

What We're Reading - 24 September 2021

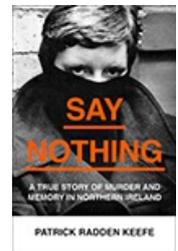
Lucy Nathan

Opinion - Books Friday, 24th September 2021

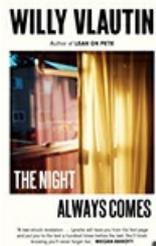
The BookBrunch team reveals what's on their bedside tables

Julie Vuong

My choice this week was a book set in Ireland (no, not that one). *Say Nothing* by Patrick Radden Keefe (HarperCollins) has been lauded by everyone, even those who don't normally enjoy non-fiction - and rightly so. It feels somewhat reductive to compliment this as non-fiction that reads like fiction, as though we should judge historical books for their entertainment value. But Radden Keefe brings the people and politics of the Troubles to life in such vivid and visceral style - in a way only the most skilled storytellers can. It goes without saying that it's brutal and disturbing, and there are parts of the book, such as the 1981 hunger strikes, which will stay with me for a long time. But it's such a compelling read and one that I'll be recommending to anyone who'll listen. The Audible version, read by Matt Blaney, is excellent too.



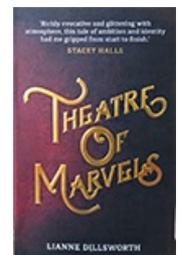
David Roche

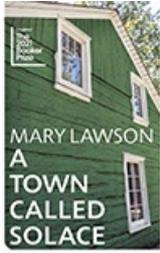


Discovering Willy Vlautin's books a couple of years ago was one of those fantastic things that makes you wonder how you did without him before. His latest book, *The Night Always Comes* (Faber) is a hard-hitting story of Lynette, who lives with her chain smoking in front of the TV mother and looks after her brother, who is grown up but with the mental ability of a three year old. There's a light at the end of the tunnel but it never seems within reach. It's grim, occasionally shocking, but also uplifting in places with amazing resilience on show. As always, the author's writing is wonderful and the tale totally absorbing. If you haven't discovered Willy Vlautin yet, dive in!

Lucy Nathan

I was kindly sent a proof of *Theatre of Marvels* by Lianne Dillsworth (Hutchinson Heinemann), which was great of the publisher but also extremely annoying as it isn't out until April 2022 and I really want to shout about it to everyone I know. Set in Victorian London, the novel follows Zillah, a mixed-race woman who plays 'The Great Amazonia' onstage at a theatre run by the hideous, corrupt Crillick. When she meets the Leopard Lady, one of Crillick's 'freaks' he intends to display, Zillah knows she must rescue her. This is first-rate historical fiction from a new and fascinating perspective - I found it hard to put this book down. It conveys its setting in a brilliant and evocative way, and Zillah is an incredible heroine. Also, a sidenote: it felt so visual and compelling that I can already tell that one day it's going to be made into an absolutely fantastic film or TV series.





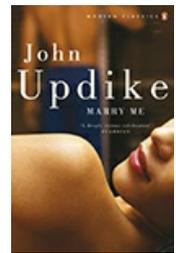
Jo Henry

It's always a red letter day when a new Mary Lawson is published (a sadly infrequent event, with only four novels published in her career so far), and I'm grateful to Nick Clee for recently alerting me to her latest, *A Town Called Solace* (Chatto & Windus). Born in Canada, but living in the UK, her books are all centred on the bleak, wintry northern Canadian landscape, and like other favourite authors of mine show a world where, on the surface, nothing much ever happens. But her skill in delving below that surface and uncovering the hopes, fears, joys and sometimes deep sadnesses of the characters within that landscape, and the complicated dance that we all go through to try to make the most

of our lives, is absolutely mesmeric. Truly an 'I couldn't put it down book' for me.

Nicholas Clee

Last week, I was re-reading John Updike's story collection *The Music School*. The obvious follow-up is the novel he wrote at the same time but kept locked away for another 10 years: *Marry Me*. The story of Jerry Conant, his wife Ruth, his mistress Sally and her husband Richard was too close to that of Updike and his affair with Joyce Harrington. Almost claustrophobically so: in *Marry Me*, the two couples and their children are the only figures of substance, whereas a whole village of characters populates Updike's next adultery novel, *Couples*. The moony first chapter "Warm Wine", in which Jerry and Sally make love on a Connecticut beach, may try your patience, but turns out to be a necessary prelude to a purgatorial section set at Washington airport, and a coda in which several afterlives - one of them Updike's ideal, perhaps - are portrayed. Meanwhile, Updike lays bare compellingly the writhings of tortured, if affluent, individuals.



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