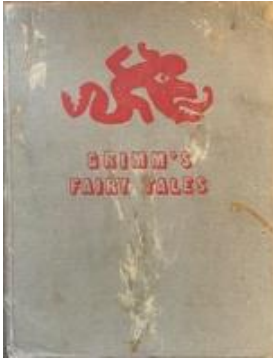


BOOKS IN MY LIFE

Thanks so much for the introduction and for the invitation to be a presenter. I too acknowledge that we gather on the lands of the Kurna peoples, the first peoples of the Adelaide plains and affirm that all First Nations people passed on stories which kept and keep their rich cultural identity alive.

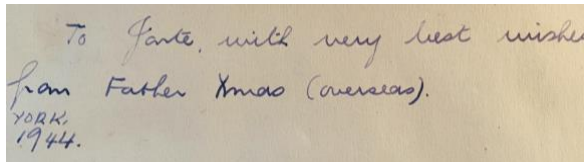
Also I would like to express how much many of us miss Margaret Calder – Margie who recently died - a regular attender here, contributor and member of the Friends of the Library.

Today I am going to feature 10 books all chosen because they are mostly ones I have read again and again and are therefore clues to the interests and values which have been important to me. So this is kind of autobiographical! The first starts from childhood:



1. GRIMM'S FAIRY TALES

This book was probably the first that I could read when I learned to read. Of course it was special as it was sent from the UK as a gift from Father Christmas when my father was with the RAAF and Bomber command. This wording is in the inside cover.



It also had great pictures (note the character I identified with in this picture!). I think I learned at a young age that stories, even if not “historical” had something to say about how to survive when things don't go your way or when the characters have to do battle with those who wield power either from social superiority or by using so-called magic.



Children' stories have always fascinated me and a great source for the many “children's addresses” I have given over the years. Well into my adulthood, I discovered C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. My sister when in the U.S. sent a collection of Leo Leonie's stories which enhanced my collection with delightfully funny pictures. But in my childhood, it was Grimm's stories which I read again and again.



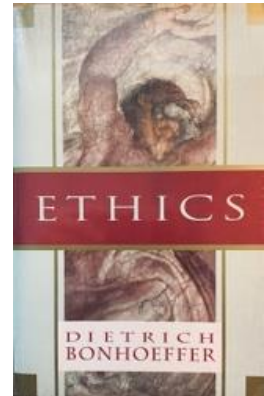
2. PHANTOM PATROL – A.R CHANNEL

Phantom Patrol was a Sunday School prize when I was about ten years old. My best friend at school was Robert Steed who borrowed it every term to read again and again – as I did too. At that age social class was hardly noticed, but I was aware that Robert had no books at home. I was privileged by having for example every Biggles book published as well as other series such as the “Just William” novels. But the world of Biggles interiorised in me a world view that all things British were good and superior. Talk about a swallowing a colonial mindset!

Why read “Phantom Patrol” again and again? It was a ripping good yarn about British scouts who because of their parents were living in Finland just as WW2 was about to break out. However the book I realised later was the first crack in my colonial thinking. The real heroes in the story were the Finns and their culture which guided them as they successfully countered the invasion of the Russians. Although I was hardly aware of it, the author was actually beginning to dispel the pervading myth of British superiority. As I continue to talk about the books in my life, the myth of British indeed western cultural superiority would be called into question again and again.

3. ETHICS – DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Someone wanted to know which book of the Bible I would choose for this presentation. Well I chickened out on that one but there are “religious” books that I have lived with and read again and again. This is one by the martyred Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I first read his “Letters and Papers from Prison” when I was at Parkin College and then received the rare accolade of a prize for being student of the year in 1960. It was “The Cost of Discipleship”. But there is a section in Ethics I have lived with all my life. It is his chapter on Freedom and Responsibility in his unfinished draft on Ethics. Why chosen?



It seems Bonhoeffer was reflecting on his own life when having to make hard choices such as becoming complicit in the plot to kill Hitler. What he articulates is what we now call contextual ethics, where responsibility means living in the tension of freedom and obedience thus always having to decide what obligations one ought to be committed to. This is known as the necessary deed which Bonhoeffer theologises as the “will of God”. This new model of ethical responsibility, is in contrast to the prevailing ones of the past, that is the Kantian ethic of duty to do with “right and wrong” and the Aristotelian ethic of the “good and the bad.” Some of this text was versified by Russel Campbell to the tune “The Yellow Submarine” and was sung by children and adults in the Mowanjum Aboriginal community in the 70’s as part of an imaginal education process:

*CHORUS: We all live in responsibility, duty bound and free in relativity.
We all live in responsibility, whoever we may be, our deeds are history.*

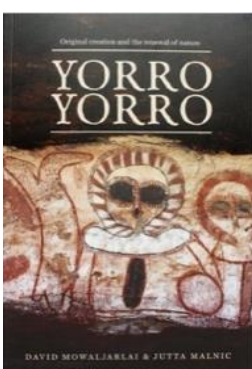
*Observe and judge the given facts. Weigh up the values; decide and act.
You’re alone completely free, leave the judgement to history.*

*To no principle, no law, to no authority can we withdraw.
We decide it all alone, right from right and wrong from wrong.*

*Obligation is the call; to God and neighbour surrender all.
The free venture is the deed rendered up to meet the need.*

4. YORRO YORRO – DAVID MOWALJARLAI

In 1970 my wife and I were appointed by the Presbyterian Board of Missions to be part of a team to prepare the Mowanjum Aboriginal Community for the expected time when they would have to manage their community for themselves. Among several outstanding women and men, one in particular we were privileged to have a close association with. He was David (Bungal) Mowaljarlai, someone we continued to have contact with until his death in 1998. Remarkably he was photographed as a child at the original mission station at Kunmunyua.

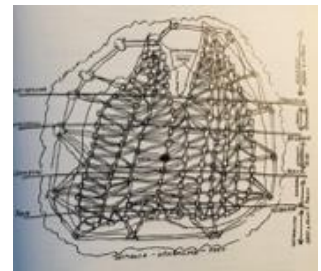


In “Yorro Yorro”, Mowaljarlai in dialogue with photographer Jutta Malnic tells of the Wandjina creation spirits and their 'crossing over' into ancestral beings and then eventually into human form. Yorro Yorro in the Ngarinyin language means 'everything standing up alive', referring to the new life that emerges after the cyclonic rains. The Wandjina figures were painted in caves all over the Kimberley and while are of ancient origin they are still touched up to this day. Mowaljarlai was one such custodian.

I add this picture because it was painted on the back wall of the chapel at Old Mowanjum. The “right” people, including Mowaljarlai were chosen to paint them. Thus First Nations people who had moved from the rugged mountain areas of the West Kimberleys to living on the plains south of Derby decided that the nearest thing to a cave was the chapel. It was regarded as a sacred place. The people by the way honoured both the Christian symbols of communion table, pulpit and baptismal font at the front and of course the symbols of their own spirituality on the back. The only people who were bothered even outraged about this were conservative Christians in the wider community.



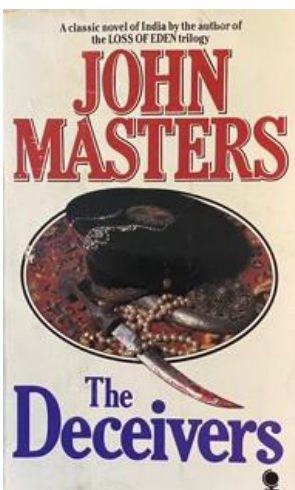
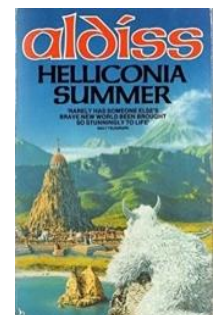
I also include this picture by Mowaljarlai in the book who had actually shared it with us as a parting gift which makes it clear that First Nations people, despite the distinctiveness of each clan, were connected right across the continent by the song lines.



5. HELICONIA SPRING – BRIAN ALDISS

I have always loved science fiction – starting from school days I would buy the latest SCI-FI paperbacks from Preece’s Bookshop in the beehive building on KW Street. Later I got into Isaac Asimov and his foundation series, introduced first by my colleague at Mowanjum, George Holcombe. George was intrigued by the fact that in this series, long term consequences would be the result of courageous present decisions to do something different. His point also being that the community reformulation program we were advocating for the Mowanjum community, would require bold decisions that would only have a positive effect in the long term, while not necessarily being understood in the short term. How true this was! This one by Brian Aldiss makes a similar point.

I have read and reread Brian Aldiss’ series of novels Heliconia Spring, Summer and Winter all set on a planet where humans had to share with another sentient species who believed that they were meant to have dominion on the planet. Orbiting two suns Heliconia had seasons which lasted for hundreds of years and become extreme when the two suns were in close conjunction. I now wonder in what ways, human domination of a planet is for good or ill?



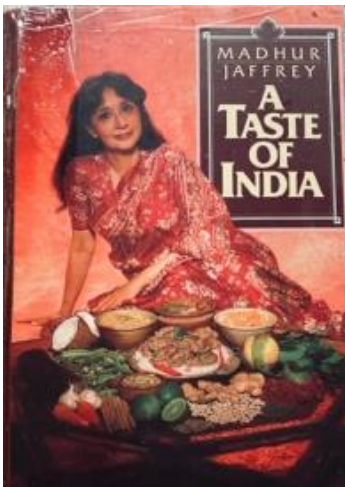
6. THE DECEIVERS – JOHN MASTERS

I first discovered John Masters in a novel set during the Indian Mutiny in a bookshop in Derby as I was getting ready to accompany Sam Woolagoodja and David Mowaljarlai on a fishing expedition up the Kimberley coast. I then read most of Master’s books when we lived in India based in Bombay as part of a team facilitating Human Development projects and offering training in social change methods to mainly members of the disparate Christian community around India. I made many long train trips and I found, “The Deceivers” at a railway station bookshop in Nagpur. Another ripping yarn I still reread it to this day! “The Deceivers” featured the thugees who were a secret religious cult also known as the stranglers, who killed and robbed

travellers mainly across central India in the early part of the 19th century.

The hero of the story, a mild-mannered Englishman, appointed as a collector for a district in what is now Madhya Pradesh, having mastered Hindi, darkens his skin to associate with the thuggees, in order to unmask the key players who are actually prominent personages in the social order of the time. The story did not hold back on the sheer brutality of using sacred cloth to choke the travellers to death. The author clearly had researched the historical records to provide authenticity to the story. The thuggees were followers of Kali the goddess of destruction and the story wove in their rituals, which according to Masters, mirrored the opposite meanings of Christian sacraments such as the eucharist. Eating the sacred bread empowered the stranglers to murder without impunity. Even their loot was ritualistically shared as a sign of belonging to a chosen community.

It would seem that it took enlightened westerners like Savage to blow the whistle on the murderous cult. Did it? I now know that this version of events is highly romanticised despite the British governor-general of India Bentick in 1830 having appointed Captain William Sleeman to eradicate the thuggees from India. The crackdown was brutal. However many historians now argue that their portrayal as a religiously motivated, murderous cult was exaggerated. Thuggee activities were amplified to justify British interventions and further control over India's population. By framing the Thuggees as "born criminals" (aka in our day as terrorists!) and emphasising their religious motivations, the British could claim they were bringing civilisation to a "barbaric" land. These days I have left Master's novels behind having been first blown away by Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" and discovering how rich are the offerings by Indian authors such as Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Khushwant Singh and in earlier days Rabindranath Tagore.

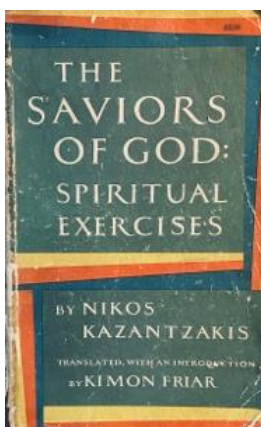


7. A TASTE OF INDIA – MADHUR JAFFREY

I drafted these books and suddenly realised that all the authors are male! This book is included on the basis of being read again and devoured! When we lived in India, we lived in what was called the Bombay Urban Ashram. As we foreigners were in the minority, we had no choice but to eat Indian food, and when rostered on to cook had to go to the market (daily - the small fridge had a tiny freezer). So we got to love Indian food.

Yet food could be a great problem. When we ran three-week training courses for people who came from all over India, given the vastly different cuisines that people we used to, no one ever was happy with what our cooks provided. And every time at the beginning of the program, the food platters were passed along the

long tables and the first persons just helped themselves to big serves which meant those down the line got little! Thus, the need to consider others was a fundamental learning on such occasions. This book is so well used that it is beginning to fall apart. And by the way there are books written by female authors I do read and even read again. Favourites are Hilary Mantel, Geradine Brooks and Kate Grenville.



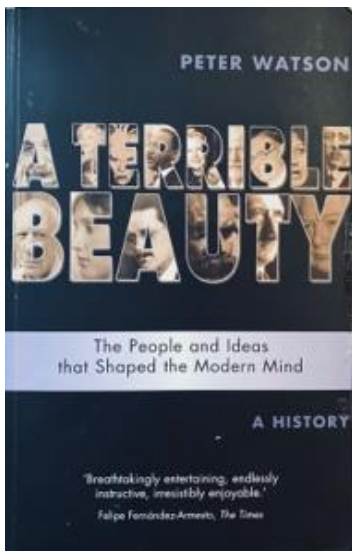
8. SAVIORS OF GOD – NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

Anyone ever see the film, "Zorba the Greek"? It was supposedly inspired by the life of the Greek mystic Nikos Kazantzakis. Or you may remember "The Last Temptation of Christ". This book was written in Berlin in 1923 and Kazantzakis was acutely aware of what was happening socially and politically at the time – the rise of fascism and the Bolshevik revolution. He charts a spirituality which is grounded in the realities of the present world and uses the image of humanity being driven by two opposing forces – one upwards towards life in its fullness with the social order being in harmony – and the other a force driving

downwards towards anarchy, destruction and inequality. The human journey is about having to navigate these real forces towards discovering a transcendent power which he calls "God". (Think of "the force be with you!"). The greatest danger is that when humans discard an unrealistic picture of God (which Kazantzakis claims are always human inventions) they are left with sheer nihilism. That is why there is the task of having to "save" God. Yes, I know that may sound heretical to some, But Kazantzakis is proposing that the challenge is to name, put a face on ultimate reality in the context of the times. Let me read a quote: page 92

The essence of our God is STRUGGLE. Pain, joy, and hope unfold and labour within this struggle, world without end. It is the ascension, the battle with the descending countercurrent which gives birth to pain. But pain is not the absolute monarch. Every victory, every momentary balance on the ascent fills with joy every living thing that breathes, grows, loves and gives birth. But from every joy and pain a hope leaps out eternally to escape this pain and to widen joy. And again the ascent begins and joy is reborn and new hope springs up once more. The circle never closes. It is not a circle, but a spiral which ascends eternally, ever widening, enfolding, and unfolding the triune struggle.

By the way this book was not available for sale in Australia when we were first introduced to it in 1966. However we discovered in Bombay that street booksellers sold many copies. Isn't it intriguing that these spiritual exercises by an author from the west, should be of such interest to peoples of the east.

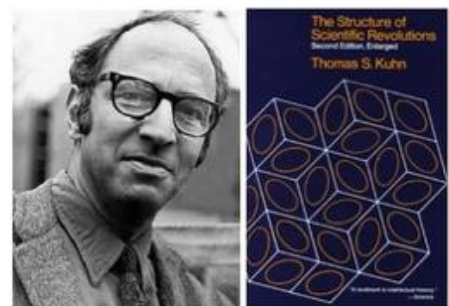


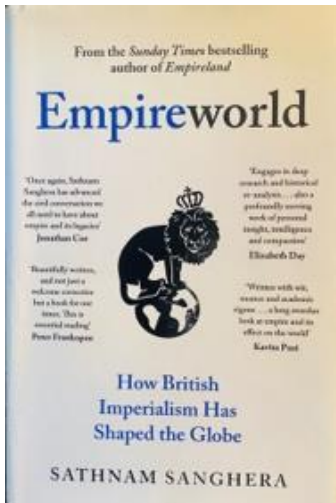
9. A TERRIBLE BEAUTY – PETER WATSON

In recent years, my wife and I read aloud after breakfast a chapter of a book that has come our way. Peter Watson's took quite a while to complete. Encyclopaedic in range, it is very heavy too! It charts the ideas that have shaped our consciousness in the 20th century and the gradual calling into question of the mechanistic assumptions of the so-called modern era with its hard-to-die assumption that progress is inevitable. The title is from William Butler Yeates' poem 1916, when the Easter uprising inspired him to grasp the larger significance of what was really happening. The verses repeat the words, *all changed, changed utterly: a terrible beauty is born.*

The book brings together the main areas of thought and juxtaposes the most original and influential ideas of the century. We meet the twentieth century's great and inventive writers, artists, scientists and philosophers who were not cowed by the political and military disasters raging around them, producing the most amazing ideas by which we live. A Terrible Beauty affirms that there was much more to the twentieth century than war and genocide.

Of all the revolutionary ideas it is Thomas Kuhn's book, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" which described the phenomenon known as a paradigm shift which I highlight. This is when all the previous held assumptions eventually become untenable, the classic example being where once everyone believed the world is flat and the earth being the centre of the universe then having to deal with all the new data which meant the earth as a sphere actually goes around the sun. Remember Copernicus and Galileo? This is now akin to realising that old "world-views" such as the colonial mindset of my youth had to be discarded in favour of a non-mechanist integrationist world view – a truly liberating experience. With new lenses one sees the world differently and can strive for a more equitable world which (yes) recognises the advantages to us all of diversity, equity and inclusion!





10. EMPIRE WORLD – SATHNAM SANGHERA

For many years since the Bali bombings in 2002, Janeen and I have attended the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival on the island of Bali. While we love the Adelaide Writers' Festival the one in Ubud has its own special appeal. One thing is you get to hang out with the authors and enter into extended conversation. We last attended in 2024 and for us the undoubted highlight was Sathnam Sanghera's "Empire World" and yes we read it together after breakfast. So far, I have only read it once! This book follows on from "Empire Land" which really created a stir in the U.K. when it was published, the author subjected to a whirlwind of hate mail.

Sanghera highlights colonial realities such as so called "blindfolded British justice" which



still distinguished between the white ruling class and the colonised so that British transgressions were often met with impunity. He cites the 1890s case of Private John Rigby, who was fined 100 rupees for kicking to death a punkhwallah after claiming that the servant had fallen asleep at his post. We too know of First Nations massacres which were simply ignored or swept under the carpet.

But Sanghera's damning assessment that "the British empire played a leading role in spreading racism across the planet" still comes with the peculiar caveat: "but it also inspired a massive international movement in anti-racism". While he engages in well researched "truth telling" regarding the horrors and economic rape in the wake of the imperial agenda, Sanghera is also quick to include the nuances of the imperial era, given that there were always dissenting voices, and judging the past with the standards of the present can overlook the fact that our present world of human rights only came about because of the enlightened advances that occurred in the wake of imperial adventures. At Ubud Sanghera reminded us that we would not be here if was not for the British Empire. He challenged us to transcend a monochromatic view of history by not just trying to balance the pros and cons but by naming contradictions. Sanghera cannot be accused of having an Indian/English "black armband" version of interrogating history.

Well, that's it. Thanks again for the privilege of sharing with you some of the books in my life that have played a role in shaping who I am.

JONATHAN BARKER

Friends of the South Australian Library presentation

2nd December 2025