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BOOKS

BOOK CLUB

READING IS *DU JOUR* RIGHT NOW WITH SOME LIMITS ON WHAT WE CAN DO. REVEL IN THE JOY OF ESCAPE THAT IT OFFERS WITH THIS COMPELLING BUNCH OF PAGE TURNERS.

REVIEWS ANNABEL LAWSON

THE OTHER PASSENGER

Louise Candlish,
 Simon & Schuster, \$29.99

How does she do it? From the very first page, I wanted to know these two men better. Jamie's living in a four-storey Georgian house in Greenwich and he takes the riverboat to London on weekdays. He must be a sheikh or an oligarch surely to live so splendidly in the most expensive city in the world. No. He works part time in a coffee bar. The younger man, Kit, grumbles about his own meagre existence though he does have a gorgeous girlfriend Melia. Tomorrow, Jamie won't get to the coffee bar. In fact, nothing will be as normal from this day forth. Once you've turned the last page you'll concede that it could happen to anyone. The chance of being believed if a trickster has brains and charm turns on a whim of fate.

THE MOTION OF THE BODY THROUGH SPACE

Lionel Shriver, The Borough Press, \$32.99

Fifteen years ago, Shriver chilled us all to the bone with *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, a mother's musings about the unobstructed trajectory of her son from troubled toddler to teenage mass murderer. Every one of Shriver's novels has been unique but I wish that she could write another novel about this intriguing family that she's created for us. Remington and Seranata Abraham live in Hudson in New York State. They have two adult children (referred to by Remington, regrettably, as 'white trash'). Seranata has always been a keen athlete. Now she has a bad knee. A lucrative career in voiceover should not have been affected by her injury. But on one occasion, voicing a character for a cartoon, she had to wear mo-caps and roll around on the floor. Her knee went into spasm. She was sent home.

The crunch, however, was to come. The director told her, "The audio companies have gotten so much grief on social media for using white performers to read, you know, black, Chinese, whatever dialogue that it's not worth the hassle. A few producers have brought in, you know, People Of Colour to read those lines, but that makes the project way more expensive. So, if there's racial or ethnic stuff in the book, it's easier to hire a POC to read the whole thing. May be hard on veterans like you. Still the reasoning goes that the privileged have had their day." Meanwhile, Remington has been fired after a long and distinguished career as a civil engineer and has had his pension frozen. Like the voiceover debacle, wokeness is the cause. Idle at home, he decides to train for a triathlon. He hires a personal trainer for \$1200 a month. Her obsession sculpts him into a 65-year-old Adonis-like figure. Does this bode well? Never has Shriver been this uproarious and that's saying something. I won't spoil it for you but underneath the high comedy is truth. There are people out there who aren't going to like it. Shriver, be careful.

A TREACHEROUS COUNTRY

K.M. Kruijnk, Allen & Unwin, \$29.99

With this novel Kruijnk won the Vogel Award. The panel was unanimous. At first sight, it seems to be a retelling of Voltaire's *Candide*. Like *Candide*, Gabriel Fox ventures into a dangerous world with only his wits to save him and they are consistently below par. This amiable nincompoop arrives from England in the early 1800s with a mission to accomplish in Hobart. He hopes to find the elusive Maryanne Maginn and be rewarded with his employer's consent to marriage with her young relative, the clammily indifferent Susannah. His companion

is William who he wrongly believes to be a cannibal. Coming from a dismal family, Gabriel weathers the setbacks in his journey fairly well; he's used to disappointment. The ending of this rambling, genial tale has been much praised although Kruijnk herself says merely "I was tired."

THE MIRROR & THE LIGHT

Hilary Mantel, Harper Collins, \$45

The third book in the Thomas Cromwell trilogy opens minutes after the French executioner with his towering curved sword has lopped off Anne Boleyn's head. The spectators leave for breakfast. Cromwell made it happen though, to be fair, it was a choice between her head or his own. Mantel is in top form. Much is presented in an orderly fashion despite Henry VIII's often random changes of direction. We already know plenty about Henry's wives from books, films and television series — squat, placid Jane who gives him a son but dies days later. Poor Anne of Cleves who must crawl away. "She does not please me." (However, she outlived Henry and the other wives.) Number five, petite pulchritudinous Katherine Howard, was the Lolita at the Tudor court. Henry marries her on the day Thomas Cromwell is executed by royal decree. Katherine Parr is clearly Mantel's favourite. Slinky, subtle, and appearing only briefly. The book ends before she becomes wife number six. In addition to all the domestic goings-on there's a pageant of courtiers, diplomats, scheming women and clergymen in disarray. (In 1536, the monasteries were seized and the monks turned out onto the byways.) Later, there was rebellion and threat of an invasion. Cromwell was always the fixer. The Duke of Norfolk, a fine soldier but poison to all his relatives (among them, queen number two and five) was finally



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sent to the Tower. On the day Norfolk was to be beheaded Henry died and the prisoner walked free. He died at the age of 80 in his own bed. That's not a spoiler because it happens after the end of the book. However, it's worth mentioning because it's an example of capricious fate under a ruler who wanted to make England great again.

DADDY COOL

Darleen Bungey, Allen & Unwin, \$32.99

Most of us know that Geraldine Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize. A lesser known fact is that her sister Darleen Bungey has also won prizes for her biographies of Arthur Boyd and John Olsen. What Bungey has unearthed about their father Lawrie Brooks was astonishing to them both. Before he met their mother Gloria and made her his fourth and final wife he'd been a Hollywood sensation. Thanks to letters between Lawrie Brooks (formerly Robert Cutter) and a daughter from another marriage

Bungey was able to reconstruct in minute detail the extremes which thrust Robert through the mayhem of the 1930s (his records outsold Bing Crosby's) and then the war years when he travelled the world as part of a combat/entertainment unit. Bungey digs back into her father's childhood, which comprised flawed parents and loving grandparents but was forever blighted by the death of his older brother. The facts alone would have been more than a blockbuster read but Bungey addresses contradictions and cul de sacs. She pursues an explanation. Gloria isn't much help. They met after the war when Robert/Lawrie was on the run from trouble in the US. He knew instantly that she was the one he had been waiting for all his adult life. He told her about Ruby, the seductress whose photo was still tucked away among Lawrie's few possessions. That marriage had been the Agony and the Ecstasy. Gloria was different. "Don't worry about being the first, just make

sure you're the last" was all she would say to her daughters. Bungey's words shine. It's the combination of a jewel of a subject and a phenomenal writer.

BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME

Kate Hilton, Allen & Unwin, \$29.99

Hilton wrote this novel partly as therapy for her own divorce. There are seven men with speaking parts in this expertly devised comic family drama. Two are useless, two lurk in the shadows, two are modern men in retreat from easy choices and one is Peter Pan. On the distaff side we have a domestic goddess, a once world famous feminist, a brilliant lawyer taking an almighty risk, an advertising supremo, a journalist, a mysterious doctor returned from foreign parts and an insufferable single mum. I nearly forgot Oscar, 16, belatedly presented with the one thing he wanted above all else and, bless him, it works out well. *cf*

PHOTOGRAPHY AND STYLING NICOLA SEVITT

