What is the Left Reading?

Everything from acting to better health.
We asked eight people on the left what they’ve been reading lately.

Meredith Burgmann
Politics lecturer, Macquarie University

When you have babies you don’t read any more. My hazy memories of what I was reading B.B. (before baby) are:

Jean Devanny, Sugar Heaven. A terrific, ideologically correct novel about the 1935 North Queensland sugar strike. Amanda Cross, Death in a Tenured Position. A feminist detective story — a great idea but not gripping enough. We are writing a better one about a feminist detective collective called Corpse at the Conference.

Richard Hyman and Robert Price (eds) The New Working Class? White Collar Workers and their Organisations. I had to read this for work but still found it entertaining and reasonably enlightening.

Vita Sackville-West, No Signposts in the Sea. I read all her novels because I met her in the azalea garden at Sissinghurst when I was twelve. They’re actually a bit dull.

Bernard Smith
Art historian

My work hasn’t left much time for reading over the past few months, but I have enjoyed rereading Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls and Lawrence’s Kangaroo — the latter feat prompted, of course, by Tim Burstall’s film. I was delighted to see what good use he had made of Robert Darroch’s excellent piece of literary detection, D.H. Lawrence in Australia — a book that did not get the reception it deserved until it was reviewed some years after publication by Edward St. John. I also enjoyed reading Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s autobiography Blue-Stone Foundations for its quiet, persistent honesty and skill in characterisation, I suppose.

Robert Hughes’ The Fatal Shore was one of the great literary surprises of my life. I came to it full of prejudice, because I’ve tended to think of Bob Hughes as a clever chap but a bit of a smart arse really. How wrong I was. This is a great book and a very personal achievement. A kind of expatriate’s peace offering: his Ulysses or Fortunes of Richard Mahoney. Now he can stay in the Big Apple as long as he wants to. The book pays his dues to Oz Culture Inc. — as a corresponding life member. I wonder how long it will be before Germaine Greer and Barry Humphries pay their subscriptions?

For some odd reason, The Fatal Shore sent me back to reading Michelet’s French Revolution (in translation, needless to say, though it would be nice to have the time to stumble through the original). If you like your history with oodles of passion, read Michelet. He would be excellent reading for Kanaks these days. It must have been Hughes’ involvement with his subject that turned me back to Michelet.

In the last few days I’ve been reading Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory. It’s full of piercing insights hidden among gnomic verbiage. How dense and opaque these modern continentals insisted on being! One yearns for the clarity of Sartre. When
they still believed that words could be about ideas and not merely about other words. Yet I do find Adorno compelling reading, looking for the brilliant bits in his great slag heap. He starts his idea of art too high up the ladder of production for my liking. But I do find him more exciting to read than Elwyn Lynn or Donald Brook. Must be suffering from cultural cringe ...

**Hester Eisenstein**
Leader, EEO Unit,
NSW Dept of Education

---

I am reading Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* and Anne Phillips, *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class.*

Both seek to provide some kind of an interim assessment of where the women's movement is at in relation to the rest of the left. Not exactly light reading, but pretty interesting.

I'm also trying to follow the Contragate scandal with the coverage in the *Sydney Morning Herald,* although that only seems to give the tip of the iceberg.

**Lyn Yates**
Education Lecturer,
La Trobe Uni

---

I've been reading and enjoying Pavla Miller's *Long Division: State Schooling in South Australian Society,* rereading, and being irritated by, Carol Steadman's *Landscape For a Good Woman*; and escaping with Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant,* and Frank Moorhouse's *Room Service.* I've also been reading for pleasure *The Victorian Readers* (a facsimile reprint) and for duty Farmer Schulz's *Ducks, Animalia, The Jolly Postman,* etc. etc. (about three times a day, with frequent repeats).

**Carmel Shute**
Organiser,
Vic ABC Staff Union

---

When I'm not being a workaholic, I'm an addict of the printed word. Over the last few months, I've read more than usual — the result of two weeks' hours (with a bag of books), persistent insomnia, and a bout of bronchitis.

As I've lately read so many books of so many kinds — feminist novels, thrillers, autobiographies, kids' books, histories, feminist texts ... I've decided here to stick mostly to what I'd urge on my friends who share the same passions.

Tops on my list is Umberto Eco's masterpiece, *The Name of the Rose,* which I've been waiting to borrow for three years. After seeing the film, I rushed out for my own copy and didn't put it down for two days. It's such a dense, scholarly work about the struggle for the control of knowledge in the late Dark Ages, but works equally as a thriller. It certainly changed my mind about semioticians — or at least one of them.

I'm almost as passionate about Nancy Corbett's novel *Floating,* set simultaneously in eighteenth century Japan and contemporary Sydney. Basically, it's about three-way relationships in both societies and how they're handled. Don't be put off by the terrible reviews.

I'm just starting Marilyn Lake's evocative history of soldier settlement in Victoria, *The Limits of Hope,* which I originally read in thesis form. It's a magnificent contribution to our understanding of our past and is unique in that it will please both the RSL and marxist feminists. Marilyn is currently laid up with a broken leg and I've just bought her a copy of Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1,000-page epic, *The Mists of Avalon,* to aid the healing process. It's a compelling reworking of the Arthurian legend from the women's viewpoint and is essentially a tale (a very long tale) about the struggle between matriarchal religion and patriarchal Christianity in early Britain. While I was reading it, I had the most wonderful dreams and it seemed to tap my sub-conscious in a way I don't understand.

I've also enjoyed Jennifer Dabs' novel about growing up Catholic and female in the 'fifties in Melbourne — *Beyond Redemption.* The theme has been done to death but her book is a lot better than most.

Juliet Mitchell's and Ann Oakley's edited collection *What is Feminism?* is one of the more interesting feminist collections to come out lately and I'd really recommend it to anyone who wanted a comprehensive account of feminist debates over the past ten years. Most of the chapters address the central contradiction between "equality" arguments and "difference" arguments.

For light reading, I've whipped through the usual number of thrillers, but I'd especially recommend these from the feminist genre: Mary Wink's *She Came Too Late;* Gillian Slovo *Death by Analysis,* and Rebecca O'Rourke *Jumping the Cracks.* Rita Mae Brown's *High Hearts* is also a rollicking read if you're prepared to suspend belief and any historical
knowledge about the Civil War.

Recently, I borrowed my young friend Jessie's copy of Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*, a book about a very bold, very strong and very independent Swedish girl who lives by herself and does amazing things. If only they'd had books like this when I was seven! At least we can now make do with Kaz Cooke's wonderfully funny (and ideologically sound) *A Modern Girl's Guide to Everything*. Good advice on everything from broken hearts to injured hands.

**Sean Kidney**
Redfern Legal Centre, Sydney

In general, I'm not good at finishing books off. I tend to dip in and out of them, which means I have a chaotic pile of 10 or 15 books beside my bed at the moment, all "being read". The pile includes: *An Actor Prepares*, by Constantin Stanislavsky. A very interesting book about acting method. It's really about communicating in a very broad sense, with lots of lessons for publishing, journalism, TV, etc. *The Treasury Line*, by Greg Whitwell. Quite a well-written history of the federal Treasury—interesting background to all the Canberra economics gospel of the moment. *What a Way to Run a Railroad*, by Landry, Morley, Southwood and Wright. Billed as an "analysis of radical failure", it looks at the lessons to be learnt from the history of various radical businesses (left journals in particular) set up in the UK during the '70s, i.e. why they failed. I'd recommend it to anyone involved in left organisations. *Love and War in the Apennines*, by Eric Newby. I've actually finished this one! A very enjoyable reminisce about hiding out in the mountains of Italy in WW2. I've been reading his *Traveller's Tales* selections as well, mainly as a book to take on bushwalks and read out aloud, around the campfire; classic pages about travelling in Antarctica or Africa or outback Australia.

*Innovation and Entrepreneurship* by Peter Drucker. Drucker is a chief guru of Business Management, one of the first people to teach management as a skill. Normally, I've found his books a bit dry, but I'm enjoying reading this one and am learning lots. Of interest is that Drucker also turns his attention in this book to public and community agencies. *Moving Left*, edited by David McKnight. Definitely a book to dip into rather than read (some of the contributions seem a bit tired), but I'm still working my way through it. *The Road Less Travelled*, by M Scott Peck. A psycho-therapist talking about his work (very much written as "talk" rather than a "read", if that makes sense at all). About love, happiness, pain, emotional growth, etc. etc. I got a lot out of it. (Another one I've actually finished.) *Pictures on a Page — photojournalism, graphics and picture editing* by Harold Evans. To my mind the best book ever written on the topic. No mosh, just solid examples. His book on newspaper editing is great, too. *Looking Forward to Better Health* by the Better Health Commission (Vol 1). Sounds dry? Well, yes, it is, but it's still the blueprint for development of health services in Australia (federally, anyway) and very interesting for that. *Corporation Man* by Anthony Jay. Jay's thesis is that effective organisational structures in western society are those that mirror prehistoric village and hunting structures. He was one of the earlier writers (1963) to push the idea of worker teams as being the best way to organise businesses. It's a very interesting book and easy to relate to. (Jay has gone on to use his understanding of organisations as co-author of the BBC's *Yes Minister.*) A book to savour.

**Eric Aarons**
Former Communist Party national official, Sculptor and writer

I have read more books than usual in the last three months; partly because I had some given to me for my 68th birthday, and partly because I had some lent and recommended to me. (In general, I find it harder these days to come by books that really interest me.)

These were: *The Long March*, by Harrison E. Salisbury; *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende; *Coffy Mahony and Other Stories* by Henry Handel Richardson; *A Long Time Dying* by Olga Masters; *The Public Culture* by Donald Horne; *Ever Since Darwin and The Panda's Thumb* by Stephen Jay Gould; *Daughters of the Dreaming* by Diane Bell; *The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*; and *The Boy Adeodatus* by Bernard Smith. I have also restudied the first chapter of *Capital* in which Marx reveals the crucial nature (in his opinion) of the two-fold nature of the labour embodied in commodities—a question I believe has an unexpected, though intimate, connection with socialist experience and "socialist renewal". I intend to write about this at some length at a later date ...

**Colin Mercer**
Cultural Studies Lecturer, Griffith Uni, Qld

My most recommended book from recent reading is *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, by Robert Darnton. It takes its title from one of the chapters: "Workers Revolt: the Great Cat Massacre of the Rue St. Severin". This recounts an obscure event in early nineteenth century...
Feminists Take Stock

WHAT IS FEMINISM?
Reviewed by JANNA THOMPSON.

After several decades of the women's movement it seems appropriate to evaluate our position: to examine accomplishments and failures, reassert the ideas and ideals which sparked the rebirth of feminism, to consider where we are going and what problems have arisen. The motivation behind What is Feminism? was, presumably, to make such an evaluation, and this is what the title of the book leads us to expect.

The editors admit in their introduction that the book did not develop as they planned and that many women who were expected to contribute did not do so. The end result is a hodge-podge of articles of uneven quality with few indications of an underlying theme. Many of the contributions are worth reading, but the reader who expects a systematic discussion of where feminism is at and what it has come to mean will be disappointed.

The contributions which most directly address the question posed by the title are generally disappointing. Rosalind Delmar in

Paris when printing apprentices, abused by the workshop master, given slops to eat and living in generally deplorable conditions, decided to make their grievances known in a particularly gruesome but spectacular way.

The master's wife, as was well-known in this part of the Latin Quarter, had a passion for cats—and for one in particular known as la grise (the grey one). La grise was the first to get the chop when the apprentices wreaked their revenge one fateful night. The rage caught on and hundreds of cats were hunted down, put into sacks, and dumped in the workshop courtyard—where a mock trial was staged, sentences passed, and the cats hung. Much laughter and delirium followed, and master and mistress, awoken by the events, retreated in fear of mass insubordination.

The point of this obscure and gruesome story—and Darnton has many others—lies precisely in its obscurity and gruesomeness, and what historians can do with this. Darnton's work is concerned with looking into these sorts of small, local and largely unknown historical episodes, finding out what made them significant for their time, and what they actively meant to the participants: it is about reconstructing the "mentality" of a given time and place. Part history and part anthropology, Darnton's work is fascinating for the insights it offers into questions of consciousness, culture and ideology frequently missed out or ignored in grander historical projects. Highly recommended, even for cat lovers.