

Book reviews

Crime Time: Australians Behaving Badly



Sue Bursztynski
Ford Street Publishing
ISBN 9781876462765
RRP \$16.95

Sue Bursztynski, in her anecdotal collection of crimes and criminals, *Crime Time*, aims to provide pre-teen readers with a history of gruesome (and frequently just plain gross) deeds performed in Australia. Covering criminals as diverse as mobsters, convicts, cannibals, and bushrangers – and yes, even Ned Kelly – Bursztynski gives readers a glimpse into the histories that rarely get taught in the classroom.

As Melbourne mystery writer Kerry Greenwood points out in her introduction, everyone is fascinated, reluctantly or eagerly, by the macabre, and *Crime Time* provides a quick and easy reference for early teens. With short entries, fun fact boxes, and black and white illustrations, *Crime Time* provides entertainment and information without delving overmuch into subject matter that might be too dark or too disturbing for young readers. Certainly some of the crimes are disturbing enough without the details!

Though Bursztynski's editorialising can be sometimes heavy-handed, she nonetheless has produced a book that will disgust and delight pre-teen readers who won't even notice they're learning about history, law, politics, and geography at the same time. That makes it a useful resource for educators also.

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Katherine's Diary: The Story of a Transsexual



Katherine Cummings
Beaujon Press, 2007
ISBN 9780980366306
RRP \$35

In late 1986, John Cummings, Head of the Information Resources Centre at the Sydney College of the Arts, bravely issued a memo to all fellow staff members, stating his intention to seek gender reassignment and live the rest of his life as Katherine Cummings.

Katherine's Diary deals with her transformation but also recounts other aspects of her life, including her passion for librarianship.

As John, Cummings started work at the Public Library of New South Wales (now the State Library of NSW) in 1955 and worked in many diverse roles, including a post-graduate librarianship degree in Canada, and roles in the US.

Katherine says that her acceptance by her art librarian colleagues at Sydney College of the Arts was "the first real day of the rest of my life". She now works part-time for the Gender Centre and part-time at the Social Policy Research Centre at University of NSW.

The library references woven throughout *Katherine's Diary* describe the emergence of the Australian library profession as well as the story of a transsexual's journey from first awareness to self-determination and beyond. Cummings' prose is straight to the point, and often laced with humour, making her autobiography both entertaining and informative.

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Grace Notes



Jenny Patrick
Scribe Books
ISBN 9781921215322
\$29.95

A coming-of-age story of a senior, Jenny Patrick's *Grace Notes* follows Grace Brockie, an 80-something woman living in New Zealand in the 1990s. A widow whose daughter committed suicide many years ago, Grace's life is comprised of regular games of lawn bowls, brandies with her longtime best friend, Mildred, and corresponding by letters with friends and acquaintances, including Max, an old neighbour.

Grace's preferred form of conversation is through letters, which are used, along with prose, to tell Grace's story. Through the letters, the reader gets an immediate entry point into Grace's life and relationships, keeping the narrative well-paced.

Our main character is immensely likable, an idealised grandmother – fit, independent, and liberal-minded. There are facets of her character, however, that remain unexplored, most notably her

daughter's suicide, and her marriage. While it is Grace's current relationships that are the focus of the novel, Patrick's negation of her past makes the narrative feel slightly unbalanced.

Glossing over might be Patrick's worst offence – death is a serious issue facing most people of Grace's generation and despite its constant presence in Grace's life, Patrick never gives her characters a chance to deal with it in any real way.

In the end, *Grace Notes* is an uncomplicated read, and perhaps Patrick's goal in this simple novel is to prove that fairytale endings happen at any age – and more than once in a lifetime.

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The Marriage Club



Kate Legge
Viking/Penguin
ISBN 9780670072989
RRP \$32.95

The Marriage Club is journalist and author Kate Legge's second novel and, despite its chick-lit title, reads more like literary fiction built around a crime scene. Leith Kremmer, the middle-aged wife of a family court judge, has always kept secrets. But Leith's sudden and unexpected death proves to be a catalyst for revelations within not only her own marriage, but also those of her friends.

Vignettes of Melbourne, where the novel is set, are drawn in precise detail, giving the characters a vivid backdrop on which to enact their marital dramas. It is disappointing, however, that the characters themselves lack this depth – sadly indistinguishable from one another, the five main couples are so interchangeable that it is an effort to remember their names, let alone who is married to whom. Legge does artfully describe the delicate interplay of couples, but this delicacy is lost as the focus of the book skims over the large group of characters.

All in all, the novel promises a lot that it fails to deliver. The revelation of secrets, supposedly central to the novel, is lacklustre at best, with many secrets revealed to the reader well before the confrontations unfold on the page.

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MY EXTRAORDINARY LIFE & DEATH
Doug MacLeod

What exactly is The Tight Trouser Club? Where do you buy children at bargain prices? A roller-coaster of madness and surreal comedy awaits the reader brave enough to open this truly remarkable book.
RRP \$19.95



Distributed by Macmillan Distribution Services

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If the time spent on description had instead been spent on drawing out a few more complexities of character and plot, this book may have been a more satisfying read.

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Debt Man Walking



Bruce Brammall
John Wiley & Sons
Australia Ltd, 2008
ISBN 9780731408351
\$34.95

Debt Man Walking is as much an unashamed tribute to Bruce Brammall's 1980's as it is an investment guide. The former deputy editor of *The Herald Sun's* Business section and all-round investment evangelist has a genuine passion for finance, but if being spoon-fed references to 30-year-old pop culture is not your thing then you will struggle before you even get to the advice.

Right off the bat is the flaw that taints the entire guide: it was written one year before a massive financial crisis, and all the statistical data and emphasis on the market correction of late 2007 seems horribly dated and undermines all his other points.

The book offers a series of easy-to-follow examples of how you can use debt to further increase your wealth, from investment home loans to the stockmarket to gearing, and the pros and cons of each. Now if only the events of the past six months hadn't blown away all his figures.

Selling to Gen X is well and good – what with our disposable incomes and all – but the book is not a primer for investment and it's not quite inspiring enough to make you want to become Bruce Brammall, and that's what (besides having better timing in publication) this book really needed.

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Accidentally on Purpose



Mary Pols
Penguin UK, 2009
ISBN
9780141038407
RRP: \$24.95

Accidentally on Purpose is like a cup of tea in your favourite chair – comfortable, predictable, and a little difficult to get up from. The autobiographical tale follows author Mary Pols' rough transition from slightly lonely late-thirties singleton to unexpectedly pregnant, cash-strapped

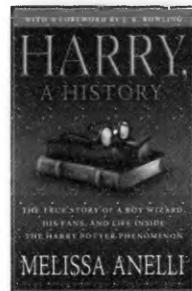
nervous wreck. A one-night stand with a much younger San Franciscan, leaves Pols contending with unglamorous issues like custody, child care, and a reluctant father-to-be. The tougher things get for Pols, the quicker the pages turn.

The novel balances light moments with interesting, thought-provoking themes. Pols is a film reviewer by trade, and while she writes with flair, she doesn't use her talent to gloss over any of the uglier parts of her story. She's not quite Bridget Jones with a baby bump, but Pols does keep us entertained through the trials and stresses of first-time pregnancy and motherhood. Her documentary approach to her life may leave some readers yawning, but chances are you'll only pick up this book if you're interested in all the gory details of an unplanned pregnancy at age 39.

It isn't just the dramatics of Pols' story that make *Accidentally on Purpose* enjoyable. The book's main strength lies in her ability to show so much of herself without straying into exhibitionism – to tell a story of modern motherhood that's funny, sad, and, above all, honest.

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Harry, A History



Melissa Anelli
Puffin, 2008
ISBN
9780143304364
RRP: \$19.95

Whether you are a fan yourself, trying to understand someone who is a fan, or just fascinated by the social phenomenon that the Harry Potter books created, there is a wealth of information in Melissa Anelli's book *Harry, A History*.

Anelli writes with clarity and enthusiasm, telling her own story of discovering Harry alongside events surrounding the growing popularity of the books. The tone is light and engaging, and Anelli fills the book with exactly the type of details, stories, and insider information that delights and fascinates passionate fans, and will still entertain more casual readers.

Harry, A History describes a very personal journey, from Anelli's first reading to her growing role in Harry Potter fandom through the fan site *The Leaky Cauldron*. She met some of the actors, got involved with fan conventions, tribute bands, and interviewed JK Rowling herself – in fact, Rowling wrote the foreword. Anelli's position in the fan world gave her more access than most, but her enjoyment of the books, her growing fascination and involvement, and her passion for all things

Harry will mirror many readers' stories as well. Anelli captures the suspense and excitement of Harry Potter and many fans will recognise themselves in her tale.

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The Museum of Mary Child



Cassandra Golds
Penguin Australia
ISBN
9780143304142
RRP: \$17.95

Similar in style to her earlier book, *Clair de Lune*, Golds writes as an old-fashioned storyteller, her characters not locked into a specific time or locale, but with a 19th century European flavour. The lightness of Gold's touch is evident in the sweetness of the text. She delves into complex issues without slipping into territory too dark and solemn for the early teenage reader.

We easily engage with Heloise, empathising with her struggles living with a strict, unloving godmother. Issues of parentage, identity, and love are explored as it becomes evident that Heloise is no ordinary child. We cheer as she discovers a wished-for hidden doll and escapes her cold godparent, venturing alone into the unfamiliar – and almost Dickensian – world.

Eventually all the pieces of the puzzle begin to come together and we learn the truth about Heloise. Dealing with themes of adolescence without the black humour of Lemony Snicket or the heavier gloom of Sonya Hartnett's *The Ghost's Child*, *The Museum of Mary Child* is above all a romance, and will appeal to girls on the brink of young adulthood.

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