

3.12 Recommending Aussie Books

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano and twinkly triangle]

Angourie [host]

Hello, and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast and book club about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[fade out: theme music]

Angourie [host]

Though I know most of my listeners are from the US, and you guys are going into fall, where I am this week it has been delightfully sunny and warm. Spring is in the air, and it's just reminded me how much I love the smell of the long-awaited summer. That being said, I could do without the hay fever and swooping magpies. Now, if you haven't been here before and you can't quite place my accent, I am Australian, and when I'm not working overseas, I live in Melbourne, which is where I am now. Though Melbourne isn't exactly known for its sunny weather, it's certainly been spoiling us with sun this past week.

I started tracking my reading two years ago, and since I've been doing that, I've noticed the dismally low number of Australian books I read each year. Like, it's ... it's embarrassing. So this month for the book club, I've chosen a YA Aussie novel called *Catching Teller Crow* by Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekiel [Ez-EE-kiehl] Kwaymullina. This is also published under the title *The Things She's Seen* in the US. Now, this is a ghost story to lead us into the Halloween season, and I'll be discussing that on the podcast on Sunday the 27th, so you still have two weeks to read it! In keeping with this theme, I have decided to make the next two episodes all about Aussie literature, and this week I'll be recommending some of my favourite Aussie books.

To begin with – [laughs] – I should get all self-indulgence out of the way! But it would be remiss of me to not mention Aussie books that I have a particular connection with. And I'm not doing this out of obligation or promotion, but because I honestly really recommend and love these books. But I guess, you know, take these first few with a grain of salt because I will obviously be biased.

So firstly, I want to recommend *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey, which is a YA historical fiction novel published in 2009. Now, if you're Aussie and went to high school in the last ten years, there's a good chance that you actually studied this book. It won the WA Premier's Book Awards, and was also shortlisted for the Miles Franklin award, and has been lauded as a modern Australian classic. It was also adapted into a film in 2015 and I was in that movie. Again, I'm biased here.

[fade in: ominous sounding low pitched and high pitched droning synth]

Jasper Jones follows quiet, book-loving, thirteen-year-old Charlie Bucktin growing up in rural WA in 1965. His world is turned upside down when a young girl goes missing ... Because he knows what happened.

[fade out: ominous sounding music]

So I first read this book in 2015, when I auditioned for the film adaptation. I finished reading it on the plane, actually, to my final call-back in Sydney. And I really loved it – I was just in awe of the writing, the way the story was crafted, all these little threads that had been woven through the narrative. This book is quite simple, really, you know, it's a coming of age story, but it also encompasses so many themes and issues. It talks about love and bravery, family relationships, racism and violence, and ultimately what it's like to grow up in a conservative Australian country town in the 1960s. Oh, and it's also about cricket. [laughs] Five years after being in the film adaptation, I still cherish the experience of working on that set and getting to be a part of that story. It's got so much heart to it, and so much emotion, and we also just had the best time filming it. So of course I highly recommend the book, but if you're pressed for time, I guess the movie's okay, too. This one is for fans of the film *Stand by Me*, or the book *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. Trigger warnings for racism, violence, and sexual assault.

My next recommendation is also a book – [laughs] – that was turned into a film adaptation that I was in, and this is *The Women in Black* by Madeleine St John: an adult historical fiction novel published in 1993. This is one I've talked about frequently on the podcast, but in case you've missed it, I'm gonna talk about it again. Also because I just love this book so much. Madeleine St. John was born and raised in Australia, but moved to England in 1968, where she remained until she passed. She began to write novels in the early 90s, towards the end of her life, *The Women in Black* being the first. It's her only novel to be set in Australia, and it's understood to be partly autobiographical.

[fade in: upbeat old timey jazz music with trumpets]

The Women in Black follows an ensemble cast of women working at a women's department store in 1959 Sydney. The lives of these women begin to change and intertwine when a young girl named Lisa arrives as a temporary sales assistant for the Christmas period.

[fade out: jazz music]

So I read this book after I was cast in the film adaptation and before we started filming, but I had already fallen in love with the story from the film script. And the script is so faithful to the book. This story is all about women and their lives, and how each of these women finds love and happiness. It's a really subtle, character-driven novel, but it's quite fast-paced and fun, and filled with joy and laughter. It's not without witty commentary, though, of what it's like to be a woman in 1950s Australia. If you'd like to watch the film, it's called *Ladies in Black*. The title had to be changed in order to avoid confusion with the film *Men in Black*.

But I also highly, highly recommend the book, it's so delightful and heart-warming and I really want to reread it now. This one is for fans of the film *Brooklyn* with Saoirse Ronan, or the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid. If you want to know more about my experience in working on film adaptations of books, of that's something you're interested in, then there's a whole episode about that which I will link in the show notes.

And I promise this is the last Aussie novel that I'm gonna recommend that I have directly been involved with, and that is *There Was Still Love* by Favel Parrett. This is a YA historical fiction novel published in 2019. My special connection with this one is that I had the privilege of narrating the audiobook.

[fade in: soft piano music in a minor key]

There Was Still Love tells the story of twin sisters in Czechoslovakia, at first separated by the Nazi invasion when one sister leaves to Australia, and then kept apart by the Cold War. Flash forward to the 1980s, and one sister is raising a grandchild in Melbourne, while the other is raising a grandchild in Prague.

[fade out: piano music]

The thing that makes this book feel so truthful and raw to me is that it's based on the author's own experience. So her paternal grandmother helped raise her in Melbourne, while her grandmother's sister raised Favel's cousin in Prague. So you really feel that truth and that emotion in the writing. It's a heart-wrenching story about memory, and immigration, and homesickness, and compromise, and of course, love. I really love stories about dislocation and homesickness, so this was one I just really connected with. As I mentioned before, I narrated the audiobook! So, if you want to hear me read it out loud to you, that is an opportunity you can take! I'll have all the links in the show notes, as always. This one is for fans of the film *Casablanca*, or the novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick.

Okay, that's it! That's all the novels that I have connections to out of the way! [laughs] Next up, I would like to recommend an Aussie novel I read recently that I don't think gets nearly enough hype: *On the Jellicoe Road* by Melina Marchetta. This is a YA contemporary novel published in 2006. Melina Marchetta is a prolific Aussie YA writer, the author of *Looking for Alibrandi*, which was also made into a film that is an Aussie classic.

[fade in: low pitched and high pitched droning synth with echoey drums]

On the Jellicoe Road is the story of Taylor Markham, a seventeen-year-old girl who lives at the boarding school on the Jellicoe Road, after her mother abandoned her when she was just eleven. This particular summer, Taylor begins to discover secrets about her family and her past.

[fade out: droning synth]

You guys, this book made me cry, which is very rare, nowadays. It's a beautiful story about loss, family, identity, all set against the backdrop of outback Australia. I love stories that focus on what identity means through connection to family, and this book explores that with such subtlety and emotion. But it's also really funny, which I loved! And it also has a sweet romance, and wonderful friendships, and overall it's a really well-rounded YA novel. I read this one while I was living alone in America, and it made me feel pretty homesick, but it was also a bit of an antidote to my homesickness, as well. When I was thinking about comparisons for this one so you'd kind of know what vibe it is, I really struggled because I think it's such a unique story with so many defining elements. So I'm gonna give a few recommendations. So for films, I'd say maybe *Dirty Dancing* and *Hunt for the Wilder People*, which are two very different movies! But they're both coming-of-age stories set in kind of a restricted environment. So you know, *Dirty Dancing* you've got the lodge, and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, you know it's a very small cast, you're out in rural New Zealand. So those are kind of similar elements, I guess. For novels, I would liken it to *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi or *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo. Also for fans of *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, and *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, cos those two books also, you know, follow orphans who kind of find a new connection or a new meaning of the word family. But, these are – so many comparisons, just read the book!

Next up is the most recent Australian novel I that read, which is *Lilian's Story* by Kate Grenville. This is an adult historical, kind of fictionalised biography of sorts, published in 1985. Kate Grenville is a well-known name in Australian fiction – she wrote *The Secret River*, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin. It was also adapted into a successful play, and then again into a limited series – which, fun fact, I auditioned for and I didn't get it!

[fade in: synth drone harmony in a major key]

Lilian's Story is *Lilian's story: a girl born in Australia in the year of Federation, 1901, and her life as a girl, a young woman, and then an adult.*

[fade out: synth drone]

This novel was inspired by Bea Miles, who was known as Sydney's quote-unquote "iconic eccentric" in the ... I guess 40s, 50s and 60s. She was born in 1902, came from a wealthy family and was well-educated, but was committed to a mental hospital for two years, and after that, she lived on the streets in Sydney, and would ride around in taxi cabs and recite Shakespeare for money. In the foreword to *Lilian's Story*, Grenville says the inspiration sparked when she asked herself how a young woman in that era becomes such an eccentric personality living on the streets. This book is told in a very experimental, fragmented style, and I guess it is technically historical fiction, but feels very modern. It's an exploration of identity and self-expression. This one is for fans of the film *Frances Ha*, or the novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. Trigger warnings for negative depictions of mental health issues and sexual assault.

Okay, I notice I've included a lot of historical fiction in here, but none of it feels like historical fiction, you know? Like, most of these books were written about time periods that actually crossed over with the author's lifetime, so just don't be afraid by the label "historical

fiction"! But next up I'm going to recommend something more modern: *Amelia Westlake* by Erin Gough. This is a YA contemporary novel published in 2018.

[fade in: upbeat, poppy synth music in a major key]

Our story follows two girls at the prestigious Rosemead Grammar: perfect prefect Harriet Price, and notorious bad girl Will Everheart. This unlikely pairing team up to expose the school's many problems, but will they jeopardise their futures along the way?

[fade out: pop music]

This is a really fun and sweet contemporary YA that's probably erring more on the side of middle-grade. And when I read it, it just really felt like a palette cleanser. At that time I had been reading serious, sad, adult books, and reading this one was just so refreshing. And even though it is, you know, bright and happy, it also doesn't shy away from more serious topics like sexual harassment, homophobia, and racism. I think it gets the balance exactly right, and that's what I really liked about it. It wasn't a perfect five star for me, you know, it was a little cliché at times, but it's also modern and realistic, and I think perfect for younger readers. Also, there is a queer love story at the centre of it, which just made my heart sing. This one is for fans of the film *Mean Girls*, or the novel *Watch Us Rise* by Renée Watson and Ellen Hagan. Trigger warnings for sexual assault and harassment, and homophobia.

Next up I'm going to recommend a sci-fi book, which is a little different for me, and that is *Terra Nullius* by Claire G. Coleman. This is an adult light sci-fi / speculative fiction novel published in 2017. I was going to write my own description for this one, like I did with all the others, but the description on Goodreads is just so intriguing and mysterious, so I will read that one out for you:

[fade in: ominous deep bass drone]

The Natives of the Colony are restless. The Settlers are eager to have a nation of peace, and to bring the savages into line. Families are torn apart, reeducation is enforced. This is not Australia as we know it. this is not the Australia of our history.

[fade out: ominous bass]

I read this book last year on recommendation from the Reading Women podcast, where they did an episode on Australian and New Zealand fiction. I don't read a lot of sci-fi, so I was kind of apprehensive going into this one, but this isn't very intense sci-fi, it's quite light. So, if you're new to that genre like I am, then don't be scared, give it a go. *Terra Nullius* is an exploration of Australia's colonisation and the violence against First Nations peoples, all through the lens of sci-fi. It's tense, and it's thrilling, and it's kind of like an adventure novel, I guess. But it's also an examination of Australia's culture today. I don't want to say too much about this one, because there is a twist. So, I just recommend going into this one without knowing much. This one is for fans of the film *Sweet Country*, or the novel *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Demaline. Trigger warning for violence.

For my last fiction recommendation, I'm going to recommend a novel I studied in Literature class at school: *The Man Who Loved Children* by Christina Stead. This novel is set in the US, but Christina Stead was an Australian author, who has a literary prize named after her here in Australia. It was published in 1940, but only gained recognition and acclaim when it was reissued in 1965.

[fade in: high-pitched twinkly piano music in a minor key]

The Man Who Loved Children is a study of family life. Our family here is the Pollits: the father Sam, his second wife Henny, his daughter from his first marriage, Louie, and the other six children. Over the years, we follow the family members' secrets, lies, outbursts, and tantrums.

[fade out: piano music]

I don't often get the opportunity to talk about this book on the podcast, or to recommend it, because it's pretty weird. It's 550 pages long, it's very dense with rambling paragraphs and grotesque descriptions. And it's painful and intense, but so very much worth it. It's a study of narcissism and toxic masculinity, and how this effects the dynamic between husband, wife, and daughter. The thing that makes this story so fascinating to me is that it's predominantly autobiographical. So the character of the father is based on Christina Stead's own father, and the fourteen-year-old girl, Louie, is a representation of herself. When the book was published, she actually sent a copy of it to – not her father – but her father's new wife. As a sort of warning, if you will. I find that little bit of trivia absolutely fascinating. As well as her incredible character work, Stead's command of language in this novel is just phenomenal. Studying passages of her writing was so rewarding because everything is so rich in detail. So if you're up for a challenge, I highly recommend. This one is for fans of the films *Marriage Story* and *Revolutionary Road*, or the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. Trigger warnings for sexual assault.

Finally, I have some nonfiction to recommend. The first book is *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Nugi Garimara, also known as Doris Pilkington. This is a biography published in 1996.

This is the true story of three Indigenous girls who ran away from the Moore River Native Settlement, where they had been taken to be assimilated into white colonialist culture. Molly, Daisy and Gracie were just three of many Indigenous children who were part of the Stolen Generations. To make their way back home, these three girls followed the rabbit-proof fence, a pest-exclusion fence that cut through Western Australia, from north to south.

So the author is the daughter of Molly, who was one of the girls, and she wrote the book after hearing her mother tell her stories about her experience. And this book isn't told with much embellishment or emotion. It's very straight-forward, presenting the facts of what happened. It's a really important story, and it's one that I think everyone should read – especially if you've seen the film adaptation which was really popular.

And my other nonfiction recommendation is actually a series of books: the *Growing Up in Australia* series from Black, Inc. Books. So far they've published *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, *Growing Up African in Australia*, *Growing Up Queer in Australia* and *Growing Up Disabled in Australia*. So these books are anthologies of personal essays from people all across the country, on their experiences of growing up in Australia. So I've read *Growing Up African in Australia*, and I'm currently halfway through *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, which I'm reading for next week's episode, so look forward to my thoughts on that. The other two in the series are obviously on my TBR and I haven't read them yet, but I can tell you that I read *Growing Up African in Australia* and I really loved it. It's kind of hard for me to express why I liked this book so much, or to evaluate it or review it any way, because I don't think you can rate or review someone's life experience. It's just a really insightful and beautiful collection of personal essays, and you get so many different perspectives, and people from so many different walks of life with different experiences. And it's just a joy to read. And also a privilege that so many people were able to open up and share their experience with the world. So, I really enjoyed it, and I guess I would recommend it to anyone who likes documentaries or nonfiction.

That's it for recommendations this week, I hope you've found some books to add to what I'm sure is an ever-growing TBR pile – I know mine is. I mentioned at the beginning of this episode that I am still mortified at the small number of Aussie books I have read, and so next week, I'll be taking you with me on a journey to read more Aussie literature. I'll be reading some Aussie classics, some newer titles, some nonfiction ... It's gonna be lots of fun, so make sure you tune in.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano and twinkly triangle]

Just a reminder that our book club pick is *Catching Teller Crow* by Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekiel Kwaymullina, also published as *The Things She's Seen*. Can't wait to discuss that one on the 27th. If you want to know about the book club picks further in advance, or ask me any questions, or if you have any recommendations or suggestions, you can always follow me on Instagram @the_community_library. Until next week, I hope you're staying safe and healthy, and maybe reading some Aussie fiction. Or, if you're not Aussie, maybe some fiction from your own home country. I'll talk to you next week. Bye!

[fade out: theme music]