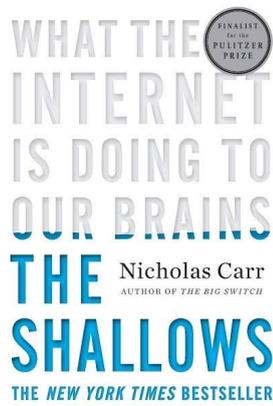


Books Read 2021

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2020/01/29 The Shallows by Nicholas Carr



Holy Macaroni I cannot believe it's nearly February and I've only read one book. It's been a tough old start to the year and the more brain numbing activities have been the priority, when I've not been working.

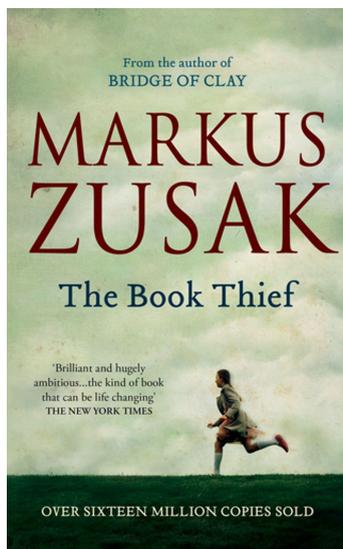
This was very interesting with a vast body of research to support how our brains are transforming as a result of technology. I found it quite thought-provoking with a variety of 'what if' scenarios bubbling to the surface of my head - what if in the future memory feats become even more impressive than they are simply for their rarity? What if there's a future where we can't imagine anything other than a piece of software performing an action that railroads is into conforming to its rules?

I don't imagine our future is as bleak as all that, but I do worry about how the pandemic in particular has warped my free time activities which I know has fed into a warping of my attention span and concentration. I've been hoping it's all stress-related and that's certainly a factor - but my inability to quit the simple Skinner box pleasure of scrolling through Reddit in the morning suggests there's other sinister malarkey afoot.

In conjunction with that Netflix documentary from a few weeks back, I think I have even more reason to view my screen time through a more judgmental lens than I have been.

So I guess that's stress eating *and* internet time wasting which remain as my two major vices to be shaken off. Ho hum.

2021/02/17 The Book Thief by Markus Zusak



I know I know, I should really be working on texts for my course or something like that but with everything else that's been going on I felt as if a little indulgence into something I want to read, a little foray into flights of fancy to try and rekindle my habit of reading ... well, I felt like that was probably more important.

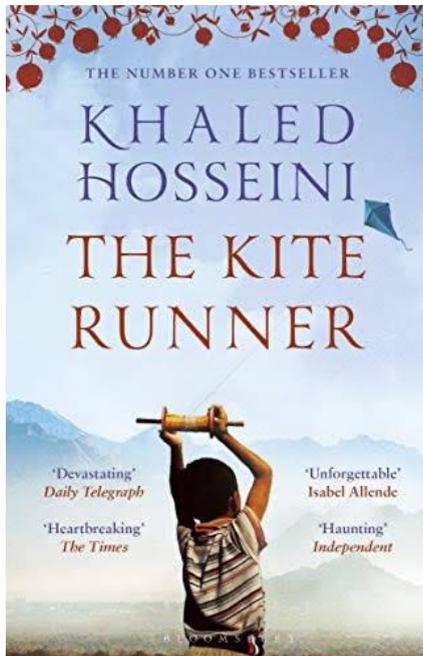
Thematically, I suppose I have a bit in common with Liesel then as she starts off wanting to read and then working hard to develop her reading before she ends up just reading anything she can get her sticky little mitts on.

I like the framing device of having death narrate the book. It's weird and it shouldn't work and I'm not sure it always does... but it allows the threads of the book to all tie up beautifully at the end. Although killing off the entire cast seems a little heavy-handed even for my nihilistic tendencies.

It was incredibly moving in parts and I was really in love with the lyrical feeling of the writing especially towards the end. I put the book down after finishing it last night on the train and just kind of felt my heart sigh a little bit, the heavy sadness of a tale just finished mixing with the sympathy for Liesel and then the wave of tingling warmth that comes when you know that things end up okay - not perfect, not best but infinitely better.

Wow. This is a gem.

2021/02/21 The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini



As a follow up to the previous book, here's another book about a child with a weird nickname that is a noun modifying a person who does an action.

This one is a little different in that it's set in Afghanistan and not Germany, and the timeline is different.

There's also a whole heap less magical realism and a heck of a lot more brutal *actual* realism.

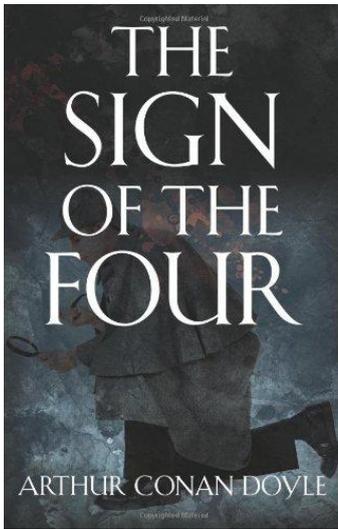
I enjoyed the lyricism of the writing although it did feel, in places, overengineered - like someone reaching to dress up the mundane in a prettily constructed coat woven from the finest figurative filigree... but the plot ticks along tidily from one

HORRENDOUS incident to the next winding up to a denouement which just seems to be an exercise in sadism to be honest. I don't know why the author couldn't just let his characters catch that one final break, I mean they'd pretty much earned it without the extra dollops of dolour... eh.

The ending may have had to have been that miserable so as to allow the characters to come full cycle the way Hosseini seems to think they need to - I'm not fully sure that anything other than the slingshot needed to happen. The little role switch right at the end seemed a bit forced to me, but maybe the algorithms that I am beginning to suspect editors at big publishing houses use (similar to the ones that influence Coldplay in their songwriting) dictate a pretty little bookending such as this one.

Can't say I loved this, definitely didn't hate it... wouldn't read it again because it was so damned depressing.

2021/03/02 The Sign of the Four by Arthur Conan Doyle



Another of the GCSE set texts that I am intending to get through before I start my course, this one has me a little baffled.

It's super heavy on the exposition with the whole mystery being revealed in a large chunk of the perpetrator confessing at the end.

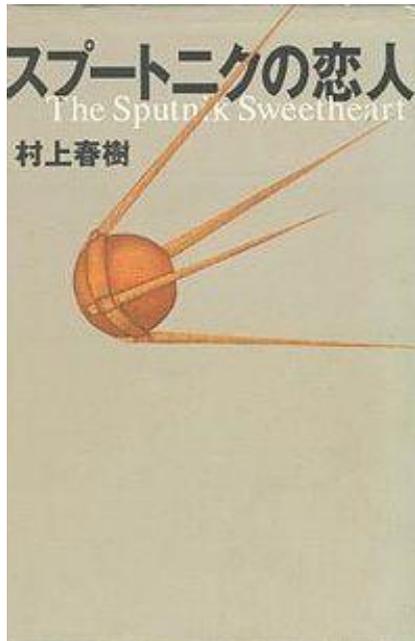
I'm unsure whether all Sherlock books are like this, I don't recall reading them for like ... an eon.

Anyhoo, some interesting turns of phrase in parts - Doyle can write, that's not in dispute.

A lot of *interesting* references to race - it is a product of its time after all - but I'm honestly quite unclear as to what the thinking is with putting this on the GCSE syllabus. I think it does provide the opportunity for some interesting discussions about race and colonialism... but it's framed as an adventure story and it's not a particularly stellar example of such either.

Wonder if it'll still be around when I get to teaching GCSE.

2021/03/23 Sputnik Sweetheart by Murakami Haruki (1999/2001)



This was a re-read as Murakami's been in and out of my awareness for a while now, popping up most recently in Uniqlo of all places with his own range of tees. Go figure.

I felt like reading him again to see if age had changed my interaction with the text and yeah, I felt this differently this time around.

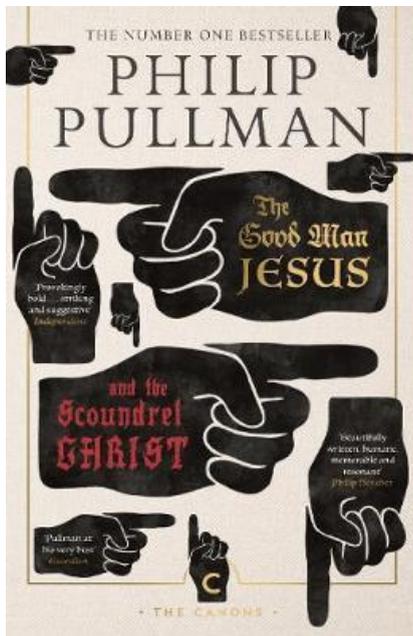
It was odder than I remembered and I wasn't as bothered by the lack of resolution this time around. It feels like a meditation on the compromises we make throughout life and how those compromises and experiences, the disappointments and the missed opportunities, all kind of chip away at our identities if we let them until we're just depressed automatons going through the motions.

I'm also not sure if Sumire went somewhere better or worse.

Finally, I am not utterly convinced by the way Murakami writes about women or by the way he writes about sex. I know he's married so you'd have thought he'd have asked his wife to help out.

Eh.

2021/05/18 The Good Man Jesus & The Scoundrel Christ by Philip Pullman



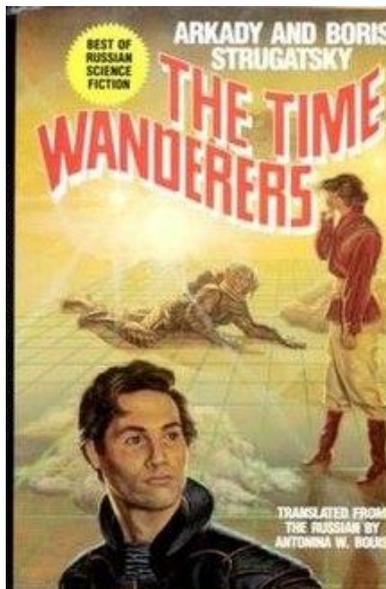
This was very well-written, simple language with the barest of vocabulary except for every now and then when you get a word like 'oblation' - it seems to be that Pullman is deliberately evoking the atmosphere and feel of a religious story; something that is accessible to anybody of any age who can read English.

Essentially the tale hinges on the fact that Christ was actually Jesus' brother and through the machinations of a heavenly emissary this body double was put to use establishing the church on earth.

Honestly the real kicker for me was in the afterword: Pullman sets up a thought-experiment. If you could go back in time and save Jesus, would you? Because if you do, what's going to happen to the world you return to?

And if you don't go back in time and save him, are you better than Judas? Why or why not?

2021/06/10 The Time Wanderers by Arkady & Boris Strugatsky



This was a total slog. I'm not sure if it was the translation - well, actually, I'm fairly sure that that didn't help - but I'd forgotten about the way that the Strugatskys tend to do high concept science fiction without much help for the reader whatsoever.

It's a cool premise - aliens invading by taking over people's bodies with weird stuff happening like in *Annihilation* but it's more an exercise in bureaucracy getting in the way and it's just soooooooooo boring until maybe the last 20% of the book when things start coming together and start happening.

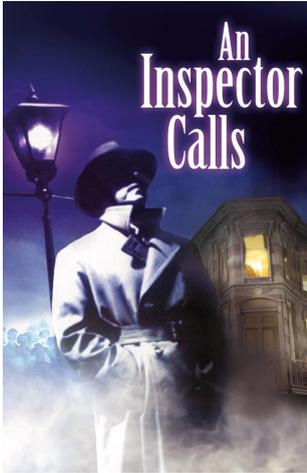
As always, I'm not sure if my displeasure and difficulty in reading this has anything to do with the brain rewire that the pandemic seems to have instituted in my noggin, or whether the book itself really is as unsuitable for me as I think.

Perhaps therein lies a connection to the material of the novel itself?

I did have a sensation as the book came to its conclusion that perhaps there was a kernel of a parable in here about the slow and steady change of societies over time as new ideas infiltrate, percolate and then propagate... but as I mentioned, the rest of the book is so dull as to make whether or not it does something funky on different levels kind of a moot point.

For me at any rate.

2021/06/16 An Inspector Calls by JB Priestley



Had to read this for course preparation, but it was an absolute pleasure.

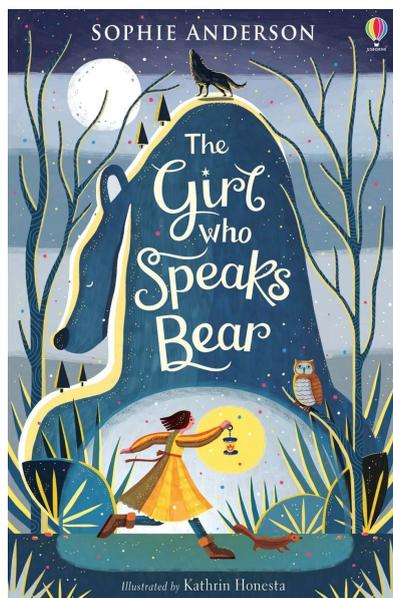
Very well put together, lots of juicy, mind activating themes and ideas to explore.

I'd love to teach this!

I'm not really going to go into too much detail since I already took a bunch of notes when reading it.

One thing I didn't mention to myself in my notes that troubled me while reading it was that it was set in a period over a hundred years ago and it doesn't really seem like much has changed. I'd quite like to see a time shifted adaptation of this to be honest.

2021/07/13 The Girl Who Speaks Bear by Sophie Anderson



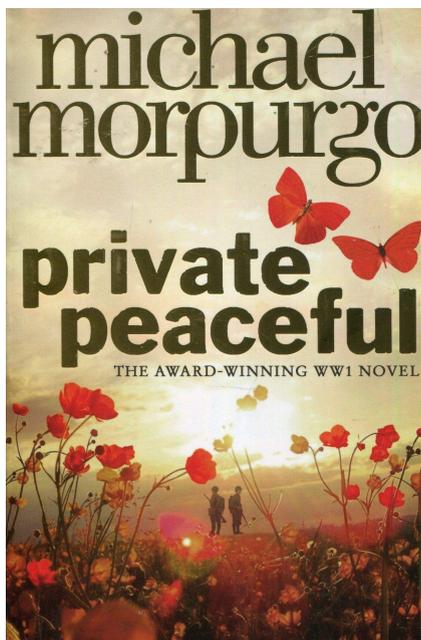
A really fun collection of fairy stories woven together in support of a larger narrative about a little girl who also turns into a bear.

It was very sweet, very well constructed and had a lot of fun moments in it...

... but I'm a bit sad to say it didn't really grab me and hold me. Think the prose was a bit flat, to be honest.

Nonetheless, a solid 7 out of 10 and worth a read.

2021/07/16 Private Peaceful by Michael Morpurgo



A very moving World War I story with interesting narrative symmetries.

Read it partly because it was a text of his that apparently lots of KS3 kids will have read but also because I find his writing very accessible and enjoyable.

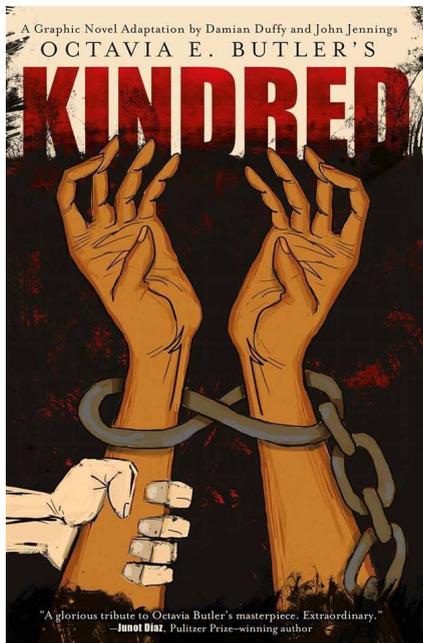
I liked the conclusion where he explained the background behind the name of the titular soldier, and reminded me of the horrors of the Battle of the Somme again.

I think that's a little piece of history we would all do well to think about often and in depth.

One thing that did just occur to me now about the symmetry in the story is that Charlie, who always speaks truth to power, is on a collision course with his fate right from the beginning. I was wondering if it would be possible to pull out a reading of the story where he's not so much being punished for his idealistic honesty as he is being rewarded for it? That plays into the more readily observable messianic imagery around him - when he's first punished by Hanley, there's a line comparing him explicitly to Christ...

Just as a purely intellectual exercise you understand. I don't think there's any need to analyse this until we can see holes in the pages...

2021/07/23 Kindred by Octavia Butler



Read this because someone recommended it as a kind of complementary text to *TKAM*.

It's a really powerful book that I don't feel really counts as science fiction - the time travel at play is merely a plot device that allows Dana to move into a quite horrible world.

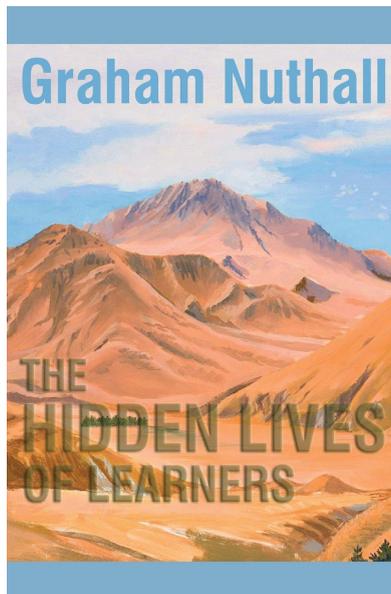
This movement then permits Butler to explore some pretty heavy notions of what exactly slavery means / meant. What it means to be a black woman descended from a relationship between slave and master.

It's pretty intense but the language is light & flows lyrically - it's a difficult read but it's not difficult to read if that makes sense; I'm still mostly letting the content wash through the brain processors at the moment but I was left with a heck of a lot to think about.

I don't think it needs a great deal of literary analysis but I feel like it would lend itself to a great deal of that in terms of symbolism & representation, characterization & plot...

A very moving and deftly written text.

2021/07/24 The Hidden Lives of Learners by Graham Nuthall



A review isn't really required for these kinds of books, I'd say - just some background research, as ever, for my unceasing need to know what I'm doing.

Some really useful quotable sections in here, of which I have made copious notes elsewhere, and it's given me plenty to think about in terms of interactions & so on in the classroom - although I have to say that a great deal of it wasn't exactly new.

Then again, the closing chapter explains that novelty was never the point - backing up something that many teachers and teacher trainers know about learners with actual tangible evidence was the point.

And there is plenty of solid research in this slim tome. Definitely something I'll be coming back to in the future, I suspect.

2021/08/16 Bradford History and Guide by Bob Duckett

Bob Duckett and John Waddington-Feather

BRADFORD



history & guide

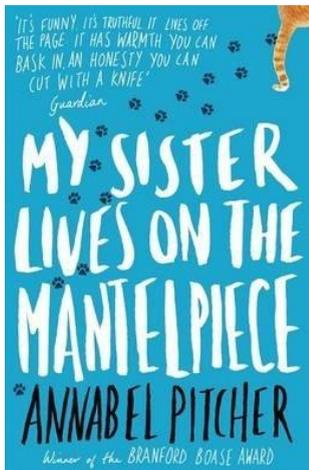
An enlightening read, with lots of history and interesting tidbits.

My only real complaint is that there is way too much dense treacley information from way back when about how Bradford got to where it is today and then it kind of speeds through the 19th century and barely touches anything in the 20th in any great depth.

Still, a very good starting point. I consider myself a heck of a lot more informed about my imminent residence to be than I did before.

Also plenty of snippets that have made me want to explore certain parts I'd not known a lot about previously or had known nothing at all about.

2021/08/18 My Sister Lives On The Mantelpiece by Annabel Pitcher



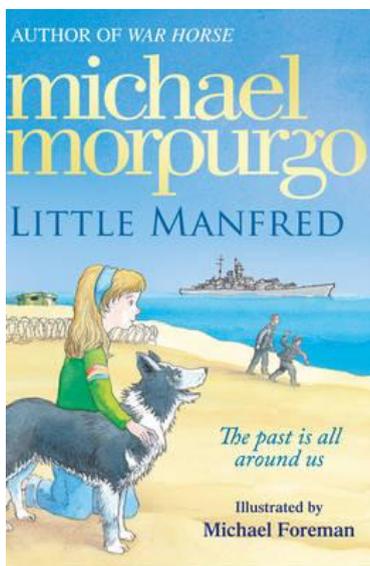
It's well put together although bits of the plot could be tighter - what is the deal with his mum? I really wanted some kind of resolution there... but I assume that the lack of a resolution is the actual point.

It's a very moving & engaging piece of writing.

The *neko ex machina* is heartbreakingly sad although the outcome and slow return in the correct direction that the family takes following that event seems perfect, to be honest.

A really rich exploration of grief, loss and a bunch of other weird things that happen to you when you're little and you move house. Utterly believable and I think there's a lot you could get from this in class.

2021/09/09 Little Manfred by Michael Morpurgo



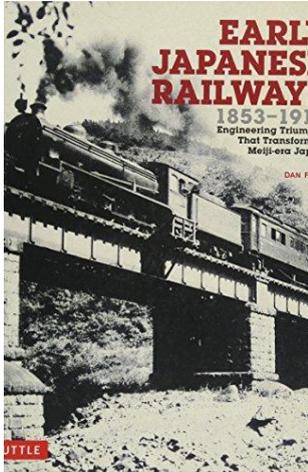
This one's an even weirder Morpurgo than I remember.

He always plays a bit fast and loose with historical reality and I'm okay with this but the main point of this book seems to be about connecting a toy made by a German POW to his story... but this isn't the actual story of the very real tale upon which it's based.

Instead, it's Morpurgo's version of it and it's a little far-fetched and clean to be honest. I feel like there's a lot of depth and emotion that has just been glossed over like "and then everybody was friends again except for a few people but oh well ho hum"

Well-written, engaging, interesting and I enjoyed it. A very light quick read. Not his best by any stretch of the imagination.

2021/09/12 Early Japanese Railways 1853 - 1914 by Dan Free



This was DENSE... not initially in a good way but I do appreciate how fantastic a resource it is now that I have finished it.

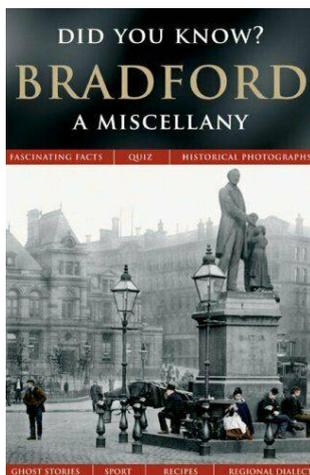
It is crammed with information - lots of which pertained to engine configuration or how locos are laid out but assumed the reader knew enough to understand, so I was a bit lost.

On the other hand, the research and detail in terms of the history provided in here was absolutely phenomenal. A lot of typos which was mildly irritating but overall they didn't really impede the enjoyment of the book. It was just hard for me to get through owing to the size of it meaning I couldn't cart it about with me and so I only ever really read it at home, typically in bed... and it is rather dry so yeah... took me a while to get through it.

Glad to have it about though - it turns out that the appendices are super interesting too with some really cool pictures of *shamon* from different companies of this period.

Learned a lot from this.

2021/09/16 Did you know? Bradford - a miscellany

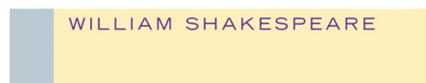
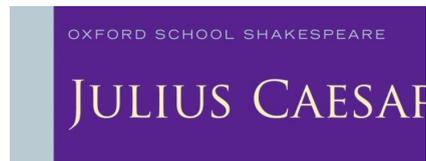


Found this in a charity shop, picked it up for a quick read and a wee bit of local knowledge garnering.

Easy read, lots of interesting bits and bobs in it - it wasn't until I'd read the whole thing I realised that it's a series put together by the Francis Frith organisation. He was a photographer who travelled about the UK taking pictures of towns and cities and villages as they changed over time. They've retained his image archive and even put it online.

That's kind of cool - glad somebody was on that.

2021/10/25 Julius Caesar by Billy S

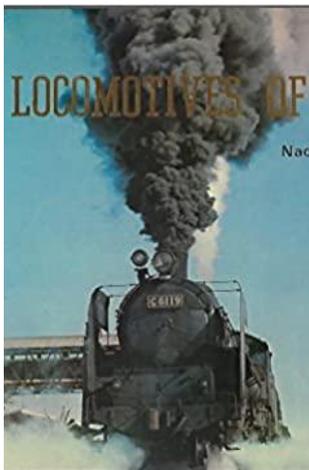


Read because I will be teaching it next week, but I mostly enjoyed this, despite the necessity of its consumption. The first couple of acts with a decent build up to the murder and the subsequent civil war are pretty solid.

The writing is consistently engaging throughout, but there's only really a few stand out moments - Cassius and Brutus falling out was one. Then again, they never really seem to make up or sort it out - just move on - so it's a bit odd. (A lot of the writing in the final acts feels like a first draft to be honest - the ending in particular feels rushed and dull.)

Oh and faaaaaaaaar too many characters to be dealing with. I wonder if this variety of names was as mildly confusing to the Elizabethans as it was to me...

2021/10/26 Steam Locomotives of Japan by Naotaka Hirota



Beautiful ancient text from before I was born - less in-depth than the previous book I read about J rail, but with some interesting details that that text didn't possess. Plus a whole range of lovely photographs.

This is out of print I think, but I've no idea why it should be - the appendix with the technical specifications of the big hitters from the age of steam alone makes this book a great go to reference.

2021/11/10 Seven Ghosts by Chris Priestley



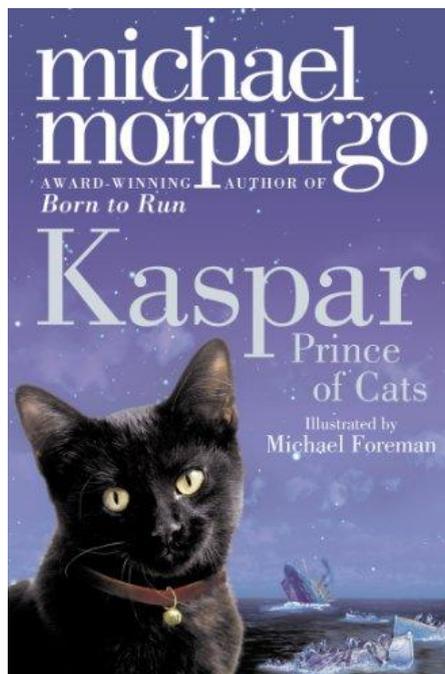
A deliciously spooky quick read this with a fairly obvious twist in the tale that still managed to deliver some shivers quite effectively.

Some really nasty hauntings take place in this book and it makes you wonder what kind of evil the building itself is actually in possession of...

I enjoyed this a lot and it was, as I say, a quick and easy read.

Nothing mind blowing but a good, well-constructed and enjoyable book - a set of 7 ghost stories woven together with a framing device of a woman giving a tour of a haunted house to a bunch of kids who have won a story writing competition.

2021/11/15 Kaspar- Prince of Cats by Michael Morpurgo

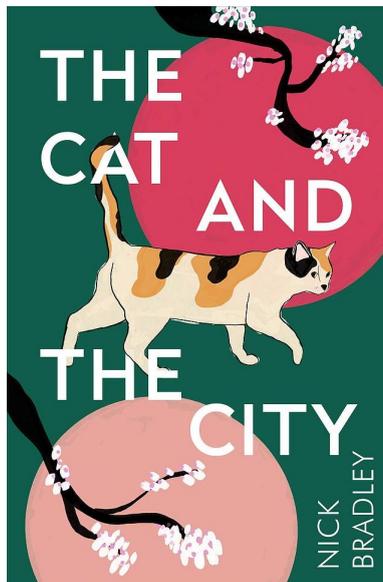


Yet another one of me ma's current Morpurgo obsession hand me downs. Yet another one of 'insert generously fictionalised characters into actual historical event' tableaux deals from Morpurgo- this time an opera singer's cat who ends up in the possession of a Savoy bell boy who stows away on the Titanic ... and they both survive.

Fun, frivolous despite the weighty subject matter, and if you know Morpurgo, then you know what to expect.

A pleasant distraction for a few hours.

2021/12/05 The Cat & The City by Michael Bradley



Popped up on Amazon prime as a free read, sounded interesting and happily enough, it was.

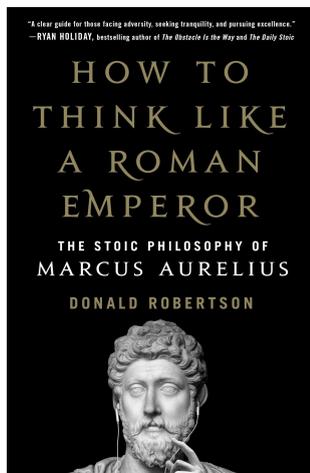
A collection of weird little vignettes describing the intersecting lives of Tokyoites, with a calico cat popping up in pretty much all of them...

It ends rather abruptly and a couple of the stories were a little too out there but I thoroughly enjoyed the breadth of experiences that Bradley has ambitiously tried to interweave.

So the cat... is the cat the soul of the city? Is the green eyed girl the cat, shapeshifted into a kind of omniscient seductress that roams the city drawing residents into her grasp? Is the cat just a coincidence?

Does it matter? Lots to think about, and plenty of fun to be had as one does so. A great little book.

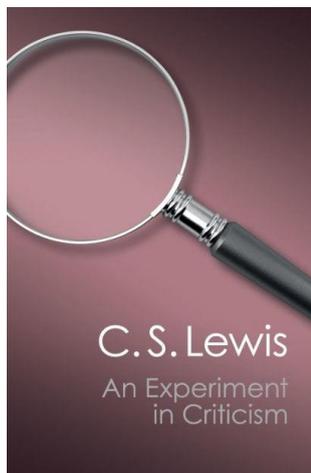
2021/12/17 How to Think Like A Roman Emperor by Donald Robertson



Found myself fairly unimpressed with this. It's well-written and very interesting but it doesn't flow for me at all; it's a series of vignettes taking us through Aurelius' life, punctuated with lessons we can learn from his experiences, tied in with Stoic philosophy, but the end result for me was not one of bringing me closer to an understanding of those principles. Rather, I felt like connecting them to the struggles of a man whose life is completely alien to me in terms of time and experiences, rendered them more distant and I didn't really feel engaged with the concept.

I enjoyed the history of Aurelius' life and I enjoyed reading about practical takeaways from Stoicism but this is actually two books vying to occupy the same space and it never really gelled for me.

2021/12/26 An Experiment in Criticism by C.S. Lewis



Stumbled across this while hunting out for something else so of course I completely forgot about the other thing and just ended up reading through this despite the fact I have far more important things to be doing.

Kind of enjoyable? Seemed a little elitist and a little pretentious in parts - sometimes at the same time - but it rises above that to generate an erudite examination of what reading actually is - Lewis defines two kinds of reading, which he terms 'literary' and 'unliterary', and then he explores what it means to be doing either one of those at any one time.

There are some fascinating insights & ideas at play throughout the book and I was engaged in a pretty good mental workout for the duration. Serendipitous.