Melbourne has always had a reputation as a city of bookshops. The uncharitable might say it has something to do with the weather - all those dismal damp days we spend stuck inside. The locals prefer other, more intellectual explanations; but whatever the reason, it is still true that the city has an outstanding range of bookshops.

For a start it has the International Bookshop (17 Elizabeth St, Melbourne, phone 614.2859), sadly now a shabby dty building, but it is well hidden away on the second floor of a shabby city building, but it is well worth the trouble.

International and Australian politics, socialist and feminist theory, contemporary culture, gay politics and literature - it has a range of books and magazines unequalled in this country.

While you are there have a look at the records - folk music from all over the world, with a strong feminist leaning - and the secondhand books and pamphlets where there are always a few gems to be found.

The rest of the city centre isn’t a wasteland either. Among the big general shops and the discount barns full of books that should never have been printed on trees that should never have been pulped, there are some good ones.

Further along the street is the Grub Street Bookshop (317 Brunswick St, Fitzroy, phone 417.3117). It is mainly a secondhand shop, but one of the best in Melbourne, well organised and labelled, with a good range of political titles along with lots of literature. One of its strengths is its material on Latin America, both fiction and non-fiction, an area which they are trying to expand even further.

From there it is a short walk across to Kalkadoon Bookshop (94 Smith St, Collingwood, phone 419.3361) recently forced to move from the city by rising rents. When it moved its emphasis changed a bit, so there is not so much on China now, but a lot on Australian history and politics, especially Aboriginal issues. It’s also the place to go if you are looking for Eureka flags, and all the other bits and pieces the Australian Independence Movement made popular.

Alternatively, just one suburb away is Readings Records and Books (338 Lygon St, Carlton, phone 347.6633). The shop has increased its shift down the street, and probably with the change of character of the suburb to an inner city alternative to North Balwyn. But it is still a very good place to find the best of contemporary fiction, including a lot imported from the US, which you won’t usually see anywhere else, and you can readily see from the window display the extent of its support for new Australian writing.

Of course, if you are out for an afternoon stroll, the best place in Melbourne to do it is St Kilda, and it also has a shop that provides many good hours of browsing. Cosmos Bookshop (112 Acland St, St Kilda, phone 534.4568) is a bit of an institution, but like Readings has changed with its move into new premises. Mainly for the better - some of the atmosphere may be gone, but it is a lot easier to find what you want, and the range of stock is big enough so that you should be able to, whether it’s a good novel or something on current political questions.