers' diaries: "good prices paid for good material". He got it, and it is this material that TV producer Michael Caulfield mined for his magnificent *The Unknown Anzacs*. This is more than a compendium of war diaries. Caulfield weaves 31 voices into a narrative of Australia's most traumatic period, when pride in a little nation finally making her mark on the world stage was outweighed by grief as 61,000 were killed. Such blind acceptance of duty might be alien to modern readers, but the voices of Caulfield's cast of characters – soldiers, nurses, officers, dirt-poor and privileged – ring true. These are ordinary Aussies – not just soldiers but civilians willing to put up with military discipline (at least sometimes) until the job was done.

Tim Hilferty ******FICTION****We Are Water****Wally Lamb, *HarperCollins*, \$29.99**

Contemporary insecurities about sex, race, equality, and creativity are skewered and tossed aside in this complex and challenging novel. It opens with the pending gay wedding of artist Annie to gallerist Viveca. Annie recently divorced Orion after 27 years of marriage and three children. Orion's life

is falling apart while Annie's is gaining momentum. As the wedding approaches, the key characters all reveal themselves to be prisoners of the past. The use of alternating narrators and multiple flashbacks gives the reader an omniscience lost to the characters themselves. It's 560 pages long but in typical Lamb style this is not vain grandiloquence: the writing is so intense and the storyline so dense that there is hardly a wasted word. Ultimately, the characters are not very likeable but they are certainly compelling.

Diana Carroll *1/2****MEMOIR****Dot Complicated: Untangling our wired lives****Randi Zuckerberg, *Bantam Press*, \$34.95**

Randi Zuckerberg was at the right place at the right time when Facebook erupted as the uber phenomenon of social media. Sibling to its famous founder, she quickly saw the "awesome" potential. But, sibling to the founder, she chose not to make her life at Facebook so much as out of Facebook. She now tours the world speaking as an expert in the history and culture of social media. *Dot Complicated* is an extension of this pursuit. It's written in a very personal and youthful style, colourful, casual and quite unabashed – a literary "selfie". She has made lots of mistakes and she has lots of advice for life online. She gives an interesting peek behind the scenes and comes across quite winningly.

Samela Harris ******YOUNG ADULT FICTION****Why We Took the Car****Wolfgang Herrndorf, *Scribe*, \$19.95**

This unusual, highly engaging coming-of-age road trip has been ably translated from the German by Tim Mohr to keep the distinctive, self-deprecating voice of its teenage hero. Mike's mother is a drunk, in and out of rehab, his father a wealthy, unsympathetic real estate salesman who abandons his son at the start of the summer holidays and takes off with his mistress. Fourteen-year-old Mike is one of his class's non-entities, good at high jump and drawing but ignored by the delectable Tatiana who has invited all his more acceptable classmates to her party. The Russian new boy, Tschick, another class outcast, decides to do something about it, and the two drive a "borrowed" clapped-out Lada to Tatiana's to deliver her present and then on through Germany, discovering themselves, having odd, intriguing encounters, evading curious police and getting into more and more tricky situations. A great teenage read.

Katharine England **1/2**

