

Clive's Book Reading Log

Updated 30th August 2011

TITLE: D Day - The Normandy Landings
AUTHOR: Antony Beevor
DATE: Aug 2011
PLOT: An authoritative account of the three months from D-1 to the liberation of Paris
COMMENT: Very well written, astonishing first hand records of the preparation, logistics and effects. Excellent historical account for anyone going to Normandy.

TITLE: The Perennial Collection - Beyond Black
AUTHOR: Hilary Mantel
DATE: Aug 2011
PLOT: Spiritual medium living with her ghostly companions who tormented her.
COMMENT: Bizarre and out of character for Mantel. Gave up half way, not going anywhere.

TITLE: Jelly Bean
AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald
DATE: Jul 2011
PLOT: Small town real life boys and girls in youth's struggle to impress each other.
COMMENT: A beautiful example of FSF at his short story best, incisive, observant, amusing, pure essence of youthful life in 1920's Georgia.

TITLE: A Fine Balance
AUTHOR: Rohinton Mistry
DATE: Jul 2011
PLOT: This story of present day India follows the lives of a handful of disparate characters having different social standing, their struggle against seemingly impossible relative odds and shackled by social history.
COMMENT: An outstanding book, superbly crafted, very well written with deep understanding for the characters and their heart rending lives, shocking and enlightening. One of my best books.

TITLE: The End of the Affair
AUTHOR: Graham Greene
DATE: Jun 2011
PLOT: A tale of adultery, devotion, faith and love set in London, probably Clapham. The adulteress makes a promise to God whom she does not believe in and so begins the way the characters are torn apart by feeling we or they do not understand.
COMMENT: A Classic Greene novel, still not dated in style. Disturbing, cerebral and deep. Greene creates some exquisite cameo figures such as the private investigator and spices his profound work with drips of cruel humour. Excellent.

TITLE: Small Wars
AUTHOR: Sadie Jones
DATE: Jun 2011
PLOT: Career soldier and young family move from the safety of Europe to the battle ground of Cyprus in the 50's. They experience a totally different world to that which they had grown up with and face social and moral dilemmas which challenge their lives to the end.
COMMENT: A really good read which draws in the reader at every page. A dramatic exploration of how British supremacy tore Cyprus apart and affected ordinary people in extraordinary ways. Highly recommended.

TITLE: The Seagull
AUTHOR: Anton Chekhov
DATE: May 2011
PLOT: Set in the Russian countryside at the end of 19th C, we are shown a slice of life as it was for some; characters searching for happiness in love, success in career and life in general.
COMMENT: Chekhov is a master at making so much out of nothing, little plot, just meticulous observation of the way we all are, this could be a reflection on our sense of failure like F S Fitzgerald or just mocking the way we behave to each other.

TITLE: So Disdained
AUTHOR: Nevil Shute
DATE: May 2011
PLOT: Post WWI, our hero stumbles on an injured pilot who has crashed after spying on British naval operations for the Russians. He helps him and becomes involved in counter espionage and a chase across Europe while falling in love with the daughter of the local Lord of the Manor.
COMMENT: Boys own stuff but written in that clipped British innocence of yesteryear (he was shocked when she appeared in a dressing gown!) Worth reading for the period style and as this was NS first novel.

TITLE: I'm the King of the Castle
AUTHOR: Susan Hill
DATE: May 2011
PLOT: New boy and housekeeper come to stay. Son is resentful of housekeeper's son and starts hateful campaign, heightened when his father is attracted to her. Swings and roundabouts of childish horror.
COMMENT: Well told exploration of inter child cruelty but the end was predictable.

TITLE: When the Lion Feeds
AUTHOR: Wilbur Smith
DATE: May 2011

TITLE: Riptide
AUTHOR: John Lawton
DATE: Apr 2011
PLOT: Espionage set in WWII London, with a German double agent on the loose, US Captain, Special Branch and Scotland Yard etc muck in to dodge the blitz and pursue the enemy in spite of each other.
COMMENT: What started out as a very promising plot within an authentic setting of blitzed London during 1941 became over populated with stereotype characters, toffs, gawd luv yer Cockneys and brass nosed Northerners in the middle section. That apart the final third rescued the yarn enough although the factual elements built in were actually more gripping than the fictional.

TITLE: The Redbreast
AUTHOR: Jo Nesbo
DATE: April 2011
PLOT: Another Harry Hole detective exploit involving Norway's hidden Nazi right wing die hards.
COMMENT: Bought on the back of Laarson's success and Nesbo's Snowman, not in the same league. Contrived and unrealistic.

TITLE: Babylon Revisited
AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald
DATE: Mar 2011
PLOT: The struggle of an alcoholic father in an attempt to regain custody of his daughter from his sister in law and husband. One of three short stories in this tiny book of gems.
COMMENT: FSG is one of America's finest writers with phrases to die for, plots, description and characters which are deep and totally absorbing. Wonderful.

TITLE: We are all made of Glue
AUTHOR: Marina Lewycka
DATE: Mar 2011
PLOT: Georgie, a separated struggling author attempts to save the world and the house of an old insane lady from the clutches of double dealing estate agents and the social services. Bizarre characters flood the plot through sex scenes, domestic disasters and social mayhem.
COMMENT: A boring book at 420 pages is far too long and which did not succeed in meeting the expectations having read Lewycka's superb "Tractors" novel.

TITLE: Tess of the D'Urbervilles
AUTHOR: Thomas Hardy
DATE: Mar 2011
PLOT: Tess is a 19th C country innocent bestowed with the magic and beauty which shapes her love and life in the most tragic way imaginable. Her life swings from ecstasy to torment on a journey beset with secrets, social barriers and morality.
COMMENT: Hardy's story and portrayal of Tess just tore me apart and swept me along in this superbly passionate masterpiece. For me it had everything – Outstanding.

TITLE: Splinter
AUTHOR: Sebastian Fitzek
DATE: Mar 2011
PLOT: Berlin present day. The protagonist seems to have lost his mind and is embroiled in a bizarre world in which nothing seems to make sense until the last chapter. A psychological thriller apparently.
COMMENT: The worst book I have read for years. The author has concentrated on misleading the reader with a completely unrealistic plot which dies a deserved death in the last chapter. I need a Thomas Hardy immediately.

TITLE: Lady Chatterley's Lover
AUTHOR: D H Lawrence
DATE: Feb 2011
PLOT: Set in 1920 Yorkshire, The young and insensitive Clifford Chatterley's world is collapsing around him as established values crumble. Paralysed by the war after one month of married life he is unable to produce an heir. The weight of his ancestry is on his shoulders. Lady Chatterley discovers herself in a romance with the gamekeeper and in the process illuminates the dilemmas facing a post war society.
COMMENT: Written today, this book is less sensational than it was in the 30's. but is still a well crafted exploration of how we hide the truth behind a shield of propriety, class and social rules.

TITLE: The Great Gatsby
AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald
DATE: Feb 2011
PLOT: Jazz age America. Gatsby is one of the beautiful people, he has everything, yet nothing. He exists in an aura of mystery. People are drawn to him like moths to a lamp. A brilliant and concise study of humanity, love and truth.
COMMENT: A masterpiece. Fitzgerald's writing is lyrical, poetic and incisive to a degree which made me gasp at a single phrase. One of the finest examples of the writer's art.

TITLE: Sea of Poppies
AUTHOR: Amitav Ghosh
DATE: Feb 2011
PLOT: Historical novel set in 1830 India with the East Indian Co. trading opium to China. Many characters coming together on a boat called the IBIS. The lives, flavours and images of adventure at that time – the first of a trilogy.

COMMENT: Clearly I did not have the patience to get past the first 150 pages which I found heavy going, unrewarding and frustratingly full of unfamiliar language – possibly in an attempt to make the period authentic but to me was meaningless. I suspect that eventually there is a great adventure ahead but not for me.

TITLE: The Hanging Shed
AUTHOR: Gordon Ferris
DATE: Jan 2011
PLOT: Post war Glasgow, Brodie a journalist is contacted by a condemned man to prove his innocence four weeks before the hanging. A race against time uncovers plot upon plot with good description of Scotland at that time.
COMMENT: Could not put this book down, a fast read with interesting twists and turns.

TITLE: 1222
AUTHOR: Anne Holt
DATE: Jan 2011
PLOT: Norway present day, catastrophic rail crash in extreme snow storm isolates hundreds of passengers in a developing murder mystery with wheelchair bound, lesbian ex cop bent on cracking the case before help arrives.
COMMENT: Weak writing does not help this somewhat contrived yarn.

TITLE: Operation Mincemeat
AUTHOR: Ben Macintyre
DATE: Jan 2010
PLOT: The true story of a successful but very risky deception carried out by British Intelligence on the Germans during WWII. To convince the enemy that the Mediterranean invasion target was Greece and not Sicily, an extremely detailed and intricate plot amazingly worked to perfection.
COMMENT: Based on documented records, this is a more studious revisit of the story told in the film "The Man who Never Was." It's story line and appeal is slightly diminished by the in depth studies of many of the characters involved. However, a good second half.

TITLE: Ordinary Thunderstorms
AUTHOR: Williams Boyd
DATE: Dec 2010
PLOT: Set in present day London, Adam Kindred stumbles into a deeply dangerous conspiracy which drives him underground in his efforts to clear his name and save his life.
COMMENT: I feel that Boyd is a different author each time he writes. Gripping adventure from page one. Interesting characters and a carefully woven plot provides enough twists to make it "unputdownable". Not high literature but very readable and recommended.

TITLE: Three Ways to Capsize a Boat
AUTHOR: Chris Stewart
DATE: Dec 2010
PLOT: Adventures of a novice sailing in Greece then with Tom Cunliffe in Hirta en route to Newfoundland via Norway and Greenland.
COMMENT: A disappointment after "Driving over lemons" which was absorbing. The format was too much like a logbook and despite the appearance of Tom who is always entertaining this book failed to entertain.

TITLE: A Voyage in the "Sunbeam"
AUTHOR: Annie Allnut Brassey
DATE: Nov 2010
PLOT: Autobiographic account of a one year voyage around the world on the "Sunbeam" her husband's 157ft private steam / sailing yacht in 1876 with a crew of about 40. The people she met, sights seen, dangers encountered – slaves, cannibals, shipwreck etc. and going where few white people had been seen before.
COMMENT: A fascinating description of an almost unknown and developing world and its people. My only slight irritation is a distaste for the superiority and arrogance of the British at that time.

TITLE: The Snowman
AUTHOR: Jo Nesbo
DATE: Oct 2010
PLOT: One of a series of Harry Hole detective crime novels set in Norway. A serial killer on the loose always one jump ahead of detection and a catalogue of horrific techniques to set your hair on end.
COMMENT: Unfair to compare Nesbo with Larsson except both are based on Scandinavia, detection, suspense and full of surprises. This one has a complex plot and helps if you keep a note of who is who. A good example of the genre.

TITLE: The Girl who Kicked a Hornets Nest
AUTHOR: Stieg Larsson
DATE: Sep 2010
PLOT: Third book in the trilogy involving the ultra disturbed young woman with The Dragon Tattoo in the continuing violent and mysterious thriller in an evocative Swedish setting.
COMMENT: Carries on immediately from the end of the second book and continues to grip and surprise with violent passages. Could not put it down, possibly the best of the trilogy

TITLE: The Widow and Her Hero
AUTHOR: Thomas Kenealy

DATE: Aug 2010
PLOT: At the start, the hero's death at the hands of the Japanese is described. His widow tells the whole story of Australian wartime exploits from the hero's diary entries and her own experiences up to the current time when the final curtain is drawn back, ghosts and unpleasant truths revealed.
COMMENT: I have a feeling there is more to this book than I made of it. I did not enjoy the counter change between diary and widow but a fascinating story from Shindlers Ark author. Worth reading.

TITLE: In the Heart of the Canyon
AUTHOR: Elisabeth Hyde
DATE: Aug 2010
PLOT: Twelve people on a trip of a lifetime down the rapids of the Grand Canyon with three guides. Tensions, interaction and crises build steadily to keep you reading.
COMMENT: An easy, gentle book highly recommend. Interesting character portraits and superb description of the Canyon. (Author of Abortionist's Daughter)

TITLE: Mudbound
AUTHOR: Hillary Jordan
DATE: Aug 2010
PLOT: Mississippi delta in 1946. Laura, new to cotton farming, struggles to bring up family in isolated shack under hateful eye of racist father in law. Ingrained racism ignites momentous tragedies when war heroes return.
COMMENT: A compelling novel which captures the moment and winds the reader in to the devastating and inevitable end. Very moving and worth reading.

TITLE: Home Before Night
AUTHOR: Hugh Leonard
DATE: Jul 2010
PLOT: The childhood reminiscences of Hugh Leonard as a growing lad in Dublin through the 30's and 40's. His rise out of poverty to what seemed to be an unattainable level of education and fulfilment.
COMMENT: Leonard superbly captures the era, lifestyle, the religious and class ridden constraints of the time in this hilarious journey to manhood. A little gem.

TITLE: Lustrum
AUTHOR: Robert Harris
DATE: Jul 2010
PLOT: Set in post Caesarean Rome as seen through the eyes of Cato, the enslaved secretary to Cicero. The story relates the corruption, intrigues and power struggles as moral decline is first sensed in the great Empire.
COMMENT: As expected, eminently readable and intriguing. Not quite the grip of Pompeii but a good read nonetheless.

TITLE: The Girl who Played with Fire
AUTHOR: Stieg Larsson
DATE: Jun 2010
PLOT: Second book in the trilogy involving the ultra disturbed young woman with The Dragon Tattoo in the continuing violent and mysterious thriller in an evocative Swedish setting.
COMMENT: Took a little while to get going but having read the first book you know what to expect. Gripping, violent, bizarre and many surprises.

TITLE: Agent Zigzag
AUTHOR: Ben Macintyre
DATE: May 2010
PLOT: The true story of Edward Chapman, chancer, crook and British double agent during WWII who completely fooled the German secret service into believing he was their foremost agent. Incredible exploits put Chapman's life on a knife edge day after day.
COMMENT: Based on documented records, this is one of the most exciting and extraordinary stories about a real life James Bond character. A really gripping read.

TITLE: No Country for Old Men
AUTHOR: Cormac McCarthy
DATE: April 2010
PLOT: 1980 Texas. A drugs deal ends in a massacre, the payoff is discovered by an opportunist who is embroiled with hit men in a violent manhunt with changing fortunes as body after body piles up.
COMMENT: I cannot believe this is the same Cormac McCarthy as The Road. An exciting essay in depravity, greed and the breakdown of society. Could not put it down.

TITLE: The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo
AUTHOR: Stieg Larsson
DATE: April 2010
PLOT: Fallen Swedish journalist involved in a quest to discover the truth behind an apparent murder. Joins forces with ultra disturbed young woman in an evocative Swedish setting.
COMMENT: First class film came from this first class thriller. Gripping, violent and bizarre – imaginative characters in a deep story which kept me guessing - loved it.

TITLE: Patron Saint of Liars
AUTHOR: Ann Patchett

DATE: Apr 2010
PLOT: Three separate narrators take you into the lives of the inhabitants of a Catholic home for unwed mothers in the US. First Rose, then her second husband 'Son', and finally her daughter Cecilia. Secrets weave them together as characters slip out of your grasp.
COMMENT: Beautifully written, real human characters you care about and desperately want to see resolved in your hopeful, ideal world. A superb novel which held me the entire journey and moved me greatly. My best book of 2010 so far.

TITLE: A Suitable Boy
AUTHOR: Vikram Seth
DATE: Mar 2010
PLOT: An Indian family finding a suitable boy to marry their daughter Lata – however the story details the lives of four families in the period after Independence. It involves politics, business, culture, love, intrigue and every aspect of Indian life in Cities and villages.
COMMENT: A vast novel confirming Seth as an outstanding literary figure, his writing is poetic flowing and extremely descriptive sometimes in minute detail. As I am not a quick reader the novel at 1500 pages was too long. An education and literary milestone if you dare.

TITLE: Fludd
AUTHOR: Hilary Mantel
DATE: Feb 2010
PLOT: Set in strongly catholic North Country village of Featherhoughton, a new curate arrives to assist the incumbent priest but acts as a catalyst. Intrigue, scandal, relationships change to embroil the village in mystery – is he a saint or the devil?
COMMENT: A quaint little novel, well worth reading.

TITLE: Havan Bay
AUTHOR: Martin Cruz Smith
DATE: Jan 2010
PLOT: Fourth in the series about Moscow detective Arkady Renko this time in Cuba, sinister menace with lashings of blood and seedy locations.
COMMENT: Sort of thing to read on a plane when you've got nothing else to do. Not memorable but boys own stuff.

TITLE: Animal Dreams
AUTHOR: Barbara Kingsolver
DATE: Jan 2010
PLOT: Young woman returns home to south west US and traditional Spanish and Indian influences effecting the modern world. She searches for her roots and future via tragedy, love and frustration. There is a dream like quality which draws comparisons between human emotions and animal instincts.
COMMENT: Barbara Kingsolver weaves words with the ease and artistry, a moving and evocative read. Recommended

TITLE: An Experiment in Love
AUTHOR: Hilary Mantel
DATE: Dec 2009
PLOT: Lancashire girl rises out of elementary education through grammar to university. We are taken through the development from child to woman and adventures away from home.
COMMENT: Held by the story telling, a nice easy style with many observations which brought back childhood memories. Very much a description of the exploration of life we all go through, I liked this book even though it is very female orientated and was sorry it came to an end leaving the rest of Carmel's life yet to come.

TITLE: Cold Comfort Farm
AUTHOR: Stella Gibbons
DATE: Nov 2009
PLOT: A 1930's parody on many classic novels – society girl with little inheritance descends on remote farming kin in Sussex to find the most bizarre and hilarious characters living out a life of primitive hell which she sets about changing.
COMMENT: Should be compulsory reading for everyone who begins to take novels too seriously – a classic of its genre.

TITLE: Countdown to War
AUTHOR: Richard Overy
DATE: Nov 2009
PLOT: Factual account of the few weeks leading up to the invasion of Poland and outbreak of WWII
COMMENT: Clearly written, informative and interesting to read the major influences acting on all the major players and how close it might have come to being totally different in outcome.

TITLE: Remembering Babylon
AUTHOR: David Malouf
DATE: Nov 2009
PLOT: Australia mid 19th C, extreme limit of settlement in Queensland. A ragged figure appears out of the wilderness – the story is the reaction of the settlement to this arrival.
COMMENT: I quote – "It is like finding a spirit painting in a 19th C locket – full of wisdom and magic – the most delicate tracing of a profound and elliptical history." - "The poetry of Malouf's vision is needle sharp." A wonderful and moving book.

TITLE: A Passage to India
AUTHOR: EM Forster
DATE: Oct 2009