

## What We're Reading - 3 September 2021

Lucy Nathan

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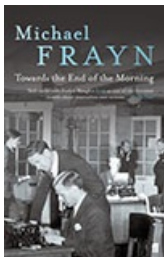
*The BookBrunch team reveals what's on their bedside tables*

### David Roche

Time for some blessed light relief so I followed the favourable reviews for *Billy Summers* (Hodder & Stoughton), Stephen King's latest offering. As usual it's a page turner, with Billy Summers being an ex-Marine assassin hired for one last high profile job which will make him enough to disappear and live the life depicted at the end of *Shawshank Redemption* (the movie, anyway). But all is not as straightforward as it appears - is he also being set up to carry the can? Will his interesting, platonic relationship with the young girl he rescues pay dividends when it comes to payback? I whizzed through this wanting to know what happens next and enjoyed the nods to *The Shining* here and there, amongst other light touches. As reliable as ever.



### Jo Henry



I have seen many Michael Frayn plays, and read many of his books over the years, but not for some reason the one for which he is probably best known, *Towards the End of the Morning* (Faber) - or, as the author wryly notes in his introduction to my edition, the one 'that seems to have been retitled over the years as *Your Fleet Street Novel*'. And what a joy! Laugh out loud funny, this reminds us of the time when Fleet Street and the surrounding thicket of narrow lanes was the centre of a newspaper world dominated by now archaic business practices: printing machines in the basement, hot metal typesetting by compositors, long boozy lunches and the regular collection by the office boy of internal

mail for onward distribution (some will remember at least the last two of these!). But despite all this, the interactions between the various office characters are still readily identifiable, and there are some hilarious sequences involving the pompous head of department John Dyson, particularly his quest for TV fame and an attempt to take advantage of a boozy freebie to the sun of Sharjah. Highly recommended!

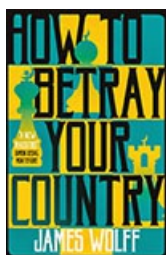
### Neill Denny

A strong cover made *The Shortest History of England* (Old Street Publishing) stand out amidst the clutter of WH Smiths at Jersey Airport, and Read In A Day, Remember For A Lifetime is a compelling back-page hook. And what a curious history book this is. The author, James Hawes, starts arbitrarily with Julius Caesar arriving at Kent - 'we know almost to the hour when England emerged from archaeology, and entered history' - dawn on the 27th August, 55 BC, but, as any fule kno, England doesn't exist much before about 900 AD. Meanwhile, in the rather muddled last chapter, we are never actually told the result of the Brexit referendum. Apart from the unavoidable Queens, women are noticeably absent. Antony Beevor's name is spelt wrong. Stonehenge is never mentioned. But the book has many strong points, not least Hawes' assertion that 1066, and the nobility speaking entirely in French for 300 years, created a class and language divide we have yet to break, whilst the real story of England is the dominance of the heavily-Romanised south-eastern quarter, which became the stronghold of the Church of England, and eventually the Tories too. Levelling up? Forget it. Brilliant insights on every page, and the multiple entry-points and clever use of graphics bestows an easy-to-read, magaziney feel. Favourite thing I





learnt: the Anglo-Saxon warrior elite departed en masse about 1076 to fight for the Byzantine Empire, and founded a New England in the Crimea. And yes, I read it in a day.



### Nicholas Clee

Spy fiction writers, working in a genre that boasts the likes of Len Deighton, John le Carré and Mick Herron, may find that those authors have set the bar at a rather daunting level. But with *Beside the Syrian Sea* and now the sequel *How To Betray Your Country* (Bitter Lemon), James Wolff need not be wary of comparisons. Like his distinguished forerunners, Wolff writes novels that require the reader's full attention, and offers sharp dialogue, idiosyncratic character portraits, and evocative scene-setting. We're in Istanbul, where our anti-hero August Drummond, sacked from the intelligence service and mourning his wife, ventures on a private spying mission; but messing around with ISIS is a risky

business. James Wolff is a pseudonym for someone who has worked "for the British government", and who is not reticent about the moral compromises such work may involve.

### Lucy Nathan

Clare Mackintosh is one of the most reliably excellent authors of domestic thrillers, and her new book *Hostage* (Sphere) is no different. It follows flight attendant Mina, who is having marriage troubles and is worried about her small daughter, as she takes part in the inaugural non-stop flight from London to Sydney. After the plane takes off, she receives a chilling note, and realises that not only is her family unsafe, but that the future of everyone on the flight depends on her decisions. I read this book so, so quickly - it was hard to put down and one of those books that made it a real challenge to not flick to the end to see what was going to happen. Mackintosh is really skilled at quietly laying down plot points that will later be important, and even more importantly she is brilliant at building fascinating characters. We're drawing into autumn now, and if you're looking for something that will keep you spellbound through a cloudy weekend afternoon on your sofa, nothing could be better.



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