

## What We're Reading - 12 March 2021

Lucy Nathan

Opinion - Books Friday, 12th March 2021

---

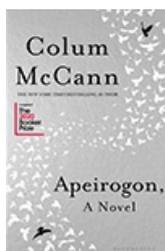
*The BookBrunch team reveals what's on their bedside tables*

### Jo Henry

Ethiopia, 1935, and the threat of an Italian invasion - desperate to revenge their ousting from Ethiopia in 1896, in one of the few victories over a European colonial power by African forces - looms over the country. Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (Canongate) opens in the compound of an officer in Haile Sellassie's army, Kidane, where life is claustrophobic and there are growing tensions, particularly between Kidane's wife, Aster and her maid - Kidane's quasi daughter - Hirut. But when Kidane leaves for war, the women refuse to be left behind. Told in a mixture of small, immensely detailed set pieces and sweeping, myth-creating lyricism, I am already completely caught up in the heavily outnumbered and badly equipped Ethiopians' fight to retain their independence.



### David Roche

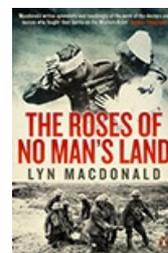


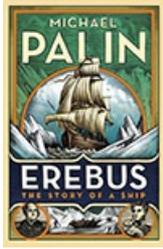
Right book, right time. As a big fan of Colum McCann, I bought his latest novel *Apeiogon* (Bloomsbury) a year ago when it was first published. I jumped in when the first lockdown happened and could not understand why I found it so difficult to engage with and I abandoned it after not so long. I have recently been on a streak of wonderful books and thought I had really to re-visit this 'masterpiece' of Colum's work and I am so glad that I did. This book is centred on the friendship of two fathers, a Palestinian and an Israeli, linked by the loss of their daughters as a result of the conflict and united against it. It is crafted from, and delivers, so much more. Information, lateral facts, and anecdotes are

sewn into the structure which itself alternates between short paragraphs and longer sections which ooze perception and empathy. All built around real characters that reduced the author to tears on a visit to the region when he met them and heard their stories. It is a stunning achievement. There is such a thing as wrong book, wrong time, and also a huge satisfaction and almost redemption when the moment is eventually right; a wise head revisited.

### Lucy Nathan

Following the announcement of the death of historian Lyn MacDonald earlier this week, I thought I'd pay tribute to her by talking about how much I loved *The Roses of No Man's Land* (Penguin), which I read a couple of weeks ago and tells the stories of the volunteer nurses and young doctors during the First World War. It has a great deal of fascinating first-hand information from diary entries and letters, and tells the stories of ordinary men and women who did remarkable things with depth and care. As someone whose eyes glaze over pretty easily when it comes to reading fact-heavy texts, this was remarkably easy to read, and I loved the way that facts about the war itself and the rapid (and necessary) development of new medical techniques were interspersed with personal stories and recollections. I now have several more titles by MacDonald to read and am looking forward to them - she has left a really incredible legacy.





## Neill Denny

I have returned to Michael Palin's excellent *Erebus: The Story of a Ship* (Hutchinson). Right now the BBC are running *The Terror*, Alien director Ridley Scott's take on the doomed Franklin expedition to the high Arctic in the 1840s. We are only the third episode in and Sir John Franklin himself has just been torn limb from limb by some sort of supernatural polar bear. Palin chose to approach this iconic tale of the golden age of exploration from a slightly less racy angle, writing a detailed history of one of Franklin's two ships (*Terror* was the other), but the truth was just as bad: - scurvy, poisoning, starvation, finally cannibalism. The doomed crews tried to walk south from their ice-bound ships, dragging

rowing boats full of equipment, before dying in small groups, a few scattered remains found by search parties years later. No supernatural polar bears, sadly.

## Nicholas Clee

The voice of Klara, in Kazuo Ishiguro's new novel *Klara and the Sun* (Faber), is familiar from - though not identical to - those of other Ishiguro narrators: naive, well meaning, observant of details but with only a partial grasp of contexts. Klara, like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, is a servant, and like the children in *Never Let Me Go* has a limited lifespan; she is also an android - an 'Artificial Friend' to Josie, a teenager in poor health. In the earlier novels, a fuller picture gradually became apparent to the reader. Here, the storytelling is more oblique. We infer a dystopian setting from fragments of information, and the agency behind a significant event at the end of the novel is not spelled out. The scenes are no less vivid for that, and continue to haunt well after you've finished reading.

Source article: <https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-detail/what-we-re-reading--12-march-2021>