

fiction reviews



Fiona Purdon

WHEN Samuel was two years old his mother, Karen Collum, noticed him blowing kisses to fellow shoppers who passed the trolley in which he was sitting. Collum also paid attention to the effect the kisses had on random strangers and knew one day the episode would make a beautiful story.

The idea for *Samuel's Kisses* was born. "It was a beautiful, innocent and lovely thing Samuel did and I was fascinated with the change in people's behaviour when they were blown a kiss, seeing their frown turn into a smile and they would interact with him," she says.

Collum says people would play peek-a-boo with Samuel but kiss recipients in the book who juggled and danced were figments of her imagination. Collum says she wanted to get across the message that one small person could have a positive impact on many.

"This book, as soon as I wrote it, I thought it was something special," she says.

"I also very strongly believe that children can make a difference."

Samuel's Kisses has also been published in Korea while Collum has had two picture books published in the United Kingdom.

"It's very surreal; my whole dream is coming true. I had always hoped to become a career author," Collum says.

She has just moved from Brisbane to Ballarat with her husband and four children - Samuel, 6, twins Jacob and Matthew, 3, and Hannah, six months.

"To be a successful children's author you need to see the world through the eyes of children and fortunately I have four kids so I can see the world through their eyes," she says.

Collum gave illustrator Serena Geddes a photograph of Samuel, who she used as a model.

"Serena's work went far beyond anything I could imagine. I wanted the kisses to leave some sort of trail and I was excited to see that there is a beautiful trail of hearts.

"Serena has brought the story to life in such a powerful way."

Collum lived in Brisbane for seven years and took up writing five years ago when she became a stay-at-home mum and had the time to "take my dream seriously". She was a school teacher in Tasmania and Victoria for seven years. She is now working on several picture books, rising at 5am several mornings a week to write.

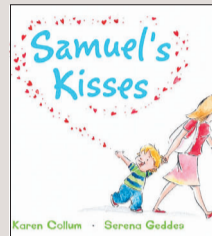
"In fewer than 500 words you have to keep kids' attention, to tell a proper story, to touch people in some way and capture the heart of the story - that's why it takes so much work," she says.

"Writing is what keeps me sane. Writing is the part of my life that is for me and enables me to give to everyone else.

"I'm at my happiest when writing is a part of my day-to-day life."

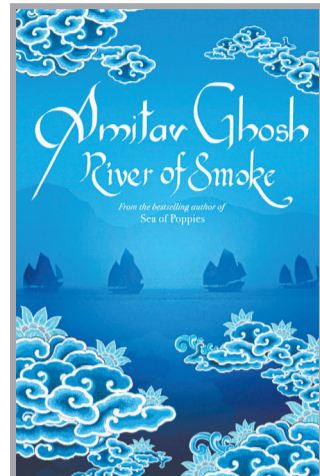
Samuel's Kisses is a Little Big Book Club selection for June.

For more enjoyable selections, go to www.thelittlebigbookclub.com.au. For information on Karen Collum's books go to www.karencollum.com.au or phone 03 5330 1093



Samuel's Kisses
Karen Collum
New Frontier,
\$24.95

River of Smoke
Amitav Ghosh
John Murray, \$32.99



AS a girl in a village where murals are painted on every surface, Deeti's specialty is to paint the ordinary mortals who frolic around the feet of the deities.

She marries and discovers painting is forbidden in her husband's village. Then, one day during a storm, she stumbles upon a cave within a spur of limestone, and this becomes both her canvas and her shrine.

For the rest of her life, the unlettered Deeti paints stories, events and adventures on the cave walls - the history of everyone and everything she knows.

With this motif, Amitav Ghosh sets the backdrop for *River of Smoke*, a polyphonic history of the 19th century and of the Opium Wars in particular.

From Deeti's cave on the island of Mauritius, Ghosh sails to the markets of Singapore, lands in the warren of opium dens in Canton and battles oceans to encounter Napoleon in exile on St Helena.

Crisscrossing continents and generations, he charts the ordinary lives of indentured servants, merchants, orphans, imperialists, smugglers, painters, and an assortment of others.

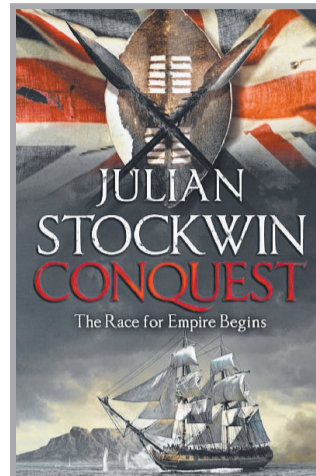
River of Smoke is the second in the Ibis Trilogy, the first of which is the bestselling *Sea of Poppies*.

Even on its own, the novel is an epic mural, breathtaking in ambition. With so many characters, dialects, and cultures, it can be occasionally heavy-going but well worth the extra effort.

Ghosh stands out as one of the masters of the contemporary novel, and *River of Smoke* is an astonishing record of a century of imperialism and greed.

Adair Jones

Conquest
Julian Stockwin
Hodder & Stoughton, \$32.99



"BEAR up into the wind, brail the main and let fly foresheets!" No, that's not me rounding Green Island after a pleasant day on Moreton Bay with friends.

It's the voice of Captain Thomas Kydd preparing the crew of the good ship *L'Aurore* to do something heroic around the Cape of Good Hope in the year of our Lord 1805.

And if there's one thing that Kydd is good at, it's being heroic. This is the umpteenth book in the continuing series of the nautical adventures of Thomas Kydd.

This latest instalment sees him and his trusty crew, fresh from victory with Nelson at Trafalgar, dispatched to the pointy bit at the bottom of Africa to play their part in a bold plan to relieve the Dutch of their colonial possession.

But it's not only the Hollanders they have to worry about - Napoleon still runs Europe and it's an arm wrestle between his fleet and the British to see who rules the waves.

Historical fiction is a tricky beast. As a writer you have to keep your history in proper shape while combining it with a narrative that someone actually wants to read.

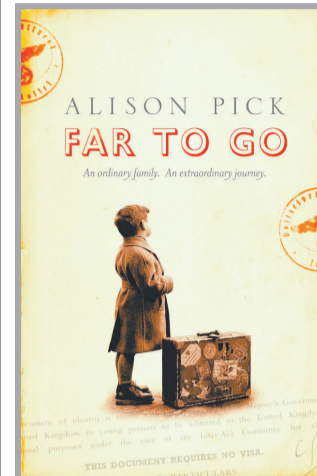
Score two out of two for Julian Stockwin.

The history is accurate and only occasionally in your face - such as his superfluous description of Nelson's funeral - while the adventure is all jolly exciting.

And hardly a woman in sight! Like sailing the Great Barrier Reef, it's not deep but it is engrossing.

Ian Barry

Far To Go
Alison Pick
Hachette, \$29.99



FRESH horrors of the Holocaust seem painfully real, as Jewish parents Pavel and Anneliese Bauer struggle with how best to save their young son Pavik.

Canadian author Alison Pick brings history alive for readers as she forces her characters - loving parents who are wealthy, secular Jews - to make a tragic choice between two unbearable options. As the Nazis invade Czechoslovakia, the Bauers must decide whether to keep their only child with them as they flee to an uncertain future in Prague, or try to find him a place with Kindertransport (also known as the Refugee Children Movement) bound for Britain.

It's an absorbing narrative that shines a light on a rescue movement that saved almost 10,000 children sent without their parents in the months from November 1938 until the start of World War II.

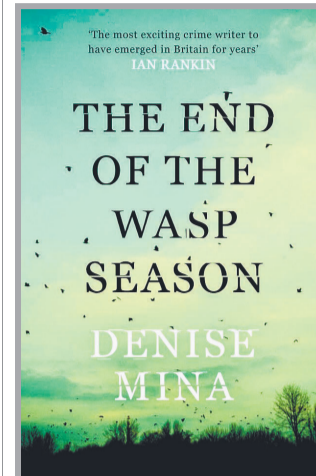
Part historical fiction and part thriller, Pick manages to keep us guessing as to the desperate family's decision, as rumours of death camps spread. It's hard not to draw comparisons between the powerless couple and the fate of the tragic maternal character Sophie, in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*.

Pavik's beloved nanny Marta is a central character and it's through her eyes that we really understand the demoralising changes forced on the once-grand lifestyle of the Bauers, as they struggle to survive. Pick's narrative alternates between past and present, and has many voices, but it is seamless in transition and testimony to her talents.

Betrayal is a constant theme in the harrowing novel but an unexpected ending proves love really does conquer all. A gripping read.

Julia Ross

The End of the Wasp Season
Denise Mina
Orion, \$24.99



The End of the Wasp Season is engaging and well written from the opening paragraph to the very last word. And there are not many crime novels that can boast that.

The story deals with two deaths - a suicide of an unpopular millionaire banker and the apparently random murder of a well-liked, quiet young woman.

His death leaves a shattered wife and shredded children and her death shakes a genteel community to its foundations. But while each death is devastating to those around it, the two seem unrelated.

But once Detective Alex Morrow, heavily pregnant with twins, begins to unravel a deep and intricate web of lies around each death, she finds the threads are linked and that devastation has a ripple effect that runs deeper than even she thought possible.

The depth of the characters and the precision of the storytelling are what stand out in this novel. The story flows factually, emotionally and creatively. The author paints pictures that are real and accessible.

The scaffolding of the story - the people and the relationships - adds dimension and makes each new chapter a delicious pleasure. It is meaty without being weighty. As in life, the lines between heroes and villains and right and wrong become blurred as the truth is bent and fiction intersects with fact. Lovers of the crime genre will find *The End of the Wasp Season* a sheer, thrilling pleasure to read.

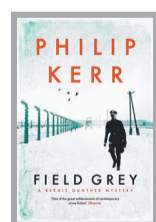
Jane Fynes-Clinton

REVIEW: FICTION

BERNIE Gunther is one of the strangest, most intriguing characters of today's fiction. The German policeman serves his country before and during World War II out of a sense of duty to his community. And his association with the darker elements of the Third Reich has left stains on his name, if not his soul.

But Gunther is his own man, an anti-hero of substance. And author Philip Kerr weaves a clever and credible tale of post-war intrigues and espionage around Gunther as Europe recovers from war.

There follows a vivid, engrossing tale of honours and deceptions that may disturb conventional thinking about the shades of wartime greys. War and politics can never be black and white in Gunther's world. Kerr's work is rich in period detail. A deal of this is done in flashbacks as Gunther relives past



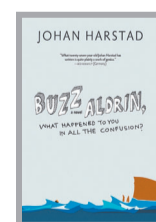
Field Grey
Philip Kerr
Quercus,
\$21.99

associations under heavy-handed questioning from US secret service agents looking to weed notorious war criminals out of Europe. Kerr's reading and research not only colour this compelling drama. Kerr's prose and Gunther's troubles highlight the humanity, and the darkness, on both sides. This is a magnificent thriller, written with the flair and depth of a John Le Carre classic, and just one of Kerr's novels featuring the hard-bitten Gunther.

Bruce McMahon

REVIEW: FICTION

PROLIFIC Norwegian writer Johan Harstad's first novel to be released in English, intriguingly titled *Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion?*, has seen him compared to Jonathan Safran Foer and other hipper-than-hip post-modern experimental authors for several reasons: his work moves at a leisurely, introspective pace, his favoured subject matter seems to be emotionally retarded young men drifting through a bizarre and contradictory world, and he appears to be fond of torturing the rules of grammar and challenging his readers' patience by writing ridiculously overlong sentences. Fortunately, Harstad's prose lacks the pretentiousness that sometimes mars Foer's work, and he composes his overly long sentences with more flair than this reviewer's clunky effort above. The novel chronicles the strange



Buzz Aldrin
Johan Harstad
UWA
Publishing,
\$34.95

journey of Mattias, who is thoroughly content with his quiet, unassuming existence. Mattias's cosy life unexpectedly disintegrates when his emotionally distant girlfriend leaves him and he loses his gardening job. Some might find the prose style to be a little too clever at times, and Mattias might be too bland and emotionally detached to be a truly engaging protagonist, but it's hard to dislike a novel that boasts such charm, wit and warmth.

Terry Oberg