2008 AWCUM Bookclub reading list

12 February:

**Summer Reading List -**

“Unpolished Gem” – Alice Pung: Non-fiction

"This story does not begin on a boat." So commences Alice Pung's memoir. This is an original take on a classic story - how a child of immigrants moves between two cultures. In place of piety and predictability, however, Unpolished Gem offers a vivid and ironic sense of both worlds. It combines the story of Pung's life growing up in suburban Footscray with the inherited stories of the women in her family - stories of madness, survival and heartbreak. Original and brave, this is a girl's own story that introduces an unforgettable voice and captures the experience of Asian immigrants to Australia.

“The World to Come” – Dara Horn: Fiction

A million-dollar painting by Marc Chagall is stolen from a museum during a singles' cocktail hour. The unlikely thief is Benjamin Ziskind, a lonely former child prodigy who writes questions for quiz shows and who is sure the painting used to hang on a wall of his parents' living room. As Ben tries to evade the police, he and his twin sister, Sara, seek out the truth of how the painting got to the museum, whether the "original" is actually a forgery, and whether Sara, an artist, can create a convincing forgery to take its place.

Eighty years prior, in the 1920's in Soviet Russia, Marc Chagall taught art to orphaned Jewish boys. There Chagall befriended the great Yiddish novelist known by the pseudonym "Der Nister," The Hidden One. And there, with the lives of these real artists, the story of the painting begins, carrying with it not only a hidden fable by the Hidden One but also the story of the Ziskind family -- from Russia to New Jersey and Vietnam.

Prize-winning author Dara Horn interweaves mystery, romance, folklore, theology, history, and scripture into a spellbinding modern tale. She brings us on a breathtaking collision course of past, present, and future -- revealing both the ordinariness and the beauty of "the world to come." Nestling stories within stories, this is a novel of remarkable clarity and deep inner meaning.

“I Robot” – Isaac Asimov: Fiction

Both humorous and suspenseful in tone, Isaac Asimov's collection of short stories explores the human condition and our changing understanding of it, vis-a-vis the robot and follows the progress of robot technology in the 21st century. Each story is linked by the reminiscences of Susan Calvin, robo-psychologist with US Robot and Mechanical Men, Inc. On one level 'I, Robot' is an examination of the social pessimism and anxiety that holds back potentially beneficial advances. A timeless classic, it has profound insights for our times.

11 March:

“To Kill a Mockingbird” – Harper Lee: Fiction

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Harper Lee written in the bildungsroman and Southern Gothic genres and published in 1960. The novel is loosely based on the author's observations of her family and neighbors, as well as an event that occurred in her hometown when she was 10 years old. Lee has acknowledged that the character Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, who serves as the novel's narrator, is based on herself.

Lee's novel addresses themes such as courage, racial injustice, the death of innocence, tragedy, and coming of age, set against a backdrop of life in the Deep South. One writer noted its impact in saying, "In the twentieth century, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is probably the most widely read book dealing with race in America, and its protagonist, Atticus Finch, the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism." It has proven to be not only an extraordinarily influential book, but a controversial one as well. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been the target of various campaigns to have it removed from public classrooms. The book was successfully adapted for film by director Robert Mulligan with a screenplay by Horton Foote in 1962. To date, it is Lee's only published novel.

8 April:

“The Year Of Magical Thinking” – Joan Didion: Non-fiction

Didion's husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, died of a heart attack, just after they had returned from the hospital where their only child, Quintana, was lying in a coma. This book is a memoir of Dunne's death, Quintana's illness, and Didion's efforts to make sense of a time when nothing made sense. "She's a pretty cool customer," one hospital worker says of her, and, certainly, coolness was always part of the addictive appeal of Didion's writing. The other part was the dark side of cool, the hyper-nervous
awareness of the tendency of things to go bad. In 2004, Didion had her own disasters to deal with, and she did not, she feels, deal with them coolly, or even sanely. This book is about getting a grip and getting on; it's also a tribute to an extraordinary marriage.

13 May:

“The Philosopher's Doll” – Amanda Lohrey. Fiction

"The Age" describes it as a book that "focuses on a professional couple in their late 30s struggling with the issue of when to have children. Much of the book deals with an intense few weeks in which the wife, Kirsten, has actually become pregnant and is deciding when to tell her husband, Lindsay, while he, completely unaware of this biological incident, is arranging to buy her a dog in order to temporarily satisfy her procreative yearnings."

As Rachel Slater puts it, the novel "novel poses some big questions. How much free choice do we really have? What does it mean to be human? What do we know about consciousness? These philosophical stalwarts are unravelled alongside the lives of two suburban professionals grappling with their own big questions - questions of potential parenthood, infidelity and desire." But it seems clear that it is not the novel's intention to tie up the loose ends and "the reader is not offered definitive answers to any of the questions raised in the novel, but in addressing the argument - so prevalent in Western culture - that choice equals freedom and therefore happiness, Lohrey provides more than a little food for thought."

Tony Smith, reviewing the book in Australian Book Review is certainly enthusiastic about the result: "Lohrey is so perceptive that there is nothing superfluous in this superbly structured novel. Every event, every word is necessary and there are constant echoes that remind the reader of the complexity of the plot and the sophistication of the author's technique...Many novels display some of the characteristics that encourage readability: consistency of theme, soundness of structure, steadiness of pace, depth of characterisation and elegance of style. In The Philosopher's Doll, Lohrey demonstrates that she has consummate control of all these skills. Lohrey's beautifully balanced, expertly crafted novel is a treat for head and for heart."

10 June:


Richard Dawkins was recently voted one of the world's top three intellectuals (alongside Umberto Eco and Noam Chomsky) by Prospect magazine. As the author of many, now famous, classic works on science and philosophy, he has always asserted the irrationality of belief in God and the grievous harm it has inflicted on society. He now turns his fierce intellect exclusively on this subject, denouncing its faulty logic and the suffering it causes. In THE GOD DELUSION Dawkins presents a hard-hitting, impassioned rebuttal of religion of all types and does so in the lucid, witty and powerful language for which he is renowned. It is a brilliantly argued, fascinating polemic that will be required reading for anyone interested in this most emotional and important subject.

8 July:

“The Road” – Cormac McCarthy: Fiction

Cormac McCarthy sets his new novel, The Road, in a post-apocalyptic blight of gray skies that drizzle ash, a world in which all matter of wildlife is extinct, starvation is not only prevalent but nearly all-encompassing, and marauding bands of cannibals roam the environment with pieces of human flesh stuck between their teeth. If this sounds oppressive and dispiriting, it is. McCarthy may have just set to paper the definitive vision of the world after nuclear war, and in this recent age of relentless saber-rattling by the global powers, it's not much of a leap to feel his vision could be not far off the mark nor, sadly, right around the corner. Stealing across this horrific (and that's the only word for it) landscape are an unnamed man and his emaciated son, a boy probably around the age of ten. It is the love the father feels for his son, a love as deep and acute as his grief, that could surprise readers of McCarthy's previous work.

12 August:

“The Progressive Patriot” – Billy Bragg: Non-fiction

A passionate and brilliant polemic on the meaning of national identity in modern Britain. What does it mean to be English? What does it mean to be British? Is the cross of St. George a proud symbol of a great tradition, or the badge of a neo-Nazi? In a world where British citizens can lay bombs to kill their countrymen, where religious fundamentalism is on the increase and where the
BNP (British National Party) are somehow part of the democratic process, what does patriotism actually mean? Our identity can change depending on what company we are in. For example, someone could describe themselves British to one person, Scottish to another and, say, a Londoner to another, and be right every time. But problems arise when someone tries to tell you what you are, based on your skin tone, religion, accent, surname, or whatever.

This book is Billy Bragg's urgent, eloquent and passionate response to the events of 7 July 2005, when four bombs tore through a busy morning in London, killing 52 innocent people and injuring many more. A firm believer in toleration and diversity, he felt himself hemmed in by fascists on one side and religious fanatics on the other. The suicide bombers were all British-born and well integrated into our multicultural society. Yet, they felt no compunction in murdering and maiming their fellow citizens. Inclusivity is important, but without a sense of belonging to accompany it, what chance social cohesion...But where does a sense of belonging come from? Can it be conferred by a legal document? Is it a matter of blood and soil? Can it be taught? Is it nature or nurture? "The Progressive Patriot" is a book we all need to read. It pulls no punches in its insights and its radical vision offers a positive hope for a country teetering on the brink of catastrophe.

9 September:

“The Yacoubian Building” – Alaa Al Aswany: Fiction
Finally published in English, this 2002 Arabic blockbuster is a bleak but utterly compelling snapshot of contemporary Egypt seen through the stories of the occupants of a building in Downtown Cairo. It's no exaggeration to say that by reading this novel, Westerners can gain some degree of insight into the complex issues that have prompted the radicalisation of some parts of the Middle East. The main storyline is about devout Taha el Shazli, son of the doorkeeper of the Yacoubian Building. Taha has set his ambitions on joining the Cairo Police Force to escape his life of poverty, only to have his hopes dashed by social prejudice. Angry at the injustice of the process, he joins a radical cell of the Muslim Brotherhood and becomes a terrorist/martyr. A thought-provoking and unexpectedly affectionate novel that is as instructive as it is enjoyable.

14 October:

“Shakespeare's Wife” – Germaine Greer: Non-fiction
Little is known about the wife of the world's most famous playwright, but much is said about her. Ann Hathaway has been mocked and vilified by scholars for centuries. The glaring omission of her name from Shakespeare's will has been gleefully used by many as evidence that she was nothing more than an ugly old wench whom William was shackled to after a thoughtless roll in the hay in his giddy youth. Yet Shakespeare went on to become the very poet of marriage, exploring the sacrament in all its aspects, spiritual, psychological, sexual and sociological. He is the creator of the most tenacious and intelligent heroines in English literature. Is it possible, therefore, that Ann was the inspiration? Until now, there has been no serious critical scholarship devoted to the much-wronged Ann Hathaway. Part-biography, part-history, "Shakespeare's Wife" is fascinating in its reconstruction of Ann's life, and the daily lives of Elizabethan women. Germaine Greer offers an illuminating portrait of their working routines, the rituals of their courtship, and the minutiae of married life. Shakespeare's Wife is a polemical, ground-breaking study of Elizabethan England that reclaims Ann Hathaway's rightful place in history.

11 November:

“The Book of Other People” – Edited by Zadie Smith: Fiction
The Book of Other People is simply about character. The 23 authors who each render a character do so in a fantastic variety of ways, from short blurbs (Nick Hornby) through inner monologue (David Mitchell) to pictorial (Chris Ware). Equally the focus of the authors, who were asked to contribute a story each on a character in the name of a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting young creative writers, is similarly varied. In one instance we watch the expiration of a judge (Heidi Julavits), in another the perspective of a paranoid cultural critic (Jonathan Lethem), a giant (Dave Eggers) and, elsewhere, a child (Andrew Sean Greer), a mother (George Saunders) and a monster (Toby Litt).

The variety is one of the hooks and central tenets of the book, but there are some themes which recur. Family, love, loss, sanity and subjectivity are all explored through different eyes, with the one constant – character – exploring the interaction between the individual and the world.