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Art

Carolyn McDowall's Terrific Twelve + Reading Choices of 2012

By [Carolyn McDowall](#) · December 1, 2012 · [Post a comment](#)

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In this the last month of the [National Year of Reading in Australia](#), which is all about creating the future of learning, my terrific twelve reading choices for 2012 are a wide and diverse group, that includes a + bonus. For me there always has to be a 'stand alone' gem and this year it is an emotional, nostalgic, old fashioned, delightful record of the physical appearance of the new and exotic species of flowers that abounded during the 17th century during the lifetime of one Alexander Marshal Esq. (c1620-82). [Mr. Marshal's Flower Book, Being a Compendium of the Flower Portraits of Alexander Marshal Esq as created for his magnificent Florilegium. Here arranged by Season and supplemented with an Introduction and Commentary with a selection of plates from the Original.](#) It is produced by Royal Collection Publications and is the only English flower book from the 17th century to survive.



In his day Marshal became famous for his exquisite botanical illustrations, immortalizing their beauty and form throughout the four seasons. He it appears, lived his life of note as a seedsman, horticulturalist and entomologist among friends and contemporaries. They included the scientist and intellectual Samuel Hartlib, who mentions him in passing in his diary and the royal gardener John Tradescant the Younger. The Tradescant family at Lambeth, especially father and son, are well known in the plant world and played an

important role introducing and growing many new plants into England.

John the Younger brought back trees, shrubs and perennials collected on his three trips to Virginia in the new World. As well as working for the Cecil's at Hatfield House the Tradescant's father and son worked for the Royal family in the gardens at Oatlands and for Queen Henrietta Maria at St. James's Palace. They also had a museum at Lambeth – Tradescant's Ark (listed as *Museum Tradescantianum* in 1656) and this eventually formed the nucleus of the now famous Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. On the other hand we know so very little about Alexander Marshall. His pre-eminent reputation as a botanical artists rests on his exquisite Flower Book and its charm. I discovered it appropriately in the shop for the Royal Botanic Gardens South Yarra Melbourne where I walk each day, weather permitting, to refresh my spirit and soul.



Seeing double: Alan Bennett, right, with Alex Jennings left, who plays the renowned playwright in his play *Cocktail Sticks and Hymn*. Photo: Clara Molden

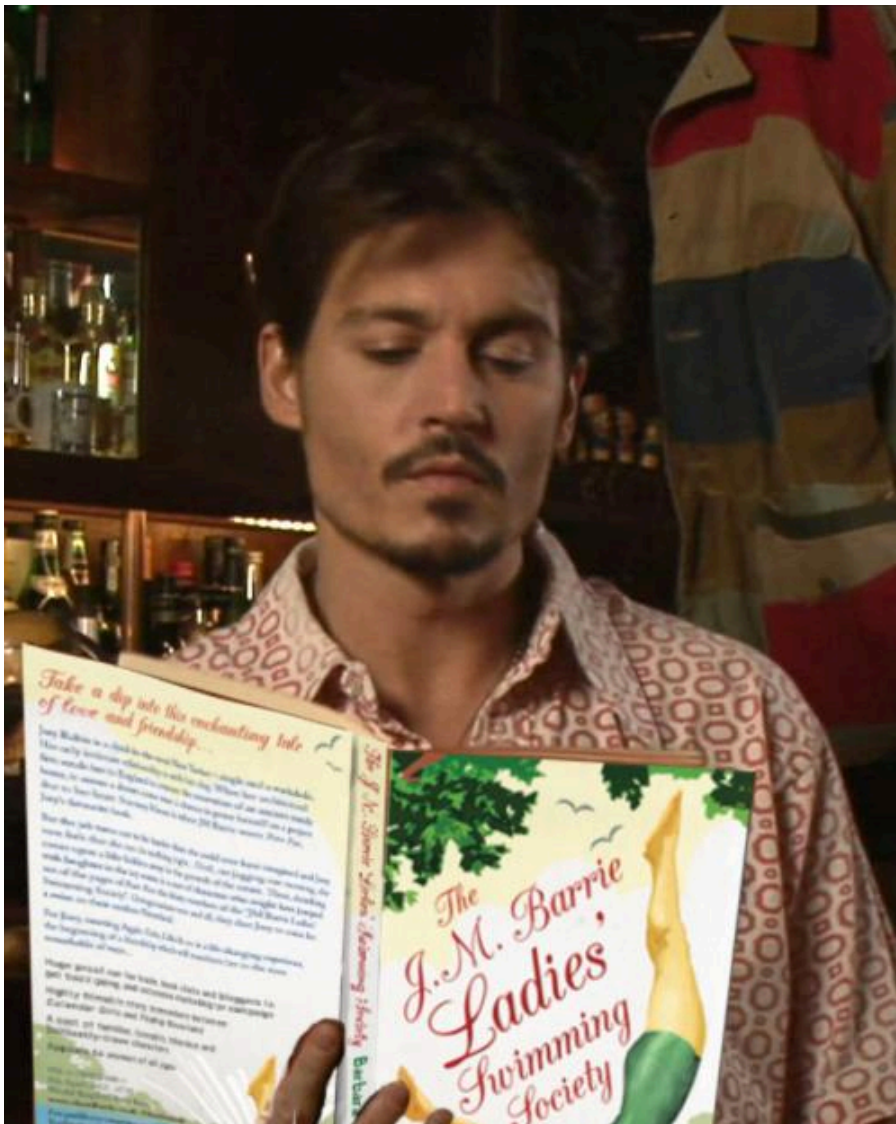
I always know it's Xmas when a latest book of a play by Alan Bennett is around.



People by all-round genius English screenwriter, actor, author and playwright Alan Bennett is a very funny, insightful and wittily pointed drama about an aristocrat who finds herself living in poverty in a mouldering pile which the National Trust wants to renovate and run.

Its short and sweet, but entirely memorable and would I love to see the play when it is produced in Australia. Alan Bennett continues as an all around master of the theatre in England and this hilarious tale caused quite a stir at the National Trust, sorry Trust it seems judging from all the press. In an essay for the [London Review of Books](#), Bennett explained the inspiration behind the play

“Some plays seem to start with an itch, an irritation, something one can’t solve or a feeling one can’t locate. With People it was a sense of unease when going round a National Trust house and being required to buy into the role of reverential visitor.”



Could Johnny Depp be every girl's fantasy of Ian the Caretaker

[The J.M. Barrie Ladies' Swimming Society](#) by U.S.A. based Barbara J. Zitwer is a first novel for an author who is also an international literary agent and, prior to working in publishing, also produced films.

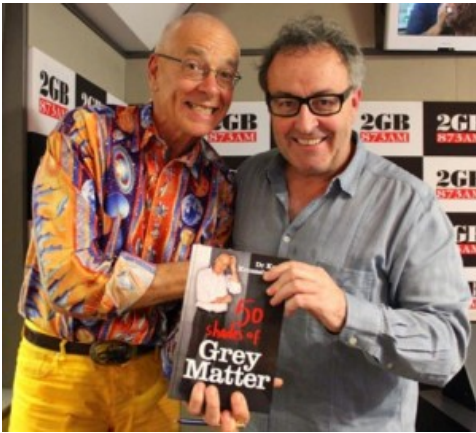
This gentle illuminating tale is about a fictional New Yorker, Joey Rubin, who is given the task by the architectural firm she works for of overseeing a project she has been working on for some time, the renovation of a crumbling stately home sited in the beautiful Cotswolds a range of hills in England designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty.

This piece about the [magic associated with neverland](#) has garnered a great deal of interest around the world, particularly on their site on [facebook](#).

When I read it all I wanted to do was take a daily dip with the illustrious members of the [J.M. Barrie Ladies' Swimming Society](#) in their private, watery Neverland, especially if Johnny Depp was joining in too!

Since then many illustrious readers have been seen out and about joining the movement.

50 Shades of Grey Matter is by Australia's National Living Treasure Karl Kruszelnicki who is the Julius Sumner Miller Fellow at the University of Sydney, and a qualified medical doctor, engineer, physicist and mathematician as well as appearing in the Top 15 Most Trusted Australians.



In the wonderful world of Doctor Karl oddities are embraced, facts reign supreme, curiosity is king and brightly coloured shirts are compulsory!

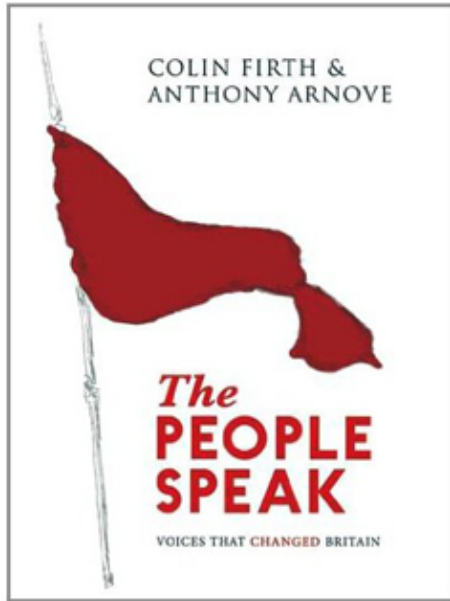
In his brand new book he applies his trademark straight-talkin'-no-high-falutin' scientific sense to a brand new range of Big Questions that you never knew you even wanted to ask, but now desperately need to know the answers to.

Finding Mr Darcy by Amanda Hooton is a witty, street smart and, above all, wise approach to modern dating, which proves that some things – especially the pursuit of love – really are timeless. Intrepid former dater and award-winning journalist Amanda Hooton turns to the ageless wisdom of Jane Austen to solve the eternal dilemmas of romance:



We discover how to be as clever as Elizabeth Bennet, as dignified as Elinor Dashwood and as confident as Emma Woodhouse; how to avoid shagging Mr Wickham, marrying Mr Collins, or being dumped by Willoughby; and most importantly of all, how to find Mr Darcy, grapple him to your soul with hoops of steel, and become the part-owner of a country estate in Derbyshire. It is charming, laugh-out-loud hilarious and entirely empathetic.

If you've ever wondered why your love life doesn't more closely resemble a Jane Austen novel, this is the book for you.



Compiled by the Academy Award-winning actor Colin Firth, the influential writer Anthony Arno and acclaimed historian David Horspool, [The People Speak](#) reminds us that history is not something gathering dust on a library shelf – and that democracy has never been a spectator sport.

With the People Speak Out now happening in Australia this is both topical and timely.

Great words need a great voice to deliver them in a such a way that they help others either to learn, or to follow a course of action. Colin Firth has now taken his involvement in the world of words to another level



[Nelson: A Dream of Glory](#) by John Sugden is all about the 'hero with the hundred faults' and combines ground-breaking scholarship with a magisterial biography that is benchmark standard against, which all subsequent books about Admiral Horatio Nelson will have to be judged. There have been numerous biographies of Nelson, but most fail to penetrate the mythology encrusting Britain's greatest naval hero who was a man

like no other.

John Sugden has examined thousands of naval, military, diplomatic and personal documents. He has ruthlessly stripped away the legends and brilliantly reconstructed Nelson's private and public life. It reveals that there was two sides to Nelson, that of a brilliant battle tactician and commander, and the spoiled celebrity lover of Emma Hamilton.

In this mammoth work there is also new revelations about his relationships with women.

Team of Rivals by Pulitzer Prize winning author Doris Kearns Goodwin is brilliant multiple biography centred on Abraham Lincoln's mastery of men and how it shaped the most significant presidency in American history. HE achieved greatness through his words, his actions and his deeds, which were completely aligned. He stood for integrity, for honour and for fairness and championed liberty, justice and freedom for all.



Doris Kearns Goodwin's book "Team of Rivals", from which the screen play for the movie Lincoln has been adapted, has been re-released. It appropriately won the Lincoln Prize for best book on the Civil War in 2005. In an amazing endorsement, President Barack Obama noted not long after he was elected, that it was a book he would take to the White House with him. It concentrates on that period in Lincoln's life when he was attempting to reconcile conflicting personalities and political factions, while endeavouring to bring about the abolition of slavery and being victorious in the Civil war by uniting all the American states.

Goodwin provided the perfect basis for a script so that multi award winning Director Steven Spielberg would be able to commission a screenplay from Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award Winning writer Tony Kushner, on which to base his film. The title refers to the men, who surprisingly became leading members of Lincoln's cabinet and political family when he was selected. Rivals in the lead up to the election they were Edward Bates, who became the Attorney General, William H. Seward, the Secretary of State, Edwin M. Stanton, the Secretary of War and Salmon P. Chase, the Treasury Secretary, all of whom had often opposed Lincoln and his beliefs and views.

Keeping his enemies close, Lincoln however brought them all on board, proving his greatness in recognizing that they all had unique abilities and service to give.

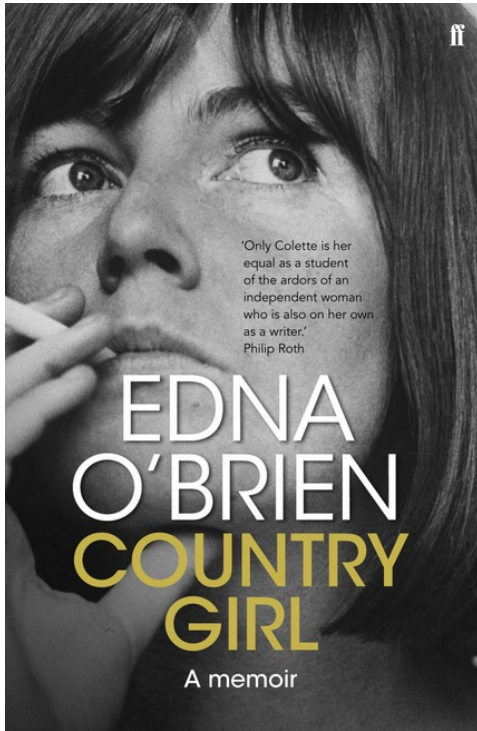


Johannes Grave's study of the great German Romantic painter [Caspar David Friedrich](#) is one of the best art books around, with 225 illustrations and an adroit summing up of the man who was able to stir up complex emotions about divinity, nature and man's role in the world.

Considered the most famous painter of his generation in Germany, he is best known for his romantic landscapes. He had a huge interest in the contemplation of nature and sought to convey his own thoughts and reactions to its awesome majesty through his art.

Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818) is his most well-known and especially Romantic masterpiece, which was described by writer John Lewis Gaddis in his work *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* 2002 as leaving a contradictory impression, "suggesting at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of the individual within it. We see no face, so it's impossible to know whether the prospect facing the young man is exhilarating, or terrifying, or both."

His 'most famous' painting 'Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog' is a striking symbol of the enlightenment that [British rock star scientist Brian Cox emulated at the beginning of his television series Wonders of the Universe.](#)



[Country Girl](#) by Edna O'Brien is an honest memoir from the renowned novelist and biographer, which charts her life from a childhood in 1930s Ireland to her encounters with Hollywood giants, pop stars and literary titans.

This is a very raw real read, a no holds barred no frills honest story.

[Jack of Diamonds](#), the final novel by South African born Australian novelist and legendary writer Bryce Courtenay (1933 -2012). It is a story of chance, music, corruption and love from the best selling author of *The Power of One*, his first book, which was a truly inspirational work.

Bryce Courtenay AM died quite suddenly of cancer in November 2012 (announced in September) and will be sorely missed by his legion of fans and the Australian public.

[Give Me An Excess Of It](#) by Richard Gill is a warm, extremely funny, highly opinionated, laugh aloud funny, delightfully naughty, occasionally rude, very witty and sometimes exceedingly droll memoir sublimely full of a love for music. His career has been all about [conducting unbecoming and igniting imagination](#).

It rollicks along delightfully, from the highs and lows of Gill's extraordinary school days to the excesses and grandeur of a towering [Victorian Opera](#) company performance, which springs eternal from the sometimes tedious monotony of the practice studio.



Richard Gill, who became a favourite on the ABC program Spicks and Specks, has probably played far too many overtures to count, but as he observes 'Music will remain my life until I die and 'I do not intend to do that for at least another seventy years. If music is the food of love, play on and give us all an excess of Richard Gill.

[Be sure to add a copy of this, and all the others to your Christmas shopping list.](#)

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Carolyn McDowall, The Culture Concept Circle 2012

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