

Read about it

With Suzanne Donisthorpe

SUGAR CANE Paul Bailey

Bloomsbury. RRP \$34.95.

This is the story of a relationship between a female venereologist and a male prostitute. It is also, intriguingly, very funny, in a dry, quirky way. The story unfolds slowly, tantalising the reader with the mysterious prostitute, Stephen, as he seeks to clothe himself in a certain style with the language of the educated classes and his flamboyant "ensembles". We are eventually let into the secrets of his life, revealed as the impressions of the insider, which are therefore given a guilelessness that is simultaneously funny and poignant. It is the image of Stephen as having "a fragile need for enchantment against a terrible mountain of odds" that sets the tone and overlays the more ribald aspects of the novel. There is a certain amount of sex in this book, revealing, as it does, the intricacies of the world of gay male prostitution, but it is not at all prurient. It is the absurdity of certain practices which dominate. Paul Bailey, who has been short-listed twice for the Booker Prize, deserves a more prominent profile in Australia.

MONA'S GIFT Thomas Shapcott

Penguin. RRP \$19.95.

Intertextuality—now there's a word for you. If you haven't done an Arts course in the past 10 years, you'll be unlikely to throw it into your daily conversations. But in Thomas Shapcott's novel, it becomes a less-than-foreign concept as he weaves his story from the letters and diaries of the two main characters, Mona Enright and Captain Ted Stephen, her lover. Mona's nephew Michael recreates the affair and his obsession with his aunt when, years later, he discovers the cache of their wartime

correspondence. The characters are absorbing as they are revealed by the layering of the letters, forced as they are to face the horrors of the war and the problems of readjusting to civilian life. Some very modern dilemmas are tackled, with the drawing of Mona's friend Dr Mack Broughton as he struggles with his love of the Japanese aesthetic while coming to terms with the death of his son at the hands of the Japanese army. Well written and delicately observed, this is an interesting insight into wartime Sydney and the characters who lived there.



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A SPANISH LOVER Joanna Trollope

Allen & Unwin. RRP \$34.95.

Joanna Trollope is suddenly a bestseller in the United Kingdom — a fact which surprises and delights her. Her novels are BBC soap: quality writing about fairly ordinary people doing unearthing-shattering things, and written with the absorbing quality which keeps us frantically turning pages. *A Spanish Lover* tells the story of twins and their families, and the choices each twin makes. The special relationship between them forms the story's central narrative, as they reassess

their options and discover their differences. The children are drawn with particular warmth, especially Davy, the youngest, who is at the mercy of his mischievous older brother. Trollope manages to breathe real life into her characters. This is, however, English fare, but more *nouvelle* than stodge.

PATENT LIES Gail Morgan

Allen & Unwin. RRP \$19.95.

This is a clever novel. Nobel prize-winning author Grace Heatherton, "the corpse of post-war Australia", lies in state. Her bequest is bizarre, but so was her life. Grace sets five people on a voyage — "in the process we'll all travel across time. Perhaps some harmonics will be achieved. At last." The legatees must unravel the clues in their manuscripts to find the last page of her final, unpublished work — *The Lost Journal of Lieutenant Cook* — and, therefore, win the rights to the royalties, worth an estimated \$500,000. Is this Grace's way of wreaking revenge from beyond the grave? Or has she left a testimonial worth far more than originally anticipated? The search unravels a metaphorical jigsaw puzzle, revealing clues to character and often false starts, much like the journey undertaken by Cook himself. Like Cook, the legatees discover nothing that wasn't there already but, on the way, Gail Morgan launches some blackly accurate barbs of her own — against lawyers, the media and Australia's colonial history. This is a closely woven quasi-mystery, clever in its conception, written with flair and imagination. An intellectual pursuit, both astute and darkly humorous.

● Suzanne Donisthorpe is the Producer of Books and Writing on *Radio National*, Friday at 10.05am.

PREVIEW

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