



My Year in Books 2023

By

Octavia Emanuel

Here is my year in books. Some I have reviewed, some I haven't, most I loved but a few I didn't but this is what I read throughout the year.



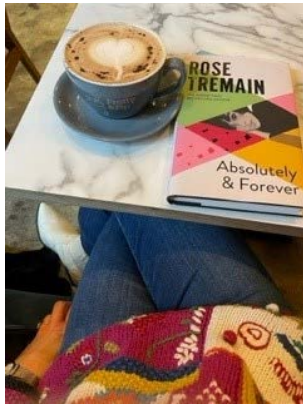
***Darling* finished Christmas 2023.**

Quite simply one of my favourite books ever. India Knight has written the perfect retelling of Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love*. It was the best book to read over Christmas with bells on. I loved, laughed, and cried and will forever read whatever India Knight writes.



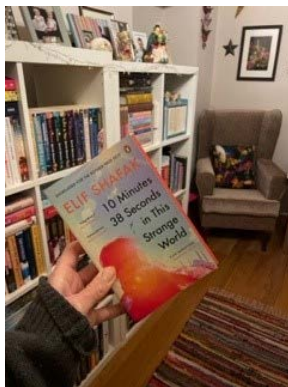
***Foxlight* by Katya Balen finished November 20th.
(for 8-12 year olds)**

I have never come across an author of children's books, that writes so beautifully lyrically, as Katya Balen. You want to savour every sentence, her descriptions of nature are so sensory and the colours she paints in words, so vivid, that the story completely comes to life. Here we have two sisters abandoned by their mother, searching for their identity and maternal comfort. However, as they struggle through the wild lands, with a fox as their guide, will they find it is just a dream they are chasing?



***Absolutely and Forever* by Rose Tremain finished October 31st.**

I absolutely adored this book. It's main character Marianne, will make you feel both amused but saddened. A story of family, friendship, first love and tragedy you will not forget. From a quaint upbringing in Berkshire, boarding school, friends with absurd double-barrelled names, horses, and holidays in Cornwall, to Chelsea in the swinging 60s and eventually life as "just a wife". Marianne's journey is not remarkable, but her mind and musings most certainly are. One of my favourite characters of late, a bit like Elinor Oliphant. Petronella, her best friend, a strong and opinionated Scot, is also seriously entertaining. A quick read but a must read. So very enjoyable.



***10 minutes 38 seconds in This Strange World* by Elif Shafak finished October 20th.**

Such a sensory and shocking book. Incredible writing, by one of my favourite authors. It's utterly original, as are the characters Shafak creates and the extraordinary lives they have led. Friendship is everything in this profound story of love and loss set against the backdrop of Istanbul's beauty and culture but also darker side.



***Impossible Creatures* by Katherine Rundell finished October 10th.
(for 8-80 year olds)**

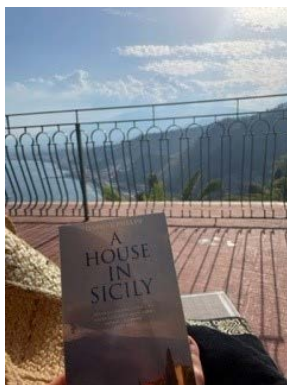
Wow! What an epic, magical experience this book was. The descriptions of the beasts, people and place are extraordinarily good. Some life affirming lines and some side-splitting humour, along with the magnitude of the quest Mal and Christopher are on, makes for an emotional yet entertaining and totally tense, page-turning adventure. For it is they that must save the Archipelago and all the weird and wonderful creatures that rely on its magic to survive. I devoured this book as Gelifen the Griffin, would devour his daily dose of fish, or indeed cake. Katherine Rundell is the first we can actually, really say, has done what Rowling did and echoes what Diana Wynne Jones did before her...she has created an utterly believable world of magic and it's one we want to immerse ourselves completely in. More adventures to the Archipelago please, I can't wait



***The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah finished October 6th.**

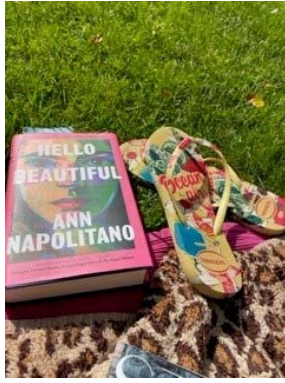
So many people have recommended the Nightingale to me and finally, with a French road trip ahead of me, I decided this would be one of the books to travel with.

Here we follow the extraordinary life of the Nightingale and her sister. How their lives were torn apart by the Second World War and how it affected the French and the role women played in the war at large. Both Vianne and Isabelle save many lives, in entirely different ways and with contrasting means and beliefs. Both utterly selfless, with an incredible will and strength to survive. It took me on journey from a bookshop in Paris, to rural Northern France, over the Pyrenees to San Sebastián and the safety of Spain. We too travelled there as I read. The descriptions of San Sebastián were exactly what I saw before me. Golden elegant medieval and Basque style buildings, the beautiful curve of the Concha beach. A refuge then and a much-loved beach resort now. This book is well written and heart wrenching but also has an ending that leaves you not unhappy but fulfilled. I like closure after such an emotional journey.

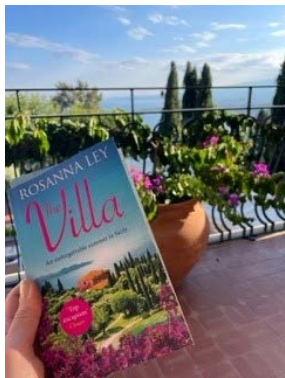


***A House in Sicily* by Daphne Phelps finished September 29th.**

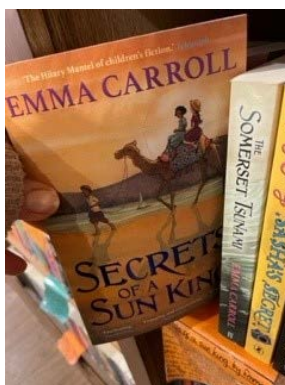
I finished this book once I was home from Sicily, a week after in the bookshop, having visited Casa Cuseni in Taormina. Such a witty and entertaining book full of the colourful characters and also animals that enriched Daphne's life. Illuminating her beautiful gold and blue grand home, which looked over the sea and at Etna in magical Taormina. Through her post war struggles having inherited the house, she decided that she must keep it alive and preserve it and in doing so she became immersed in Sicilian society but also like a magnet to Etna, the British eccentrics followed. Artists, poets, and authors, even Roald Dahl, who turned out to be not such a welcome edition. I adored Taormina and I adored this book.



***Hello Beautiful* by Ann Napolitano finished September 13th.**
A beautifully written book of unconditional love.



***The Villa* by Rosanna Ley finished on August 19th in Taormina Sicily**



***Secrets of a Sun King* by Emma Carroll finished August 8th.**
(for 8-13 year olds)

I love Emma Carroll's style of adventurous historical fiction for children and have always been fascinated by Egypt and the opening of Tutankhamen's tomb and the curse associated with it. A brilliant book for 8 years and over.



***Girls of Summer* finished August 1st.**
Visceral and thought provoking.

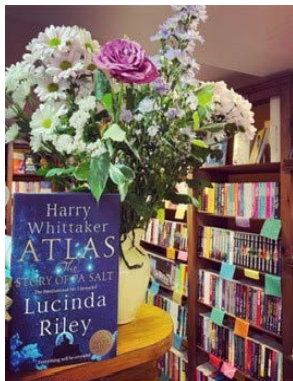


***Yellowface* by Rebecca F. Kuang finished July 13th.**
Overhyped. I wanted it to be great as it presented the dark side of publishing and plagiarism, but the writing was flat and second half anticlimactic.



***Go as a River* by Shelley Read finished June 29th.**
I loved this book, and it will be a story that stays with me. A story of a girl with extraordinary courage, who overcomes so much even to exist. A girl who has loved and lost. Who lives at

one with her surroundings, her family's legacy of peach orchards and the Elk mountains, forests, and rivers. It is both incredibly sad but also uplifting. The author's passion for where she lives, rural Colorado's history and the environmental issues it faces, are portrayed throughout this poignant coming of age story that is utterly unforgettable. It all began with a dark skinned, mysterious boy, who an innocent seventeen-year-old farm girl meets one day and who will change her life and the lives of others irrevocably.



***Atlas the Story of Pa Salt* by Lucinda Riley finished June 16th.**

Lucinda's son not only did her justice but also all of the Seven Sisters. We have all been on an epic journey with this series, geographically, historically, and emotionally and the ending did not disappoint. How clever to tie up all the loose ends that have left the reader mysteriously wandering and always wanting to read more. A beautifully finished book that would make Lucinda Riley so proud of her son.



***The Muse* by Jessie Burton finished May 11th.**

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It was elegantly written and moved seamlessly between the past and present storyline, from London to Spain, painting a vivid picture of both the places and the people. Burton creates some wonderful, eccentric characters from the art world and tells the story of a long-lost painting that holds many secrets for those surrounding it.

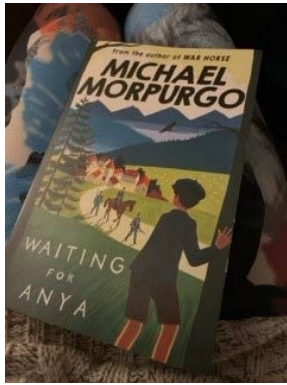


***The Snow Goose* by Paul Gallico finished May 6th.**

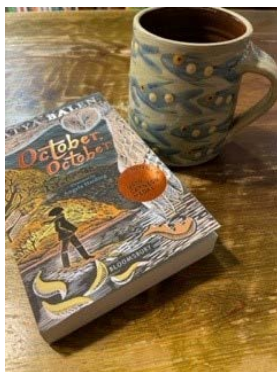


***The Secret History* by Donna Tartt finished May 4th.**

'A must read' I had been told and I'm inclined to agree. Brilliantly entertaining, dramatic, yet well-paced, this book is dark and irksome. Here we meet an extremely eccentric group of classics students who live on the cusp of a frightening reality, obsessed by history yet living in the present day in a decadent and extreme fashion quite unlike their student peers. Led by a Classics lecturer, who they are somewhat fixated with and who is probably not the most promising role model, this book takes you far from the student campus life, on a thrilling, yet disturbing journey into their misfit minds. An incredibly well-crafted thriller. A modern classic in fact!

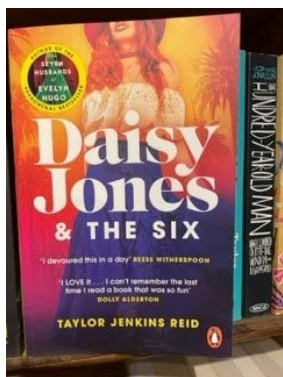


***Waiting for Anya* finished on the March 31st.
(for 8-12 year olds)**



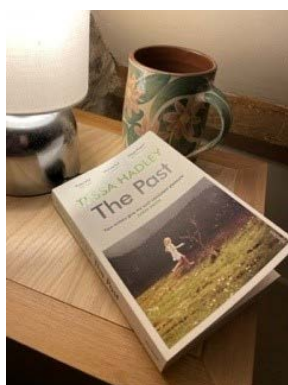
***October, October* finished on the March 23rd.
(for 8-12 year olds)**

I was sitting just starting to read *October, October* and a customer in the bookshop saw and said, he'd just read it and it was pretty perfect. He was right. This book is really lovely. Here we meet October who lives wild in the woods with her beloved father. They thrive amongst nature, living in tune with the wildlife and trees. Until the accident that is. October must then survive living in the city and going to school. Making friends isn't easy after life in the woods. However, the Thames River and the treasure it holds, the history of Mudlarks and finally a friend, brighten October's bleak new beginnings. There's also an owl within this story. An owl that is also a survivor. The writing and descriptions of her feelings but also of both her woodland and London surroundings are stunningly well written. For children from the age of eight, up to grownups, this is a book to get lost in.



***Daisy Jones and the Six* finished on the March 15th.**

Totally jumping on the bandwagon or should I say tour bus with this one. It's actually brilliant and I loved the original style it was written in, all seemingly as if an interview with the band. Very cool. I recommend you read it swiftly before watching the tv series.



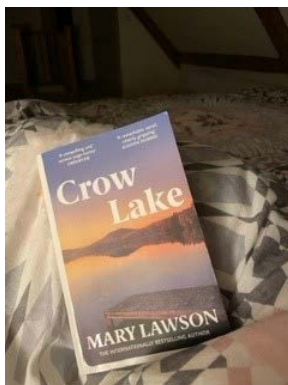
***The Past* finished March 7th.**

Very enjoyable, though not much happened. Loved the setting and Tessa Hadley has a lovely writing style.



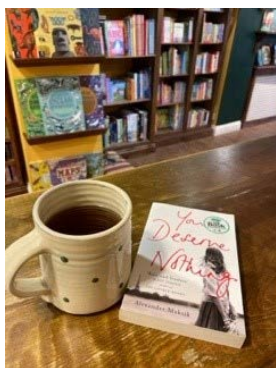
***The Things We Do to Our Friends* finished March 2nd.**

An extremely gripping, well written thriller with the atmospheric backdrop of Edinburgh. A group of so-called friends, art history students, all with secrets and all with a common motive. To make money no matter what it takes and to avenge men at any cost. This book was very unnerving, and I couldn't put it down!

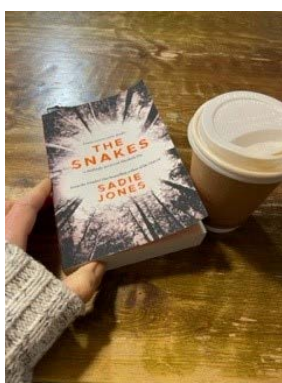


***Crow Lake* finished February 16th.**

For those who loved *Where the Crawdads Sing*, *Crow Lake* by Mary Lawson, has a similar feel. An atmospheric setting and very well told and balanced story of generations brought up surrounded by the tall trees of a lake deep in Northern Ontario. Farming families live isolated, but mostly in tune with the land and traditions of life there. However, our narrator Kate and her family have seen such tragedies. Their own that will forever change their paths in life but also an ongoing awareness of the awful misgivings going on at a neighbouring farm. Kate and her brother Matt have a special bond and affinity with nature. A passion that leads to Kate's future freedom from the lake through study. Whilst others must remain tethered to the past and the draw of life by the lake, for better or worse. An extremely well written story of love and loss.



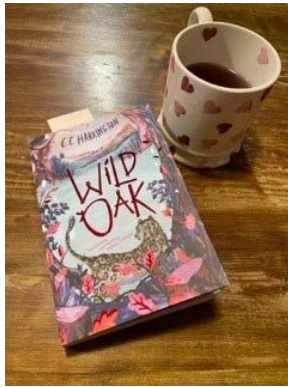
***You Deserve Nothing* finished on February 2nd.**



***The Snakes* finished on January 20th.**



***Spare* (Prince Harry) finished on January 14th.
No comment!**



***Wild Oak* finished on January 12th.**

(for 8-12 year olds)

Wild Oak is perfect. It is a beautifully told story about the magic of nature, the language of trees, the wonders of the Cornish countryside and a young girl's plight to save a lost, endangered Snow Leopard. Maggie struggles daily with her stammer. Talking to people is so hard, yet she can always communicate with animals both big and small. In fact, she has an affinity with nature, particularly a very special forest called Wild oak. When she is sent away from her home, an adventure begins that will teach her that her stammer will not always hold her back, for she has bravery, strength, and kindness. This book should be read in all schools. It is the perfect story for children aged 8 and over to teach them about endangered species, deforestation and about stammers. I urge you to read this, right to the end pages. Also take a minute to admire the gorgeous cover.