Fave reads of 1991

It's the time of the year for pulling the phone out of the wall, putting out the cat, and settling down in quiet with a good book. We asked five interesting readers for their most inspiring read of 1991.

Capitol Thrills

Paul Murphy


The book which I most enjoyed this year, and which changed to some extent my views on a subject I thought I knew well was Ross McMullin's excellent history of the Australian Labor Party in its centennial year.

I was born and brought up in Canberra where my father was a journalist turned senior public servant during World War Two and the later years of the Curtin and Chifley governments. Even though I was a child I couldn't help picking up a lot of the atmosphere and excitement of the late 1940s. Canberra was a country town in those days where everyone knew everyone else. Our home was always full of journalists, public servants and politicians and when I read McMullin's history covering those years I was stunned by how accurately he'd recorded not just the events of the time but the very feel of the place, the Caucus struggles, the rivalries involving such figures as Evatt, Ward and Calwell and the regrouping of the conservative forces under Menzies.

And McMullin captures perfectly the spirit and flavour of the ALP's tortuous climb back to eventual power during the late '60s and early '70s—years when as a young journalist in the Canberra Press Gallery and elsewhere I witnessed the demise of Calwell, the ascendency of Whitlam and the disintegration of Gorton and McMahon.

If McMullin could get it so right during those periods, then obviously he's got the lot right. It's a marvellous book and absolutely essential reading for anyone interested not just in the history of the ALP, but the way it looks, sounds, smells and operates, the feel and flavour of a party and movement in and out of power.

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Grassroots

Stephen Knight

Bobbin Up, Dorothy Hewett (Virago, 1985)

Literary epiphanies were in recession this year. No messianic stars shot across the firmament of the humanities—at least not in my neck of the woods. We are still digesting the isms of the 80s and scrupulously ignoring the new and lucrative para-religions being generated by quasi-scientists.

But secure from creation science and intergalactic thought-transfer, socioliterary serendipity can occur. This year in our course 'The Working Class in Literature and History', which is taught jointly in History and English at Melbourne University, we had good luck. Our hard-working bookshop was able to find enough copies of Dorothy Hewett's Bobbin Up for us to set this text for the first time. The book was enjoyed, admired, learned from by students and staff alike, especially as the year ended with a lively and informative visit by the author.

Drawn from late 1940s experience, written in the late 50s, the novel combines postwar grimness with emergent consumerist corruption. A story of working people, without bourgeois political leaders or narratorial condescension, Bobbin Up was one of the realistic highlights of the course. But more than that, its form resists the authoritarian simplicities of the classic novel. A set of episodes about working women in south Sydney, as they move towards industrial action through a mixture of innate dissent and in-class radical leadership, the form realises a sense of egalitarian interaction that looks back a little to Emile Zola's Germinal, but lacks, for the better, its masculinist heroics and final symbolic cop-out.

Working women, family strains, the physical heat and smell of industrial Sydney, they're all laid out here in the best focused of the Realist Writers' novels. And one of the least known. This book, amazingly, has never been reprinted in Australia. Written for the Mary Gilmore prize in 1958, it was printed by the Australasian Book Society. Their 3,000 copies sold out quickly, and that was that. Not long ago Angus and Robertson knocked back a reprint. It was left to Virago, run by Australian Carmen Callil, to reprint in London, and their run is now about sold out. Our copies were English bookshop returns, as a few astute students discovered by picking off the tag to find a pound sterling price beneath. Scholarship takes many forms.

Vigorous, politically astute, proto-feminist in a significant way, sexually explicit—in fact giving new meaning to the term grass roots—Bobbin Up
Shaken to the Core

Rosemary Sorensen

Bruce Beaver, Selected Poems (University of Queensland Press).

Most books I read simply confirm what I fear: mediocrity reigns. That's not to say that I expect to have my worldview changed every time I prostrate myself on the couch to enjoy yet another novel.

Goodness knows, I can just about cope with the Saturday papers, let alone well-written stuff by clever people, so I'm not complaining that most novelistic fare gently reinforces my notions, rather than shakes me to the core.

But it is nice, every now and then, to feel that crack in the citadel of self that occurs when you read something so strong, so resonant, it never leaves you.

Having almost given up on poetry—what gets called poetry is usually nothing of the sort, and usually self-indulgent cant—it surprised me to find myself shaken to that core when I read Bruce Beaver's Selected Poems. Doesn't sound earth-shattering, does it? Selected Poems by Bruce Beaver...hardly a trumpet-blast heralding the subversion of your set ideas. But behind that name and title, there's the kind of word force that does change lives.

Often Beaver's poems start in the everyday, the personal and the trivial. But from there they burst out into the terrifyingly wide and beautiful spaces that make being human something more than a trudge down a narrow path. His words catch you in the act of settling for mediocrity. They challenge you and also comfort you, in the best way, since this is exhilarating, not mollifying, comfort.

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The Time of My Life, Denis Healey (Viking/Penguin Australia).

Is Denis Healey now thought to be of the Left? Once, not long ago, only the mention of his name in a journal such as this would be accompanied by a snarl.

But when that lifelong British socialist and Christian Eric Heffer, MP, was about to die of cancer, he confessed wistfully that he should have voted for Healey, all those years ago, when they chose Michael Foot instead to lead the British Labour Party. That way, he said, eleven years of Thatcher might have been avoided and the party spared its catastrophic split.

But Healey, despite British Labour's fondness for toffs, was never content to place in any class. He family was bookish and industrious. He went to a school in Yorkshire, famous for building brains from local stock and sending them off to Oxbridge. Denis read 'Greats' at Balliol, a college known, as he keeps reminding us, for producing men of "effortless superiority". He got a First, naturally. The book has many references to similar attainments (or lack thereof) in others and the best Healey accolade is that someone "has a powerful mind".

In World War Two, Major Healey was in charge of landing troops—a difficult and dangerous occupation which taught him the subtleties of organisation and being practical. After a good war (for him) he quickly became an MP and eventually a Cabinet Minister. He held the most difficult and thankless jobs for a Labour man interested in the top post: Defence, for six years, Chancellor of the Exchequer (Treasurer) for five. He did them, by all accounts, very well. Yet he never became foreign minister, a role to which his scholarship, experience and hankering would have well suited him. But there's much more to Denis. "The trouble with me is I've got too much hinterland", he says. It's one reason he doesn't fret about not becoming prime minister: "the trouble with Margaret Thatcher is that she has too little".

And it's this 'hinterland' that makes Denis Healey's book such enormous fun. He enjoys his literature (Yeats, Virginia Woolf) and has similar relish for most matters of the intellect. He also likes sending himself up, as he did famously dancing a jig and crooning on the Edna Everage Show. When I went to interview him about his book and other political indiscretions, he took great delight in dropping into cockney accents, joshing about, losing no opportunity to risk a joke. This, despite being now past seventy. Yet, when the time came to consider Yeltsin, the Bomb, Europe, he was concise, formidably informed and interesting. As is his book.

It is one of three autobiographies published in the past year by Labour (or ex-Labour) heavyweights, the others being by Dr David Owen and Roy Jenkins. As it happens, I was probably the last journalist to interview Dr Owen just before he announced his own retirement from politics. He was speaking at his constituency in Plymouth, Devon. After his wideranging, erudite and typically forthright lecture I recorded an interview with this member of the 'Gang of Four' who had left the Labour Party with such acrimony ten years before. When finished I mentioned I was intending to talk to Denis Healey, if time allowed. Immediately David Owen's face turned from languid seriousness to beaming charm. "Do give the old rogue my love", he smiled, blowing a raffish kiss as he left. Just the kind of broad affection Healey now commands. Time Of My Life shows why. It's a terrific book, and not the usual exer-
rise in self-justification. It altered my view of the Left-Right dichotomy in British Labour politics. So much so that I wrote to Paul Keating recommending he read it. He didn’t reply.

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Hypopolemical

Jeff Shaw


The collapse of authoritarian forms of socialism has reinforced the point, with great historical eloquence, that elements of the Left had grossly undervalued the importance of civil liberties.

Often dismissed as ‘bourgeois liberalism’, the struggles for freedom of speech and freedom of political association have sometimes been left to those without a parallel commitment to a more just and equal society. The idea that liberty and equality are both necessary attributes of the just society is of overriding significance. It is not a matter of trading off one virtue against another—they are both vital.

It was in that spirit that I sat down earlier this year to read Geoffrey Robertson’s essay on civil liberties. With passion, clarity and detail Robertson argues the case for a much higher degree of freedom than the contemporary capitalism of Britain under the Tories has been able to deliver. On the vexed question of censorship, Robertson notes the changed landscape of the debate, with the traditional pro-censorship puritans finding allies in the feminist movement. Despite this he retains the libertarian stance, following the American legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin’s contention in a recent, brilliant article in the New York Review of Books ‘Liberty and Pornography’, that “the essence of negative liberty is freedom to offend, and that applies to the tawdry as well as the heroic”.

Robertson is scathing about the conventional conservative approach to free expression: “British law regards free speech as a very good thing so long as it does not cause trouble, at which point it can become expensive speech, visited with costly court actions, fines and damages, and occasionally imprisonment”. He argues that Common Law has “failed abjectly to counter inequality”. Freedom of contract has been simply a hollow label which cloaked all kinds of discriminatory conduct. Legislation designed to ensure freedom from discrimination on the grounds of race, sex or other irrelevant considerations can be defended as simply an application of a liberal view of the world.

The British Labour Party does not escape Robertson’s vitriolic pen. Its failure to adopt the notion of a Bill of Rights—a policy to which Lionel Murphy persuaded Australian Labor in the mid-1960s—is roundly condemned. To the argument of Labour’s deputy leader Roy Hattersley that civil liberties should be protected by a change of government, Robertson responds: “given the evidence in this book of the excesses of power committed under Labour and Conservative administrations, those genuinely concerned for individual liberty may find this response a counsel of despair”.

In an era when the Right is torn between an obsession with the free market and social conservatism, Robertson offers a genuinely enlightened vision of the free society. And it is a vision which can be integrated with egalitarian ideas, a broader concept of reform which acknowledges that political liberty is far from sufficient for the poor and oppressed—but which opposes the sacrifice of freedom in the supposed interest of a more equal distribution of resources.

Reading this book brings home to the would-be cabinet minister the dangers of the arrogant exercise of power, whether by conservative or reformist governments.

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