

BOOK REVIEWS

From a search for true identity, journeying through the glorious British countryside, King Henry VIII and his obsession to find a wife who will provide him with a male heir to the throne, to the haunting memories surrounding the characters who lived in Milderhurst Castle and then flirting, dancing and mint juleps, enrapturing excitement and drama at a party in 1928 and coming down to earth in Landed a story about life for a boy with his grandfather on a Welsh farm as the boy grows up to find happiness and love of a sort in adulthood. All of these new resources can hopefully give us a good start to a brilliant year of great reading.

MAGNA SZUBANSKI

Reckoning

Writing in *The Australian* newspaper, reviewer Peter Craven described this memoir as 'an extraordinary hymn to the tragic heroism at the heart of ordinary life'. Other critics and readers have been equally laudatory, deeming this intimate and often heartbreaking book an instant Australian classic. Szubanski, who is best known for her comedic performances in television shows including *Kath & Kim*, describes her journey of self-discovery from a suburban childhood haunted by the demons of her father's espionage activities in wartime Poland and by her secret awareness of her sexuality, to the complex dramas of adulthood and her need to find out the truth about herself and her family.

BILL BRYSON

The Road to Little Dribbling

Twenty years ago, Bill Bryson journeyed around Britain to celebrate the place that had become adopted country. This book that resulted *Notes from a Small Island*, became an international bestseller and established his reputation as one of the most amusing and insightful travel writers on the planet. Now, in his first travel book for 15 years, Bryson once again sets off to explore the small island, journeying from Bognor Regis on the Sussex coast to Cape Wrath in the Scottish Highlands. The result is an acute perceptive and amusing insight into all that is best and worst about Britain today.

PHILIPPA GREGORY

The Other Boleyn Girl

The Other Boleyn Girl is a historical novel written by British author Philippa Gregory, loosely based on the life of 15th-century aristocrat Mary Boleyn, the sister of Anne Boleyn, of whom little is known. Inspired by the life of Mary, Gregory depicts the annulment of one of the

most significant royal marriages in English history and conveys the urgency of the need for a male heir to the throne. Much of the history is highly distorted in her account.

KATE MORETON

The Distant Hours

A long lost letter arrives in the post and Edie Burchill finds herself on a journey to Milderhurst Castle, a great but mouldering old house, where the Blythe spinsters live and where her mother was billeted 50 years before as a 13 year old child during WWII. The elder Blythe sisters are twins and have spent most of their lives looking after the third and youngest sister, Juniper, who hasn't been the same since her fiance jilted her in 1941.

Inside the decaying castle, Edie begins to unravel her mother's past. But there are other secrets hidden in the stones of Milderhurst, and Edie is about to learn more than she expected. The truth of what happened in 'the distant hours' of the past has been waiting a long time for someone to find it.

Morton once again enthralls readers with an atmospheric story featuring unforgettable characters beset by love and circumstance and haunted by memory, that reminds us of the rich power of storytelling.

KERRY GREENWOOD

Murder in the dark

It's Christmas, and Phryne has an invitation to the Last Best party of 1928, a four-day extravaganza being held at Werribee Manor house and grounds by the Golden Twins, Isabella and Gerald Templar. She knew them in Paris, where they caused a sensation. Phryne is in two minds about going when she starts receiving anonymous threats warning her against attending. She promptly decides to accept the invitation - after all, no one tells Phryne what to do. At the Manor, she is accommodated in the Iris room, and at the party meets two polo-playing women, a Goat lady (and goat), a large number of glamorous young men and a very rude child called Tarquin. The acolytes of the golden twins are smoking hashish and dreaming, and Phryne finds that the jazz is as hot as the drinks are cold and indulges in flirtations, dancing, and mint juleps. Heaven!

It all seems like good clean fun until three people are kidnapped, one of them the abominable child, and Phryne must puzzle her way through the cryptic clues of the scavenger hunt to retrieve the hostages and save the party from disaster.

TIM PEARS

Landed

Brought up in the Anglo-Welsh borders by an affectionate but alcoholic and feckless mother, Owen Ithell's sense of self is rooted in his long, vivid visits to his grandparents' small farm in the hills. There he is deeply impressed by his grandfather's primitive, cruel relationship with his animals and the land.

As an adult he moves away from the country of his childhood to an English city where he builds a new life, working as a gardener. He meets Mel, they have children. He believes he has found happiness—and love—of a sort.