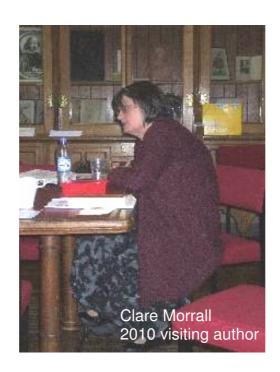
SMAP Shot Reviews



2011





Your Reviewers:

Eric Shipton
Su Richardson
Margaret Shakespeare
Margaret Holmes
Janet Jerome
Naailah Ashiq
Melanie Oakley
Kate McTigue
Nancy Gudgeon



Stone Gods by Jeanette Winterson

Reviewer: Margaret Holmes

It tells the story of a love that repeats itself through many scenario's over fast periods of time. It asks questions of the nature of humanity itself and the nature of love. Billy starts quite feisty but ends up just wanting to be safe, with someone to love and be loved by. Spike is so all knowing and wise she gives calm and security to the most extreme circumstances. But she stars as a servant of the state/ people and in the end wants to make her own choices. The third element of the stories is the planet itself which

we destroy though the same human impulses to own, conquer and fight. The story starts well, but as I reached the end, I found the endless hopelessness of it all quite tedious.

2 Stars

Reviewer: Naailah Ashiq

A love story of 2 people through time I guess, a vision of our future if we do not change. Well 1 human and 1 advanced robot, in a past in our history - then a future now. Quite a strange book but oddly addictive and left me wanting more. No proper ending though and the plotline is odd. I really liked the opening chapters on a corrupt vision of our future, where the rich control. It was a page turner, then got slower. It didn't get any better. I didn't understand the books message and a lot of it made me feel uncomfortable. The paedophiles, lesbian relationships. I know why she added these but I didn't enjoy the content.

2 Stars but only for the sci-fi part at the beginning

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

It is a futuristic story, creating a scary picture of the world we inhabit today and the possible future. It starts on Orbus (earth?) which, because of human activity, has become a hostile planet, and it is necessary to find other planets which might sustain human life. The main characters are Billie, who I quite liked because she was a rebel, an outsider and Spike who was largely a Robot! I didn't like this book at all, don't like sci-fi.. However I fear that some of the problems and developments could be credible! (the de-humanising, the sexualisation of women and children, damage to the environment etc)

1 Star although I'm sure that lovers of sci-fi would give it 5 – it is clever

Reviewer: Su Richardson

A trip through time and imagination. About beginnings and endings and what happens in between. A love /hate story about birth, destruction and re-birth — ever cyclical. About invention, war destruction, reclamation, becoming obsolete. Ending and starting again. Characters stay much the same but everything around them changes and they have to adapt or die. Related to what's happening and has happened in the world. An interesting and imaginative trip round the past, present and future. It kind have petered out, maybe a sequel needed?

4 Stars

Reviewer: Janet Jerome

A very challenging read. The book is about love and never giving up – from the white of the earth to the red of the Orbus and the blue of the new planet. All this is linked by the book 'The Stone Gods' which describes how Easter Island dies, all the wood and vegetation is used to build The Gods and questions why would a man destroy everything he most needs.



Reviewer:

It starts well, but as I reached the end. I found the endless hopelessness of it all quite tedious. It becomes fairly bleak and I found myself losing a bit of interest in how it all did indeed end! Spike and Billy represent different manifestations of what love is, but they are actually the same. The nature of humanity and the devastating effects we have on a planet we love are inextricably entwined.

4 Stars



Spare Room by Helen Garner

Reviewer: Kate McTigue

The book was about a woman (Nicola) faced with a terminal illness and her friend with whom she stayed. It was about loss and dying and the pain of feeling helpless. The complexities of honesty and love. A fast moving page turner, I liked Nicola for her fighting spirit, but I disliked her too. Very believable, the author did a good job developing the characters throughout.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Eric Shipton

When old friends meet up, one offer's the other accommodation without knowing how it would all turn out. The story was very well built up and also sad in parts. When the one friend starts to regret having asked the other to stay, as the plot continues she realises she was the only friend her friend wanted at the time and wishes she had not felt that way.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

Set in Australia, it is about two old friends Helen and Nicola. A heart breaking situation dealt with in a sensitive and sometimes amusing way. Nicole is dying of cancer when she arrives to stay with Helen for three difficult weeks. I liked both characters - they were believable although Nicola, at times expected an awful lot from Helen and other friends. The plotline was believable, sensitively written; and a page turner. Probably best read in one sitting. I thought it was a good ending with Helen able to share the burden of Nicola's illness with a relay of caring friends.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Su Richardson

This is about Helen's experience of offering her spare room to her friend Nicola, who is terminally ill, but in denial and undergoing treatment at a nearby quack clinic. The characters change as the illness progresses and affects them, making them look (or not look) at their lives. I did not warm to Nicola, and understood Helen's frustration with her. A gripping storytelling, I read it in one sitting. Haunting, angry and beautiful all at once.



Reviewer: Janet Jerome

This is the account of a 3 week stay by a cancer suffering friend, Nicola. Helen captures the priorities which continually change as Nicola moves from gaiety/jolliness through to sickness and pain. Written from Helen's perspective, it questions honesty at a time when we would all want to be dishonest in order to coat a very bitter pill. It was a very real and believable story – we all want recognition albeit we know we are not the person at the centre of the illness.

3 Stars

Reviewer: Nancy Gudgeon

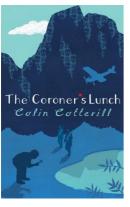
This is about a woman trying to care for her friend who is dying of cancer. It's about the everyday hardships – cleaning, changing sheets and about coping with the emotional and physical suffering that comes at the end of life. Helen (the carer) is strong throughout the whole book; while perhaps Nicola learns some acceptance of her disease but she fights it to the end. An uncomfortable read it brought home to me that caring for the sick is hard and thankless but perhaps it is ok to be angry and frustrated about it.

5 Stars

Reviewer: Melanie Oakley

This is a story of a woman called Helen, who lives in Melbourne near her family. Her friend - Nicola - who is ill with bowl cancer comes to stay with her in order to pursue alternative therapy. Helen is suspicious of the treatment, and becomes increasingly angry with Nicole for denying the seriousness of her illness, forcing those around her to do emotional work on her behalf in confronting her death. A little uncomfortable read, I've seen how illness and our caring for others gives us these mixed emotions.

5 Stars



Coroner's Lunch by Colin Cottreill

Reviewer: Naailah Ashiq

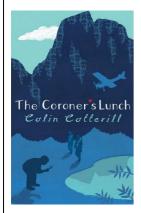
This is about an elderly gentleman from the communist country of Laos, who thought he could retire but found himself becoming a Coroner. The story evolved around him dealing with dead bodies and solving the mysteries of their deaths. He also saw the 'dead 'people in visions and found that helped him solve the mysteries! You feel the weight of his age and the lack of resources but also the simplicity of elderly life in a communist country that isn't progressing - and the facilities available to him are useless. I enjoyed

the book but the end felt rushed.

2 Stars

Reviewer: Eric Shipton

A Doctor is made the coroner of a country but has to learn his trade as he goes along. I like the coroner himself who - he is never phased no matter what is going on around him. It was a fast page turner, reading to see if he will fail or win. How the people in Laos coped under communist rule was very interesting



Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

The book was set in Laos at the height of the Cold War. The main character was an elderly medical doctor, not trained as coroner, but obliged to become the countries only coroner. An honest man, he was determined to do his best in a situation that was not of his choosing. I thought it was nice, gentle read and the characters seemed real and believable. The fact the doctor was obliged against his wishes to become the coroner was an uncomfortable situation. It made me feel relieved that however awful things might seem at times in the UK and how little power we really have as individual, we don't live in a totalitarian state.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Su Richardson

72 year old Suri, the only doctor left in Laos in 1976, is appointed official coroner, although he had no training, little equipment and unusual assistants! He leads us through his murder mystery with friendly humour, telling us of the political situation in Laos at the time along the way, as he turns detective. Suri is very likable, and his humour takes getting used to - then you start to look out for it! It's great to have a funny, likeable character in his seventies! It was an interesting plotline, believable because of the political background and droll humour. The story slowly unfolds and becomes faster- because I want to know more about the characters, the plot is secondary. An insight into the lives of ordinary people in a very different culture, climate and time – without it feeling foreign.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Janet Jerome

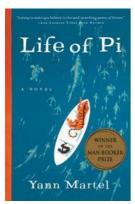
I enjoyed the book very much. Set in Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1976, it tells the tale of murder, political intrigue and the isolation of people who trust no-one in authority - yet we all have to trust somebody. Suri evolves through the book, from quiet dedication to taking on the Judge. His lunches with Civilai and Rajid brings the tale into focus as well as letting us into what impact a revolution has on life lived in the slow lane. A subtle plotline, the story slowly unfolds, with a great ending. It ties everything up very neatly.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Melanie Oakley

Shortly after a communist coup has overturned the monarchy, Dr. Siri is ready for retirement – not to be an untrained coroner, as all the experts have fled the country.

He is a doctor and as someone who has fought for the 'revolution for decades' they feel that they can trust him. Unfortunately he's too well endowed with humour, intelligence, humanity and independence. A committed communist but also a humanist. However he has two capable assistants and together they solve the events behind the series of bodies that get left in their morgue.



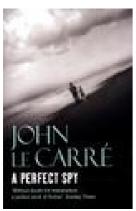
crap 'ha.

4 Stars

The Life of Pi by Yann Martel

Reviewer: Naailah Ashiq

The story is about a 16 year old Indian boy, the youngest son of an Indian Zoo Keeper. Whilst on a boat emigrating to Canada, the boat sinks and he gets onto a life boat with 4 other animals - drifting along the Pacific Ocean till he arrives in Mexico. It is his account of his life, his encounter with a Bengal Tiger, his upbringing and his mixing of religions. It was quite a slow read and a bit open ended – what happened to him afterwards? Lots of people raved about this book but have I missed something 'cos it was a bit



4 Stars

A Perfect Spy by John Le Carré

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

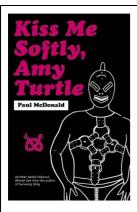
For anyone not familiar with the work of John Le Carré, the title gives the game away! The main character Magnus Pym is a double agent, working for both the Capitalist West and Communist East. The book is very long – 704 pages – I skipped sections of it which is probably why I was lost at times. I didn't like any of the characters as they were all duplicitous, dishonest, lying etc, which are presumably one has to be a spy and especially a double agent.



Ed Reardon's Week by Christopher Douglas and Andrew Nickolds

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

This book is a comedy written in the form of a diary. Ed, the main character is an out of work journalist trying to make money any way he can – no plotline. I didn't like any of the characters, they didn't seem real or believable. The ending was ok though not really believable.



Kiss me Softly, Amy Turtle by Paul McDonald

Reviewer: Naailah Ashiq

A man who drinks too much and ends up in hospital. He reflects on his life and the surrounding environment and the people of his native Walsall (which he hates). His past includes an ex girlfriend, a best friend, an S&M parlour and his student days. It's funny, sad and risqué and I couldn't put it down. I liked the language of the people of Walsall. Having an accent myself it was fun to see the how the words were written. I am glad it ended with him

correcting his life and not drinking any more. It was a positive ending.

2 Stars

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

This book is a comedy. It covers the life of Dave 'Ichabod' McVane from his time as a student to his career as a journalist – to his time on the wards of the 'Wesley-in-Tame' hospital. Some of the characters in the hospital spoke 'Black Country'. The author did this very well. Dave, Monica and Ringo are the main, very likeable, characters. Monica and Ringo eventually become 'respectable' professional people but Dave continues to be a totally irresponsible (though likeable) alcoholic until his life style becomes a serious threat to his health. The 'Black Country' language reminded me of childhood visits to my grandparents. I couldn't understand a word they said and needed my father to translate!

4 Stars

Reviewer: Eric Shipton

This is about life in Walsall – and why live anywhere else? The interaction of the character's was lovely and amusing, I read this from start to finish I liked it so much. Not having a lot to do with this way of life, I will take the author's about how credible the plot it! It seems some folk like other things than bowls and telly. The ending was part sad, part happy – how else could it end? I would recommend this author very much.

5 Stars

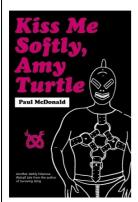
Reviewer: Su Richardson

Dave McVane, journalist residing in Walsall tells a tale of his life from his hospital bed (pancreatits) with flash backs to his youth and the deluded years of alcohol fuelled deeds in between. It felt credible and unlikely equally – but was written from the view of one who and wants to – make a very sad story, humorous. Ringo was the most likable character – quirky, loyal, funny, adaptable. Characters changed or matured as expected as they got older. I am a Geordie by birth and the humour and attitude is very different. Having lived in Walsall, I appreciate the story, but find the humour very depressing!

3 Stars

Reviewer: Janet Jerome

To me, this book was about alcoholism and its effect on the pancreas, the body, the mind and friends. There was also intrigue, which was absorbing although the sleuthing was reminiscent of Enid Blyton's Famous Five. The characters don't change - the situations do. Dave was a drunk, Ringo a 'very nice Dutch boy' and Monica managed the domestic. It was who they met along the way that was amusing, interesting and diverse. Loved the title 'Kiss Me Softly, Amy Turtle' with its link to the Midlands through Crossroads. The pace was good, the story a bit of fun – with an optimistic ending.



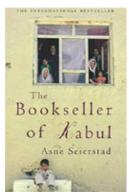
Kiss me Softly, Amy Turtle by Paul McDonald

Reviewer: Melanie Oakley

The 'Walsall Reflector's' Dave Ichabod McVane has a thirst for Devil Juice. Now, after years of debauchery the booze has bitten back. The plotline development was humorous, whilst maintaining a sense of realism in fantastical situations. It was an incredibly fast moving with a genius plot. As a health care provider I could relate to the

various incidents that occurred to Dave McVane and perhaps other clients in my care.

4 Stars



The Bookseller of Kabul by Asne Seierstad

Reviewer: Melanie Oakley

Asne Seierstad made friends with Sultan Khan or Rais who owns a bookshop in Kabul and wrote a book on the experience. Disguising herself by wearing a burka, she observed that women in Afgan are dominated by men and that while Sultan is a liberal intellectual in public - he is a tyrant to his family. He appears no different from many men in Afgan society who

treat women horrendously. It reads like a novel and is absorbing reportage, however as the story slowly unfolds you wish that the lives of those poor women would improve.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Eric Shipton

A snapshot of real life in Afghanistan. I disliked Sultan, the head of the family who ruled the home in the way he had been taught by his parents. It was very a good story because as you read – you could sense the feeling of those around. Each page left you wanting to know what would be the outcome. To think we live our lives in total freedom, it's hard to understand other's cannot.

5 Stars

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

This is not a novel but a sociological or perhaps an anthropological study by a journalist who spent four months living with the Khan family in Kabul in 2002. She paints a very bleak picture of a poverty ridden, patriarchal society. The dominant character is Sultan Khan – who, as a bookseller is a relatively well off man. He rules the whole family with a rod of iron. I felt deep sympathy with the women whose lives were so hard and so limited, totally controlled by the male members of the family. I seem to remember that the Afgan family criticised the book and author for misrepresenting them and betraying their trust.

Reviewer: Su Richardson

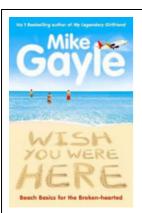
The author/ journalist spent 4 months living with the bookseller and his family in Kabul. This book is an account of the time: traditions, family life, politics, and crime in 2002. I disliked many of the characters and I became very angry reading this book. The story had a slow pace, but then it is a story of everyday life in a country that harks back to the Middle Ages in Europe. It was an uncomfortable read, the way religion, custom and tradition can be extremely oppressive and damaging, no integration and progress.

2 Stars

Reviewer: Janet Jerome

The book is about Sultan Khan, a bookseller in Kabul. Into the book is woven the history of Afghanistan, the number of countries which have invaded or been invited into this land and the troubles of 9/11 which led to the invasion by the Northern Alliance. The lack of trust between people was evident as Sultan, his mother and his sons run the booksellers business. No outsiders were allowed. Woman had no rights and you could only feel sorry for any woman who had no male relation. How did they survive, even going to the market was regarded as a moral offence. The book lets us see inside the family with all the gossip, upset and hierarchy which is part of the family in a war torn country.

3 Stars



Wish you were here by Mike Gayle

Reviewer: Melanie Oakley

Three young men who met at university, are now in their thirties. After ten years, Charlie has been dumped by his girlfriend and all he wants to do is wallow in misery. His mates have a better idea — Malia, party capital of the Greek Islands. However, they are not eighteen anymore and it shoes. It isn't the cheap beer, late nights or even the fast food that is the problem. It's girls and life and most of all each other. It's a

heart warming tale about love the friendship, and how seven days in the sun can change your life forever.

3 Stars

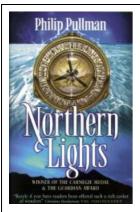
Reviewer: Su Richardson

This was a warm, funny look at the male psyche of three over 30's friends on holiday in Malia and how it changed their lives. They changed their outlook on life, (at cost, in some cases); re-assessed their feelings and values in the holiday setting. Being well over 30 in an 18-30 holiday resort was an experience they didn't always relish. I didn't think I'd be interested in the story of 30 something men's angst – but I loved it! Satisfying if predictable ending.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

This book is about three men in their 30's who go on holiday to a Greek island to find a girl for one of them who has been dumped by his long term partner. As the story unfolds it became apparent that all three of them had issues. I haven't read anything else by this author - on the basis of this book, I wouldn't particularly look for any of his other novels.



Nothern Lights by Philip Pullman

Reviewer: Eric Shipton

A young girls' life around unusual parents – Lyra – was a brilliant character, although I did not understand why you would need a daemon. It was a very good story from start to finish, a fast page turner. The ending did raise more questions than answers but I would still recommend this book.

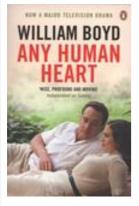
5 Stars

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

This is the first part of a trilogy 'His Dark Materials'. It is a fantasy and a thriller. The books are written for children but are equally absorbing for adults.

4 Stars

Reviewer: Su Richardson A fantasy story about a world both similar and different to this one. Written from Lyra (and her daemon's) point of view. Morals, mystery, adventure, dangerous journeys and metaphors. The first part of a trilogy, exploring different worlds. Lyra is the heroine, feisty, strong and a girl – very likeable. A clever plot, credible in a fantasy sort of way. Not keen on the link to religion, but good on making me question 'good', 'bad' etc **4 Stars**



Any Human Heart by William Boyd

Reviewer: Su Richardson

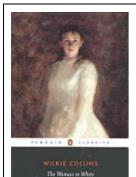
This is about the life of Logan Mountstuart that spanned the twentieth century from his birth in Uruguay to his death in France. As a writer he lives a life both ordinary and extrodinary, and we are taken along with him via his journals. I liked the way he lets you know his feelings, and the way these change and mature, about the people he knows. At times I liked him and at a few I really didn't! The story slowly unfolded – I'd tried before but having then enjoyed the TV drama, was happy to read it this time, but it

was coloured by the TV version.

4/5 but wouldn't have rated it so highly without seeing T.V drama which was excellent!

Reviewer: Eric Shipton

A man for all seasons. As the story unfolded I thought what a name dropper but somebody must have met all these people. You were introduced to people as they had a baring on events, making them feel real. The story tests your beliefs. You are thinking who or what next? Some folks make a life, lose it and do it all again. The ending felt like a cloud bringing a sunny day to an end.



The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins

Reviewer: Naailah Ashiq

A plot to obtain a rather rich lady's endowment from her by marriage, fraud is committed by people that lead to murder and an asylum. It is about how the 3 main characters obtain the truth and is set in the Victorian era. Each character gives a bit of the story and builds the picture up. There seems to be a lot of tension (up to p376) but the book was rather slow – yet strangely

addictive! I felt that if I skipped a few pages I'd miss something. The ending was a bit deflating but at least the characters were settled and prosperous and happy

2 Stars

Reviewer: Margaret Shakespeare

This book, written in 1860 is a mystery and a love story. There are many characters – goodies and badies. The best characters were Marian and Walter, both of whom were moral, intelligent and determined. The plotline was excellent – very complex but Collins expertly tied together all the loose ends. I thought it was a fast page turner even though the story did unfold slowly-gripping to the end. I liked the ending and wouldn't want to change it. The 'goodies' were restored to their rightful place and the 'badies' got their comeuppance.

5 Stars - I think it was excellent