

## TEAM READS

### Beyond the Book team members write about their current reading.

DeNel writes: During the last six months of my study leave (sabbatical), I have had the good fortune to live on the beach in southern Mexico. Life is simple here: no phones, no t.v., and no internet—unless you have a satellite, and we don't. That means most of my free time has been spent tackling my 'to read' list. Some of the books I recommend to readers of this webpage, others I don't.

For a long time, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* sat on my list because most of my academic friends praised it. I don't understand why, unless they read it in the 80s at the beginning of mass environmental consciousness. I thought the book boring, dated and the plot unlikely. The saving grace is the character development; it's always fun to see myself and my colleagues highlighted in comedic reality.

The prolific work of Anne Tyler can be found in its entirety in our village's small lending library. I chose *Back When We Were Grown Ups*. The story of a middle-aged woman who asks the big question of why are we here guides the reader to ask the same questions of herself, and maybe see some answers. With brilliant dialogue, and graphic character development, Tyler makes for good, smart beach reading.

In our research travels, we have spoken with so many voracious readers. Almost all of them in the past two years have read, and praised, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Because so many spoke of it, I didn't feel the need to read it. The many readers of our study unknowingly and slowly laid out the entire book for me—including the ending! So, instead of reading Hosseini's hugely successful book, I decided to read *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Describing the plight of women in Afghanistan through vivid characters, Hosseini paints a picture of sadness, despair and hope for oppressed women. I was left wondering how a male author could possibly know the intimate details of women's lives, but hopeful that his book reaches readers who have the means to make necessary changes.

I shared a good month of reading time with an English travel writer by the name of Isabella Tree. Her *Sliced Iguana* shed insight into the country that I've grown to love and admire. Weaving ancient history with contemporary political and cultural observations, Tree insightfully and humorously taught me to respect, listen and experience Mexico in new ways. As an academic, I felt a distinct absence of research citations, but realize I am not her main audience. When I travel to new places, I will be certain to check if my new favourite travel writer has herself commented on it.

My time here hasn't been entirely carefree. I was bitten by a Mexican bug that put me flat out for 11 days. Not one to lie around, I decided to tackle the Harry Potter series. I'd read the first one when it was published, but had decided after that that I wanted to read them all in succession. My illness allowed me to read three of the books, and forget my rumbling and painful stomach as I learned about charms, Quidditch and the universal forms of good and evil. Reading all of the books one after another was a treat. Much like watching an exceptional television series on DVD, I felt as if I was in a never-ending good movie. Daily life was peppered with language and images of the fantastical world J.K. Rowling so brilliantly created. When I finally turned the last page of the seventh tome, I felt a sadness one feels when packing a suitcase and boarding the plane home from a really fantastic holiday.

Since finishing HP, I have read *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion's memoir of the year after the death of her husband, editorial/writing partner and friend. Always an engaging author, Didion's personal reflections are inflected with facts and information gleaned from her fastidious research habit. *The Year* gave me a new appreciation of the grieving process and of death itself. I recommend it to anyone who is trying to help a loved one or friend through the death process.

If you love the Nova Scotia landscape, and its people, pick up Jean McNeil's *Interpreter of Silences*. That's really all I can remember about it, and it wasn't too long ago that I read it! Maybe that tells you exactly what I thought about it.

Like Danielle, I, too, read *Tenderness of Wolves: A Novel* by Stef Penney. I thought it was a tender human love story. I thought that Penney was light on the severity of northern Canadian winters (I've lived through a few, and know what it feels like to have frostbite). I also thought it odd how all of the characters spoke the same English dialect. What I did find fascinating, however, was the portrayal of the Hudson's Bay Company. As an American-born and bred Canadian, I am always fascinated by the divergent ideological beginnings of Canada and the US. I knew that the 'Company' was influential in Canadian development, but I didn't realize the extent of their power. While I didn't think this was a book worthy of the Costa Prize, I understand how 'otherness' can be interpreted and received. Hopefully, English readers will be intrigued enough to seek out Canadian historical writers who might shed additional different light on our country. (I recommend beginning with Rudy Wiebe and Margaret Lawrence.)

The cold north is an unlikely preferred theme when the temp is around 40c, but as the English say, 'there it is.' Last night I finished *Peace like a River*. Set in Minnesota and my home state of North Dakota, Leif Enger does not hold back on his descriptions of torrid winter blizzards and the characters such living produces. Using brilliant technique of recollection and first-person narrative through Ruben, an 11-year-old asthmatic, Enger produces a landscape the reader smells, feels and will always remember. (Have you ever smelled cold? I promise, it has a smell and Enger is able to bring it to you!) The jacket copy says that Enger has produced another Owen Meany, but I wouldn't go that far. Ruben is a lively, vivid character, but it's his feisty eight-year-old Western prose writing sister, Swede, who will stay with me forever. (Spoiler – kind of – she becomes a professor!)

Thanks to her recent travels, which afforded her good opportunities for novel-reading in noisy airports etc., Danielle has recently read Stef Penney's *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Alexander McCall Smith's *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* and Alice Hoffman's *Skylight Confessions*. The first two novels draw upon the detective/mystery genres, while Alice Hoffman's book is more of a realist fiction which charts the story of a New England family across three generations.

Although the faux-naïve style of McCall Smith is not really my cup of tea, I can see why so many readers fall in love with his protagonist, Patience. I'm sorry to have missed the recent BBC dramatisation of the first novel in this best-selling series – it would have been interesting to see how McCall Smith's nostalgic representation of Botswana translated on the screen. Penney's novel, meanwhile, is set in northern Ontario during 1867. I found the evocation of place to be fairly convincing, although the Canadian friend who read it after me felt that she had underestimated the extreme isolation of small communities during the mid-nineteenth-century (he also commented upon how all the characters speak the same kind of English!)

Whether or not these details engage or annoy the reader, Penney presents a compelling story: this was a proper 'page-turner' for me. Similarly, Hoffman kept me reading rather fervently, moving me to tears at least twice (and in public because I was on an aeroplane!), with her sensitive portrayal of loss, grief and haunting. The skylight of the title refers to the extraordinary 'glass house' designed by a family member who is an architect, and the literal building acts as a metaphor for the fragility of relationships which play out beneath the glass panelled roof.

Anouk's recent reading includes Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* and the wonderfully titled *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freak Show*, by the Berkeley linguist Geoffrey Nunberg.

*Blue Angel* is an academic novel, a genre which I'm coming to see as less concerned with university-specific plot twists and campus settings, and more about the merciless skewering of human failings for which academic contexts seem a somewhat incidental vehicle for transmission. The character at the centre of this novel, a tenured professor of creative writing whose days of productive writing are long behind him, is so wrapped up in himself and his infatuation for one of his students that he does not see his downfall barreling towards him along the pretty tree-lined avenues of his New England college. As readers, though, we can see it coming all too clearly.

Nunberg's *Talking Right* looks at the ways that US Republicans have manipulated certain words in the realm of public discourse in the US – terms like *liberal*, *elite*, *freedom* and *choice*. The metaphors, narratives and associations that have been yoked to these words have had a distorting effect, with the term *liberal elite*, for example, evoking a wider narrative in which those in the media, in academia and in Hollywood are portrayed as having undue, and undeserved, influence on public life. I found the sections discussing how the language of class has been gradually co-opted to refer to taste rather than socio-economic status to be the most interesting. Merely bringing up class in US politics results in the charge of 'inciting class warfare', and Nunberg argues that this has been an effective tool for the Republicans because once you stop being able to talk about class, it's much more difficult to point out that those with real power tend not to be the 'liberal elite' but rather the socio-economic elite.

Anna has just finished reading *What was Lost* by Catherine O'Flynn, a Birmingham based writer, published by Tindall Street Press. I have to say that I bore with the first chapter (it felt a little bit like a kids book), but by the time I got to the second I was hooked. It is based around a shopping centre, and the disappearance of a young girl, and follows the ramifications of the choices that various employees at the shopping centre have made. Thematically it explores the ramifications of commodity culture. Everyone in the novel is lost within the maze of their own lives, and within the shopping centre itself - I get the distinct impression that O'Flynn has been reading some Adorno and Horkheimer lately - I loved it, and there is a great ending! (You can [download](#) the first five chapters of *What was Lost* from the Radio 5 website.) I have also just finished Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* which I wasn't really feeling (I don't think I know enough about the US), and have just started Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* which, if the first chapter is anything to go by is like Beckett, Henry Green and Wyndham Lewis rolled into one, and is shaping up to

be the best thing I have read in a VERY long time, though Maus which is currently ranking highly would be a tough one to beat!