

Black Mountain (Venero Armano, UQP, \$29.95 tpb, ISBN 9780702239151, August) ★★★★★

This intriguing novel takes you from a small coastal Queensland town to the sulphur minefields of Sicily. There are elements of Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind* and it also reminded me of Andrew McGahan's *Wonders of a Godless World*. Armano tackles life, death and immortality in a page-turning plot that you race through. A young man begins having strange dreams about a faceless creature. He turns his nightmare into a screenplay for a horror film and tries to sell his idea, only to be accused of stealing the idea from a 50-year-old Italian novel. He tries to track down the author, who he discovers is still alive, and in the process discovers a set of buried journals which detail an extraordinary tale. The majority of the novel is told through the various

discovered journals, and this is where the book is at its best. The first part was harder to get into—I didn't quite connect with the young man and there were one too many coincidences for my liking. But once you hit the journals you get lost in a fascinating world of slavery, war and the quest for eternal life.

Jon Page is the general manager of Pages & Pages Booksellers in Mosman, Sydney and president of the ABA



Mazin Grace (Dylan Coleman, UQP, \$22.95 pb, ISBN 9780702249341, September) ★★★★★

Winner of the 2011 David Unaipon Award for Indigenous Writing, this is a remarkable novel. Based on the author's mother's recollections of growing up on a South Australian Lutheran Mission in the 1940s and 50s, it is in turn heart-wrenching, amusing, tragic and resilient. Some may find it a challenge to read, peppered as it is with many Indigenous words and phrasing. The author helpfully provides a glossary, which most readers will need to consult less the further they read, as the words become familiar through repetition and context. Grace (the author's mother) is a feisty, intelligent, quick-witted (and quick-tempered) child who knows she is not accepted either by her own people nor the whites around her, but has no idea why until she begins to realise who her father

may have been—a shattering discovery. She grows up in a small, ugly government box of a home, then spends a year in an Adelaide hospital being treated for osteomyelitis, where she luxuriates in clean sheets, regular food and basic schooling at which she excels. Returning home is a challenge. Her life, with its petty cruelties, occasional kindnesses and, above all, a complicated relationship with her extended family and loving but wayward mother, is compelling, wonderfully well told, and deserves the widest possible audience. (See interview, page 29.)

Max Oliver is a veteran Australian bookseller and compulsive reader



Midnight Empire (Andrew Croome, A&U, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN 9781743311127, September) ©★★★★★

Andrew Croome's debut novel, *Document Z*, looked at the world of Australian diplomats during the Cold War using the prism of the Petrov case. His second novel, *Midnight Empire*, is utterly contemporary, all about technology, encryption and the remotely piloted drone planes being used by the US military in the 'War on Terror'. Daniel Carter is a bright young technician who works for a small Canberra-based technology company, LinkLock. LinkLock has invented cutting-edge new encryption software that the US military wants to trial in the drone planes, and Daniel is sent to the Creech Air Force base near Las Vegas to oversee its installation. When not working all hours at Creech, Daniel is put up in a hotel in Las Vegas, where he starts playing poker

and meets Polish-born poker pro Ania at the tables. As Daniel's relationship with Ania develops, pilots attached to the drone project at Creech begin to die in mysterious circumstances when off-duty, and Ania's past returns to haunt her. Daniel is caught up in a violent world where he doesn't know who to trust or to turn to for help. This is an above-average thriller, full of complexity and moral ambiguity. Even on the last page, the reader is no clearer than Daniel as to who are 'the bad guys'.

Tim Coronel is the former publisher of Bookseller+Publisher



Andrew Croome

The Midnight Promise: A Detective's Story in Ten Cases (Zane Lovitt, Text, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN 9781921922930, September) ©★★★★★

The Midnight Promise crashes straight into Temple, Corris and Chandler territory—just like the blurb promises. It involves a Melbourne PI, interlinked stories (if this worries you, just consider them TV episodes) and a trail of intriguing cases (based on fact) that accompany our hero's best (or not) endeavours. Downfalls of lonely alcoholic PIs and cops can become a little tedious to the frequent crime reader, but there is enough warmth, self-awareness and chutzpah to keep this book on the right side of the genre. With merrily dark observations, the gumshoe metaphors are smokin' and when things get occasionally purple (chimneys as infections anyone?), a whip-smart quip brings the focus back. In fact it's the purity, lightness and knowing humour of these cracks that

lifts these stories from good to 'oh man, get me this guy's next book now!' Readers may find the latter third wavers a little in purpose and sharpness, but keep your guard up—there's a body blow coming, and a final chapter that ends up exploding in your hands. You can recommend *The Midnight Promise* by the back cover—Text has it nailed. (See interview, page 29.)

Catherine Schulz is an indie bookseller, headquartered at Fullers Bookshop, Hobart

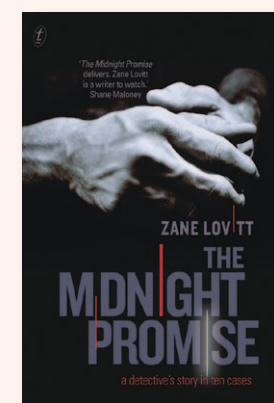


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