



# Gold Coast Book Lovers

GCBL Volume 5, Issue 4

April 2009



## Our April Meeting by Claudia

Our April meeting on Easter Monday was held at Sonia's beautiful home, and many thanks to her for a lovely spread and her hospitality.

In spite of inclement weather we had a good turn: 8 of us had a spirited discussion about our book of the month **Cloud Atlas** by David Mitchell and the other books we read this month.

The book was my choice and when I started reading I thought I wouldn't get into it, but fortunately after skipping the first part - a 19th century maritime voyage account :one of my pet hates- it all turned more interesting and I succeeded in reading it. It would have been a book club first when the person

nominating the book of the month can't read it and not for lack of time, but enthusiasm.

It's an interesting book and to me a couple of the 6 stories, were worth making the effort to read it. A bit of a challenge from the writing point of view: I found some parts only graspable ( English is my second language) if I read them aloud in my head. The science fiction part turned out to be my favourite and I'm in awe of a writer that can write 6 different genres with ease. This also made me feel uncomfortable because it's a show off, "Look at me! I can write in all these styles" kind of thing. I know that my intel-

lectual Puritanism has something to do with this feeling.

It was an excellent experience and I was surprised to find out that everybody enjoyed it, I usually choose books that are not liked although this makes for a good discussion. What 's to discuss when everybody loves the book and there's only praise to give away.

I'm proud to have fulfilled my ambition to read this book many times post-poned since it came out.

Looking forward to our next discussion, hope to see you all there.

### Attention Members

Feel free to rate or not

1. **Abysmal**
2. **Lame**
3. **Good Effort**
4. **Engaging**
5. **Masterpiece**

movies or plays here at the Gold Coast, Brisbane or Byron Bay.

We conform to basic meeting practices and everyone has an equal opportunity to express their opinion. Everyone's interpretation is valid, as long as it's expressed respectfully.

We welcome any new members who share our aims and are happy to contribute to our group. Newcomers are not required to have read the book to attend the first meeting and no contribution is required the first time.

## Upcoming Books

11/05/09

**Half Of A Yellow Sun** by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Hosted by Kim

8/06/09

**The Elegance Of A Hedgehog** by Muriel Barbery

Hosted by Leonore

13/07/09

**Keeping The World Away** by Margaret Foster

Hosted by Robyn G

10/08/09

**We Need To Talk About Kevin** by Lionel Shriver

Hosted by Denise

## Mission Statement

We are a discussion group dedicated to enhancing our enjoyment of well-written books by developing our literary knowledge and reading skills, by sharing our impressions and opinions and by expanding our reading experiences among other book lovers. Our aim is to satisfy our passion for the written word.

We meet at the Nerang Bicentennial Community Centre, Room 4 on the second Monday of every month from 7 to 9 p.m. excluding January, Easter and June when the Centre is closed. The centre is located adjacent to the Council Chambers on the Nerang-Southport Rd, Nerang. Entrance to the

building is at the rear. A small contribution is required towards the rent of the room. The amount depends on the number of people attending.

One book title is chosen each month and we all read that book. There is a 'host' who introduces and co-ordinates the discussion. The role of host is rotated around the group so that each member has the opportunity to nominate their book (it could also be an author, theme or genre). The host also acts as chairperson for that meeting.

Although we are not a social club—we are readers—we occasionally attend literary events, relevant

## Contact Details

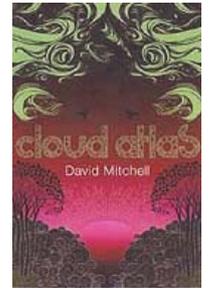
The Gold Coast Book Lovers meets 7-9 PM on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Monday of every month **except PH** at the Nerang Bicentennial Community Centre, Room 4

For more information, please contact Claudia on 0403 480 575

Or email us [gcbc05@yahoo.com.au](mailto:gcbc05@yahoo.com.au)

<http://sites.google.com/site/goldcoastbooklovers/>

# Book of the Month



## Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell - Claudia

Review by A.S.Byatt

David Mitchell entices his readers on to a rollercoaster, and at first they wonder if they want to get off. Then - at least in my case - they can't bear the journey to end. Like Scheherazade, and like serialised Victorian novels and modern soaps, he ends his episodes on cliffhangers and missed heartbeats. But unlike these, he starts his next tale in another place, in another time, in another vocabulary, and expects us to go through it all again. Trust the tale. He reaches a cumulative ending of all of them, and then finishes them all individually, giving a complete narrative pleasure that is rare.

The first tale is about a 19th-century American lawyer, Adam Ewing, crossing the Pacific in 1850, meeting Maoris and missionaries, a seedy English physician and some nasty sailors. The second is about a young British composer in 1931, who cons a dying genius into taking him on as an amanuensis, and then makes love to his wife and daughter. This narrator, Robert Frobisher, composes the Cloud Atlas Sextet "for overlapping soloists" on piano, clarinet, cello, flute, oboe and violin, "each in its own language of key, scale and colour". Frobisher's tale is told in a series of letters to his lover, Rufus Sixsmith, who later appears as a nuclear scientist in Reagan's California in the 1970s. This Californian thriller is the tale of Luisa Rey, a journalist who uncovers a corporate nuclear scandal and is at constant risk of assassination. The fourth voice is Timothy Cavendish, a 1980s London vanity publisher, trapped in an old people's home near Hull. The fifth is the pre-execution testimony of Sonmi-451, a cloned slave in some future state, who has acquired intelligence and vision. The sixth, and central one, is the storytelling voice of Zachry, a tribesman after the fall of the civilised world, who is back in the Pacific islands where the linear narrative began. The novel opens with one ship - the Prophetess - and ends with another ship that contains the survivors of Civ'lise, the Prescients.

The stories are all very intensely first person - apart from "Half-Lives - the First Luisa Rey Mystery". Each has a character with a birthmark like a comet, as though they might be different incarnations of the same soul or different forms of the same cloud of molecules, as we all are. They are linked by other artifices - Frobisher finds

both parts of Adam Ewing's Pacific diary; Luisa Rey acquires both Frobisher's letters and a rare gramophone record of the Sextet; Cavendish is sent "The First Luisa Rey Mystery" by its author; Sonmi's dying request is to watch an old half-viewed film of "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", to see what happened. Sonmi herself has become the goddess of the Valley Tribes of Zachry, although the Prescients - who have preserved a hologram of her "orison", or recorded testimony - say she was a "freakbirthed human who died hundreds of years ago".

*Cloud Atlas* is powerful and elegant because of Mitchell's understanding of the way we respond to those fundamental and primitive stories we tell about good and evil, love and destruction, beginnings and ends. He isn't afraid to jerk tears or ratchet up suspense - he understands that's what we make stories for. Cavendish, considering "The First Luisa Rey Mystery", imagines a critic saying: "But it's been done a thousand times before", and snarls to himself, "as if there could be anything not done a hundred thousand times between Aristophanes and Andrew Void-Webber! As if Art is the What, not the How!" This is a half-truth - Cavendish has the limitations of his place in culture, history and this novel - but it does associate works of art, and novels, with the eternal recurrences of culture and human nature.

Mitchell is indeed both doing what has been done a hundred thousand times before and doing it differently. He plays delicious games with other people's voices, ideas and characters. Adam Ewing has his secret sharer and his Billy Budd. Frobisher is an amoral aesthete out of Waugh and Powell, and Vyvyan Ayres, his elderly host and slave-driver, quotes Nietzsche with nasty, decadent charm. Cavendish is nasty (and insinuatingly sympathetic) in the way of the Amises and Burgess's Enderby, snarling with wit about disasters of transport and bodily malfunction. "Luisa Rey" is interesting because it uses the clichés of the Chandler world of good cop against bad power, exacts the simple response with which we would read such a tale - narrative greed, simplified fear and sympathy - and at the same time (because of the context it is in) is more moving than it would be on its own. Luisa describes an interview she did with Hitchcock (who, she says, described his own works as rollercoasters), in which she "put it to the

great man, the key to fictitious terror is partition or containment: so long as the Bates Motel is sealed off from our world, we want to peer in, like at a scorpion enclosure. But a film that shows the world is a Bates Motel, well, that's ... the stuff of Buchloe, dystopia, depression."

This observation is something that Mitchell understands and exploits - using the word partition in both its musical and fencing sense, to make a distance between us and the tense dramas and horrors he describes, to make us see everything. Sunt lacrimae rerum, as Frobisher says at the end of his tale.

Another paradigm we are offered is the idea of another character, a scientist - shortly before he is blown to bits - that we exist for a brief moment inside a shell (like Russian dolls) of virtual pasts, one of which is also the real past, and another of virtual futures, one of which is the real future. "Half-Lives" is a knowing title, radiation and fiction combined. Fictive people are ghosts. The ghosts of the virtual future, paradoxically, have to be more concrete than those of the pasts, written and real, that we already know. Sonmi's Nea So Copros and Zachry's Sloosha's Crossin' are both recognisable dystopias, one technological and political (in the tradition of Orwell, Huxley, Alasdair Gray), the other post-technological primitivism (as in Riddley Walker, Golding, Ursula le Guin); and both work because of the joyful amplitude of Mitchell's inventiveness. He is good at imagining the details of these hypothetical lives - not only the food and the rituals, but the moral atmospheres and the automatic assumptions. But his great feat is the variation in rhythms, which sweeps away any readerly objection to yet another brave new world. Sonmi, the fabricant who learns nakedly and from scratch to think and feel, is oddly the most intelligent of all the characters. Zachry's rhythm of tribal anecdote is the most compelling. These two use old words and invented new ones which are a delight. *Cloud Atlas* asks the simple questions of our own time, which has a Darwinian vision. A missionary explains to Adam Ewing, son of the American revolution, his idea of a "ladder of civilisation" that will extinguish those races unable to join progress. Zachry's tribesmen believe Sonmi was "birthed by a god o' Smart named Darwin".

*Continues next page*



Humans, someone says, have the intelligence of gods and the souls of jackals. Greed will destroy the world. Ewing, at the end of the book which is close to its beginning, as it has come full circle, sees the "natural" ideas of dominance and fitness as "the entropy written within our nature". He has saved the life of the last Moriori tribesman, whose peaceable family were destroyed by Maori warriors. The Moriori saves him, and individual acts of heroism and rescue stand against tooth and claw across the narrative web. Ewing goes back to become an abolitionist. Sonmi is a (briefly) freed slave whose presence has its half-life after defeat. Zachry becomes again the last of his peaceful tribe, and its storytelling memory. Ewing also says that "Belief is both prize and battlefield", and what Mitchell does is embody simple beliefs and make them vital and important. Luisa is named after Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, another tale of lives brought together in time and significance by convergent fates. It is a tougher, sparser book than I had remembered, and I had forgotten

the character of the priest, who tries to find God's providence in the accidental deaths and is burned for blasphemy. There are recurrent abbesses in *Cloud Atlas* who resemble the abbess in Wilder's book, who watches over the harmed and the hurt. Both books can be read both ways - there is a hidden order, mimicked by, or revealed by, art, which makes sense of our brief lives. Or perhaps there is not any order, except at the molecular level. Perhaps there is only kindness and tears.

**Ratings : Claudia 3.5, Deb 3, Di 4, Gerry 4, Kim 5., Leonore 3.5, Nicola 4.5 and RobynC 3.5**

### About the author

David Mitchell was born in Southport, Lancashire, in England, raised in Malvern, Worcestershire, and educated at the University of Kent, studying for a degree in English and American Literature followed by an M.A. in Comparative Literature.

He lived for a year in Sicily, then moved to Hiroshima, Japan, where he taught English

to technical students for eight years, before returning to England. After another stint in Japan, he currently lives in Ireland with his wife Keiko and their two children.

Mitchell's first novel, *Ghostwritten* (1999), moves around the globe, from Okinawa to Mongolia to pre-Millennial New York City, as nine narrators tell stories that interlock and intersect. The novel won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize (for best work of British literature written by an author under 35) and was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award.

His two subsequent novels, *number9dream* (2001) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004), were both shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. In 2003, he was selected as one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists. In 2007, Mitchell was listed among Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People in The World.[2]

He lists John Banville, Muriel Spark, Haruki Murakami and Ursula K. Le Guin as his influences.

## The Help by Kathryn Stockett - Dianne

Entertaining in that it is a yarn well spun, full of plot twists and sly humor, *The Help* is what you might call an old-fashioned page turner.

Twenty-two-year-old Skeeter has just returned home after graduating from Ole Miss. She may have a degree, but it is 1962, Mississippi, and her mother will not be happy till Skeeter has a ring on her finger. Skeeter would normally find solace with her beloved maid Constantine, the woman who raised her, but Constantine has disappeared and no one will tell Skeeter where she has gone. An aspiring writer, she decides to make her reputation by secretly interviewing black maids and compiling the experiences into one book.

Aibileen is a black maid, a wise, regal woman raising her

seventeenth white child. She works for Miss Leefolt, taking care of her daughter, Mae Mobley, and spends most of her time silently shielding the fat little girl from her mother's verbal abuse. Something has shifted inside her, though, after the loss of her own son, who died while his white bosses looked the other way.

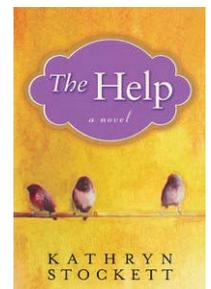
Her friend Minny, on the other hand, has no problem with speaking her mind. Mother of five and married to an abusive drunk who works the night shift, Minny is known around Jackson as the best cook in the city and the one with the biggest mouth. "If I'd played Mammy, I'd of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress." After insulting the

queen bee of the white hive, Miss Hilly, Minny is cast out from society, eventually ending up in the employment of a scatterbrained "white-trash" Miss Celia.

Kathryn Stockett creates three extraordinary women whose determination to start a movement of their own forever changes a town, and the way women - mothers, daughters, caregivers, friends - view one another. A deeply moving book filled with poignancy, humour, and hope, I'd recommend this book very highly. I absolutely loved it!

*Review by Dianne*

**Rating 4.5**





## The Pleasures And Sorrows Of Work by Alain de Botton- Leonore

Alain de Botton describes his latest book as 'a hymn to the intelligence, peculiarity, beauty and horror of the modern workplace'. Because our Western, commercially driven culture has elevated work to somewhere on a par with love as a giver of meaning to our lives, de Botton has decided that it is something to which we should pay serious attention. The pleasure of the book, as with all of de Botton's writings, is that his seriousness is deployed without heaviness. He invites us to share a number of close personal encounters with the lives and logistics attached to an eclectic mix of occupations - engineer, counsellor, painter, fisherman, accountant, biscuit maker, entrepreneur. In so doing, he holds multiple mirrors up to our own workplace experiences, daring us to reflect upon uneasy questions and neglected assumptions about work, and probing its significance as the focus of much of our time, energy and emotion.

He is a writer of distinctively philosophical bent who has consistently won a readership to which most serious intellec-

tuals could not even aspire. He has a gift for properly noticing things, and a capacity to illuminate them with enticing prose that blends erudition, witty allusion and a sense of wonder. He delivers on the Blakean ideal of seeing the world in a grain of sand, or holding eternity in an hour, and his readers are the wiser and more uplifted for it.

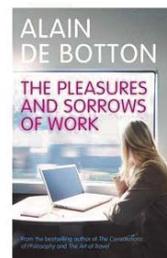
On his visit to a biscuit manufacturing plant, de Botton notes amongst the factory's operators 'an air of gravity akin to that which might obtain in an airport control tower'. The application of refined skills and the dedication of creative energy to the production of such mundane items as biscuits prompts questions about how we determine the value of an enterprise, or of an individual's career. On the personal level, does being a biscuit company's Branding Director or Strategic Projects Evaluator, with workers' livelihoods and greater profits to sustain, save one from the angst of existential awareness that one is really just a 'vaporous transient consciousness in an incidental universe'?. For de Botton, work

is meaningful 'whenever it allows us to generate delight or reduce suffering in others'.

Throughout *The Joys and Sorrows of Work*, de Botton remains keenly aware of the tensions and contradictions that abound in a world where consumerism drives economies yet despoils the planet, provides material comforts and sensual enjoyment, yet does so with great inequity. From the Iranian entrepreneur who has invented shoes to help people walk on water, to the transmission engineer who contemplates the grace and beauty of electricity pylons as others might gaze in wonder at Michelangelo's David, Alain de Botton has paid his subjects the honour of attending closely to their work and their dreams. His reward is greater knowledge about how the world works, a deeper appreciation of the strange and subtle ways in which work gives meaning to our lives, and a richer understanding of the human condition.

*From the Internet*

**Rating: 5**



## Why Not Catch 21? The Stories Behind The Titles by Gary Dexter - Leonore

The title is self explanatory - fifty stories about the above.

Of particular interest were to me were *Catch 22* and *Study in Scarlet*. Conan Doyle's first book on Sherlock Holmes. It's a pun on a French murder mystery by Emile Gaborian, the creator of Monsieur Vidocq called *L'Affaire Lerouge*. Conan Doyle read widely other mystery writers of the day. Nothing new under the sun!!

Also, why *Clockwork Orange* - why not *Robotic Banana*? And what was significant about "1984"?

The recently shown play *Oleanna* also gets a guernsey.

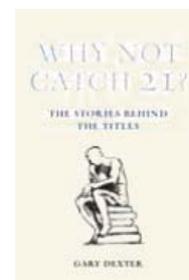
An ideal "dipping" book when one has a few minutes relaxation. Very interesting reading in some cases - others - not so, but others with different tastes would find their own

delights.

A well written and witty offering and a good book to have on your bedside table.

*Review by Leonore*

**Rating 3.5**



# Other Books We Read This Month



## The Sex Diaries: Why Women Go Off Sex And Other Bedroom Battles by Bettina Arndt - Claudia

I READ the hype. I listened to the outcry. I heard a couple of people giggle like extras from a Carry On movie, then I read Bettina Arndt's *The Sex Diaries: Why Women Go Off Sex And Other Bedroom Battles* and thought, "Has someone put the wrong cover on this book?" I've experienced more controversy at a six-year-old's birthday party when a parent dared to announce there would be only one winner of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.

Arndt's book has generated a lot of media huffing and puffing primarily due to one chapter titled **Just Do It**, where she proposes that even if women are not in the mood sometimes they should have sex. "Once the canoe is in the water, they do paddle happily," Arndt, a clinical psychologist and sex therapist, says backing up her idea with studies and first-person testimonials. This call to get paddling - even when your arms are tired and your fingers want to poke somebody's eyes out because they refuse to throw out pyjama bottoms that have lost their elastic - has been condemned by some as a return to the dark days when women were expected to do their "wifely" duty.

A woman being convinced of the benefits of having sex when she doesn't want to is nothing new. From sexual health experts promoting books to 19-year-old boys promoting "blue balls", I have heard this call before and the answer is a big fat "no". Although I didn't agree with her argument, I didn't find this chapter controversial; Arndt presented her supporting evidence in a measured way and was quick to acknowledge that not everyone agreed with her proposition. I found the focus on this chapter a shame because Arndt's book is so much more than "Just Do It".

In 2007 Arndt asked 98 "ordinary Australian couples" to keep a diary for six to nine

months, writing about their "daily negotiations over sex". There are couples who can't keep their hands off each other, there are couples whose sex life is becoming toxic, like a relationship poison they sip from daily. Between the sex-starved and the sex-sated, there are the couples with young children; couples married for decades; couples dealing with serious health issues; couples in love with their vibrators; couples who have forgotten why they fell in love in the first place. It's a smorgasbord of ordinary, completely mixed-up couples.

Arndt's main exploration focuses on the negotiations over the "sex supply" and the impact of differing sex drives on relationships. What happens when one partner wants sex more than the other? Why does this happen and how does it affect the relationship? Nine times out of 10 it was the male who wanted more sex and it is these entries - from men trying so hard to do the right thing, men who started out in their relationships with great sex lives, men who are frustrated and hurt, men whose touch at night is repeatedly met with a slap away - that make for heartbreaking and fascinating reading. As Arndt says herself, women talk and joke about the sex supply to each other; men keep quiet and, finally, through these diaries, they started to talk and tell their secrets.

These diary entries are enlivened by the fact that Arndt interacts with participants during the six to nine months. She admits she couldn't wait to sit at her computer in the morning and read what had been happening in bedrooms and kitchens the night before. She corresponds with diarists, asking them questions and giving advice.

Arndt marries these often emotionally explicit diary entries with facts, research and a wild and interesting assortment of

studies. She offers advice; she gives as much of a why as possible when it comes to sex; she examines an array of issues through the diary entries of real people. Arndt doesn't just concentrate on the disparity between sex drives and its fallout - she covers a range of issues including clitoral and vaginal orgasms; failing health and sex; the impact of affairs; erections; drugs and sex; desire; hormones and sex. There's even snoring and sex in there.

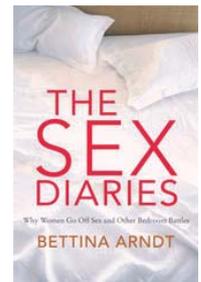
There's much more between the covers than "Just Do It".

*From the Internet*

This is a mildly entertaining book, superficial and strongly biased towards men: sex therapists can also be people pleasing women. Many essential areas ignored like menopausal problems that plague women in middle age. "Just do it, you'll like it when you're there" won't do for a lot of people.

*Comment by Claudia*

**Rating: 3**



# Other Books We Read This Month



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## Other Books mentioned this month

*The Razor's Edge* by Somerset Maugham—Dianne: Very enjoyable

*Let's all kill Constance* by Ray Bradbury—Kim: Good.

*On Photography* by Susan Sontag — Sonia: Very good essays.

*Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell — Leonore: Good.

*Sartre's Sink* by Mark Crick — Leonore: Good