

Book reviews

Sum: forty tales from the afterlife



David Eagleman
Text Publishing, 2009
9781847674272
\$22.95

Sum by David Eagleman is a collection of forty short stories exploring the notion of the afterlife, what we hope to find there, and what we might find in its place.

Each is a vignette told in the same tone, a melancholy ode to loneliness with barely a word spoken, in such a way that the book flows along in a dreamlike state. Each tale is tightly written and cleverly woven around a very human irony, insight, or conceit, often twisting the obvious in new and original ways.

It's for these reasons that the book should not be read in one sitting, but picked at over time. Get too caught in the dream and you may well miss the meaning, moving on to the next before you've had a chance to fully absorb that which you've just finished.

Sum is neither religious nor scientific – free and willing to knit any number of principles together – but more an examination of human philosophy. At its heart this book is very much about who we are and what we do in this life rather than what becomes of us when we die. Sometimes twisted, always intriguing, *Sum* is a fascinating read.

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The magician's apprentice



Trudi Canavan
Orbit Books, 2009
9780733623967
\$29.99

Trudi Canavan writes big fantasy novels: readers will find war, magic, family conflict, and a quest.

The magician's apprentice is no different. Set hundreds of years before Canavan's best selling *The black magician* trilogy, *Apprentice* follows Tessia as she tries to find her place in the world.

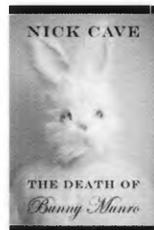
Tessia wants to be a healer like her father, but her mother and society would rather she settled down. A chance visit to the local magician changes everything when it is discovered that Tessia has magical ability. She then becomes his apprentice and a whole new world opens up before her, one she never dreamed possible. Meanwhile, events in the outside world

are coming to a head and they will have far reaching consequences for everyone, and Tessia finds herself in the middle of it all.

The magician's apprentice is good solid fantasy and should appeal to genre readers, and fans of Canavan's previous books. Don't be put off by the large size of the book as the pages go by quickly as the story builds.

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The death of Bunny Munro



Nick Cave
Text Publishing, 2009
9781921520747
\$32.95

Nick Cave introduces us to the complex and confronting character that is Bunny Munro, part loving dad and part lunatic. We meet Bunny as he journeys down the south coast of England with his son, Bunny Junior, in tow for company. Bunny's attempts at his job as a beauty product salesman and nine-year old Junior's love of knowledge, explored via his trusty encyclopaedia, combine to create an unusual mix of hilarious danger and twisted conversation. Unfortunately Bunny's sanity has been unhinged by the tragic passing of his wife, an alcohol-addled mind, and the strong desire for sexual adventure. His wild day-dreams and erratic behaviour push him further into trouble and jeopardise the safety of his son.

While the author does challenge the reader with harsh and provocative language, it is a vital component that expresses the vulnerable mental state of the lead character. This book touches upon many themes that resonate throughout Nick Cave's musical and literary career: ironic romanticism, drugs, eroticism, violence, love, and hope. I recommend this book for anyone who likes reading about twisted realities mixed with dark humour, fantasy, and sympathy-inducing, life-challenged characters.

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Pride and prejudice and zombies



Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith
Quirk books, 2009
9781594743344
\$24.95

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains." What fan of the timeless story can resist this revision where Elizabeth and Darcy engage in a battle of more than just wits?

The story begins as a mysterious plague settles on the small town of Meryton, and the Bennett sisters take up their training to protect their family and their lives. A family of all girls, however, they are forced to train in China, which is measured against Elizabeth when she meets Mr Darcy, whose Japanese training grants him a higher rung on the social ladder. But can she resist the man who has killed more than 10 000 a year?

The zombie additions meld seamlessly into the original plot line for a fast, fun read. Occasionally gruesome illustrations in the style of bookplates and readers' group questions at the end only enhance the experience. Surely the most amusing variation on this traditional story in many years.

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Literary activists: writer – intellectuals and Australian public life



Brigid Rooney
University of Queensland Press, 2009
9780702236624
\$39.95

In *Literary activists*, Brigid Rooney explores how public activism by celebrated Australian writers and poets impacts on their careers and reputations. From this perspective she also reflects on the value of Australian literary culture to the 'public life' of the nation. Rooney examines in considerable detail the works of Judith Wright, Patrick White, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Les Murray, David Malouf, Helen Garner, and Tim Winton. She asserts that writers bring to the role of 'public intellectual' the ability to represent and communicate ideas and the 'values of freedom and autonomy'. These attributes lend them credibility in a political role which then reflects on their literary roles. This intertwining of the two roles influences the way we read, value, and interpret their writing.

This book is quite challenging and aimed at an academic audience well-versed in the works of the writers discussed. It would be useful for students of Australian literature to gain a contemporary perspective on the role of the writer in Australian culture and society.

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The pages



Murray Bail
Text Publishing, 2008
9781921351464
\$34.95

On a family sheep station in western New South Wales, a brother and sister work the property while their reclusive brother, Wesley Antill, spends years writing his philosophy.

Shortlisted for the 2009 Miles Franklin Literary award, *The pages* is the mesmerising new novel from the author of the much-loved *Eucalyptus*. It is a sustained meditation on the opposition between philosophy and psychology, personified in the characters of self-made philosopher Wesley, academic philosopher Erica, who is sent from Sydney to appraise Wesley's work after his death, and Sophie, Erica's psychoanalyst companion.

Wesley's world-view dominates the prose, even though we learn about him only through the recollections of his family and the pages of his unfinished work. Yet it is Erica who holds within herself the potential for Wesley's ultimate vindication, as well as the opportunity to bridge the loneliness that suffuses every page of the book.

The pages is rich in contemplation, steeped in sadness and the haunting beauty of the Australian bush. Devotees of Bail's work, as well as the uninitiated, will find much to pique their interest here.

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Carthage: a novel



Ross Leckie
Canongate, 2009
9781847671011
\$22.95

Carthage is ultimately a frustration and a disappointment. As the conclusion of Leckie's trilogy, following *Hannibal* and *Scipio*, it completes the decay that began in *Scipio*. It is structured as an epistolary work, made up of many different dispatches by more than a dozen writers – and yet with rare exceptions, they all sound much the same. Moreover, some of the sections are short enough to cover barely a quarter of a page. This book has 210 pages, but with all the white space, it's closer to 170. In addition to the shorter sections, there is a framing commentary which is entirely too impressed with its own cleverness. The erratic pacing that marred parts of *Scipio* is even worse in this volume and Leckie's apparent taste for reveling in the brutal and grotesque seems

to be the only thing about the trilogy he wasn't bored with by this point. One for the diehard fans only.

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Bruce & me



Oren Siedler
Transworld Publishers
9781741668155
\$27.95

Families are complicated, and *Bruce & me* is a great example. The book follows Siedler's attempts to understand her family through the many road trips she takes with her father, Bruce, across the United States. Not long into the book, Siedler's hippie mother leaves Bruce and runs away to Australia with her new partner. Once Bruce finds them, he asks to see Siedler, and she is sent back to the US to spend time with him. After arriving she quickly discovers that Bruce runs credit card scams and performs identity theft as well as engaging in other criminal acts. Bruce might be living on the wrong side of the law but it was always interesting being around him, though as Bruce spends more and more time behind bars, this spell breaks.

Bruce & me is a wonderfully told memoir that reminds the reader that love is a powerful force, as Siedler tries to unravel the tangled web that is her father with humour and insight. *Bruce & Me* is hard to put down and goes to show that families are a law unto themselves.

Oren Siedler is appearing at this year's Byron Bay Writers Festival.

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Brown skin blue



Belinda Jeffrey
University of Queensland Press,
2009
9780702237133
\$19.95

Barry Mundy is 17 years old, lives in the Top End of Australia, and, although his skin is dark, his origins are a mystery to him. He longs to know his father and hopes one day to escape the haunting childhood memories that deeply disturb his psyche. Seeking his identity Barry embarks on a journey with the names of five possible fathers scrawled on a crumpled piece of paper. At Croc Jumping Cruises, where he is promptly dubbed 'Barrymundy', he finds work among the perilous crocs and befriends Boof, Cassie, and Sally. It is here that he begins to find his own path and feel a sense of belonging.

Barry's personal struggle is shared with a touching honesty: "In my heart I know life's a sham without untangling myself from the mess of my childhood, but I'm dumb enough to listen to every alarm bell inside my head". His story is poignant, yet inspirational, as he shows a quiet determination to emerge from being a victim to a survivor. Jeffrey's debut novel is written at a pace that cleverly mirrors the laid-back Top End lifestyle, including its characteristic dry humour. The book touches on many themes such as identity, abuse, and belonging. It is a wonderful story that will enlighten both adults and adolescents.

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