



22 Apr 2022

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Article type: Publication

Page: 37

The Big Issue

Readership: 179000

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Book Reviews

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FREE LOVE



TESSA HADLEY

It's dinnertime in the suburbs of London, 1967, and the conventional Fischer family – pretty homemaker Phyllis, her buttoned-up Foreign Office husband Roger and their two children – are waiting on a guest. Twenty-something bourgeois bohemian Nicky lopes in as they're about to start the terrine, and leaves having kissed Phyllis, sparking a many-tentacled affair that changes their lives forever.

What follows is a tale of freedom, desire and the search for one's true self, a family's complete upheaval and the reimagining of society all around them. Tessa Hadley (*Late in the Day*) captures the explosion of swinging London through the microcosm of the Fischers, who aren't nearly as straight as you might expect.

I don't know if anyone can capture their characters' inner worlds so completely, so empathically, as Tessa Hadley. She is as kind as she is clever in her observations of this flawed, familiar cast of characters – petulant Nicky, dejected teenager Colette, wonderfully no-nonsense nurse Barbara Jones and Paul, famous sculptor and infamous pants man. Even the settings themselves, the stifling perfection of the Fischer's home in Otterley and the ravaged glamour of Ladbroke Grove's Everglade, vibrate with meaning and tumult. *Free Love* is domestic fiction at its best – deceptively smashable, quietly transcendent, flickering with possibility. Everyone should read it. **MF**

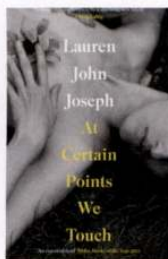


EVERYONE IN MY FAMILY HAS KILLED SOMEONE

BENJAMIN STEVENSON

★★★★★

When the Cunningham family decide to hold a reunion, it's clear it won't be without serious issues, and that's before they find themselves stranded halfway up a mountain, with bodies piling up faster and deeper than the snow drifts keeping them on ice. The fact that Ernie Cunningham, a teacher who's long tried to distance himself from his family's criminal roots, provided the evidence that sent his own brother down for murder, is just the opening twist in one of the most original crime releases of the year. From Australian stand-up comedian and author Benjamin Stevenson, this fiendishly clever blend of classic murder mystery and modern thriller will satisfy readers across the genres, with humour, guile and ingenuity in equal parts. If Ernie is hesitant to go up the mountain to begin with, readers won't want to put his story down. Already snapped up by HBO for future serialisation, this is undoubtedly a future classic just waiting to be unearthed. **CRAIG BUCHANAN**



AT CERTAIN POINTS WE TOUCH

LAUREN JOHN JOSEPH

★★★★☆

This debut novel by playwright and performer Lauren John Joseph is a raw, frenetic coming-of-age story about JJ, a young experimental artist searching for their place. Written as a posthumous missive to a lost lover, the novel attempts to honour – even revive – the dead. The book is a strung-together series of encounters, parties and come-downs, long for a story that rarely pauses to offer context, but short for one that attempts to collapse a whole life (several even) into its pages. It's an ambitious undertaking, and one that doesn't always work. Although the writing is vivid and immersive, the reader is always the observer, never quite in on the joke. There is something brutally true about John Joseph's writing: they capture the exquisite brutality of early adulthood, the jarring tug-of-war between eye-watering hope and crashing failure. There is a delight in language and dialogue that keeps the narrative moving, and while the characters in the book aren't always particularly likeable, they are undeniably, breathtakingly alive. **BEC KAVANAGH**

SADVERTISING

ENNIS ČEHIĆ

★★★★

First-time author Ennis Čehić channels his years of work in the advertising industry for this distinctive collection of stories. These darkly comic vignettes double as fables for our current age of splintered attention spans and pervasive corporate culture. Most are set in the world of advertising, with frustrated creativity a running theme. One outlier unfolds in Sarajevo, the city that Čehić calls home along with Melbourne, while the closer plays with the idea of autobiography. That's far from the only self-reflexive moment here: characters experience surprise visitations from deities and spirits, and impossible turns of events ambush mundane workplaces. It's more *Black Mirror* than *Mad Men*.

Unfortunately, the zippy brevity and repeated, hyper-specific settings wind up limiting their appeal, while too often the endings feel like easy punchlines.

Čehić proves himself a natural at shorthand character work – if only he would expand his focus and further develop his narratives.

DOUG WALLEN

