

Book Case

Dr Carol Wilson recommends 6 books (5 and 2 halves) and some music for the weary off-duty medic to enjoy.

AN EVIL CRADLING

Brian Keenan. (Vintage 1993. ISBN-13: 978-0099990307. RRP £9.99 paperback)



I read this book not only as an account of a Belfast man held in captivity in the Lebanon for four and a half years, but also to find out how a man from east Belfast somehow stumbled into the political quagmire of 1985 Beirut.

If you read only the Preface you will understand the themes that are explored and form the basis of the narrative.

It explores the cruelty of men, but how that they too are prisoners of their circumstances. Yet it is not this and the descriptions of physical privation, petty cruelty, and inhuman treatment that pervade the book. More it is a testament to friendship, his unlikely friendship with John McCarthy, a friendship that has endured beyond the Lebanon. Keenan, in little more than a paragraph, describes how from being held in solitude he had to decide how much of himself he would reveal to this stranger to bridge the apparent gulf between them. Both men took the step, laying the foundations for what Keenan called the “remaking of humanity”.

The book starts in Belfast and ends in Damascus – Keenan had not yet come “home”, and in answer to the question as to how he came to Beirut – then it was because he had not yet worked out where “home” was. The Keenan at the beginning of the book is something of an enigma, the man at the end of the book only a little less so.

AFTER ANNA

Alex Lake. (Harper 2015. ISBN-13: 978-0008168483. RRP £7.99 paperback)

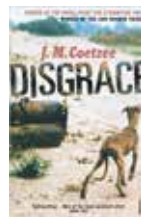


This is a book I picked

up as a 3 for £5 deal. Although billed “The No 1 ebook bestseller” I had not previously been aware of either author or book. A true psychological thriller – no one dies – and although a five year old girl is abducted she reappears a week later but with no recollection of where she has been. You know that there will be twists in the plot, you try to be clever and anticipate the true villain, but until close to the end I missed the clues that were subtly laid out. Like all of modern life, the story is also influenced by the press and more so by the anonymous world of Twitter. It is not high literature, but a good read for a wet Sunday afternoon.

DISGRACE

JM Coetzee. (Vintage 1999. ISBN-13: 978-0099289524. RRP £8.99 paperback)



There are many benefits of attending medical meetings, and a recommendation to read this book made during a late night “discussion session” was one. I had been aware that Coetzee had won the Nobel Prize for Literature was not familiar with his work.

This book is set in post apartheid South Africa – no rainbow nation here. No jubilation, no joy in diversity. This is what I call a “hard” book to read. The themes are difficult and troubling, the characters far from endearing, and even the most sympathetic one does not behave as this reader feels they should. The story told by another author in another style would be unpalatable, but Coetzee’s storytelling style makes this a powerful story of individuals in transition in a nation in painful transition.

When asked for “the best” book I have ever read “Disgrace” is my answer.

TINKER TAILOR SOLDIER SPY

John Le Carré. (Sceptre, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0340993767. RRP £8.99 paperback)



I am a big fan of the John Le Carré’s cold war novels and found it difficult to choose only one. Unlike his more recent novels which have a contemporary

setting, the cold war novels are set in a time a little removed from our immediate experience and our appreciation of them may be coloured by this. Le Carré of course had worked for MI5 and MI6, with his cover, it is said, being blown by Kim Philby.

This is a novel populated by men, with the exception of Connie Sachs, an analyst with an encyclopaedic memory, and references to Smiley’s erstwhile wife, Ann.

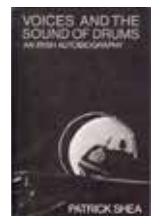
This is ultimately a story driven as much by character as by storyline. The basic storyline is simple – Smiley is reeled back in from an uncomfortable retirement to find a possible “mole”. Each time I come to the story, or see a rerun of the television serialisation of the book, I am still slightly taken aback when the mole is eventually revealed.

There are blurred lines between good and ill; “they” are more like “us” than is comfortable; no character is free from their own guilt. The truth is always bathed in shades of grey.

Now read The Spy who Came in from the Cold.

VOICES AND THE SOUND OF DRUMS. AN IRISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Patrick Shea. (Blackstaff Press 1981. ISBN-13: 978-0856402470. Out of print c. £3-£6 paperback)



As I write this I have to confess to having met Paddy Shea in his later years.

The book is often introduced as being written by the first Catholic to have reached the position of Permanent Secretary in the Northern Ireland Civil Service since Bonaparte Wyse. However the book is so much more than this. About half the book is taken up by his memories of his childhood and school days. Born in 1908, the son of an Irish speaking RIC officer, his early days encompassed the Home Rule Bill of 1914 – in celebration of which he remembers his father taking him to a bonfire, the First World War, and the Easter Rising. As he approaches and enters his teenage

years he relates his recollections and experiences of the Treaty, irregulars, Black and Tans, turbulence and partition. Rather than the history of academics, it is written about the people he met and is written with a soft and generous touch. He describes how years later he found an old notebook of his father's and under the name of a man known to be a leader of a flying column was written, "Treat with respect. He has shown kindness towards wounded men".

Flags have always caused problems in NI. Shea was involved in two skirmishes. The first concerned the jubilee of George V – in Enniskillen, the Ministry of Labour flew the union flag, only for it to be taken down by Customs and Excise in favour of flying their own flag. Tommy the cleaner had several trips up the flagpole before their seniors in Belfast reached a final decision. The second was on the death of George V – parliament sitting so flag should be flying, monarch dead flag should be at half-mast. A decision for the Head of Civil Service!

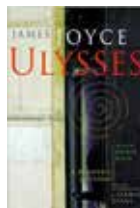
Shea describes his Civil Service career with remarkable generosity given the fact he had undoubtedly spent too many years in grades below that which he ultimately reached.

Like all men of substance, Shea had another side to his personality and for him it was a love and appreciation of the arts. He wrote a number of short plays, some broadcast on Radio **Éireann** and the BBC.

For his assessment of the politicians he encountered – read the book.

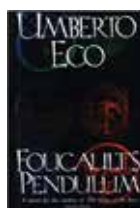
ULYSSES

James Joyce. (Wordsworth Editions 2010. ISBN-13: 978-1840226355. RRP £1.99 paperback).



FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM

Umberto Eco. (Vintage 2001. ISBN-13: 978-0099287155. RRP £9.99 paperback).



I will finish with two books – 2 that have defeated me in spite of multiple attempts to complete.

The first is James Joyce's "Ulysses". The second is Umberto Eco's "Foucault's Pendulum"

As I pondered what I might actually say about two novels I have not actually read,

I did find a dubious link between them by random slouching on the Internet. There is an International James Joyce Foundation (<https://joycefoundation.osu.edu>) of which Umberto Eco is a trustee!

I went back and looked at my copy of Ulysses, which I have had for many years – there is a London to Barcelona boarding pass at page 22, the extent of my last foray into it. On looking more closely at this it is billed as "A Reader's Edition" edited by Danis Rose. Now this is when it really becomes interesting, and I was introduced to the world, occasionally bitchy, of Joycean scholarship, the Joyce estate and the fierce and litigious protection of the this by Joyce's grandson Stephen (who insisted being called Stephen James) until 2012 when the final copyrights expired.

Ultimately my brain likes novels with a standard construction, a storyline based in some semblance reality, so the style of Ulysses and the esotericism of Foucault's Pendulum are beyond what my brain was designed to appreciate.

So instead of fighting with the impossibility of ever reading these novels, go listen to Allergri's Miserere (The Sixteen, Harry Christophers)

