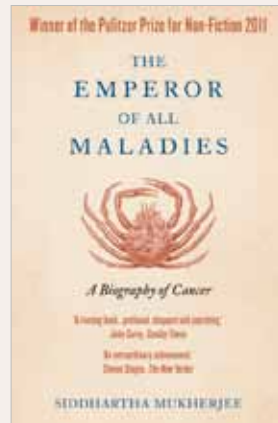
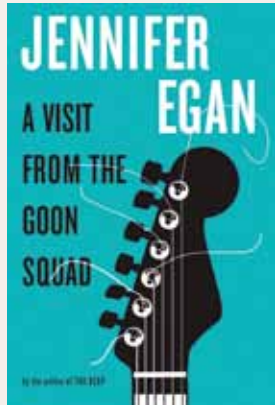




# International Books

Edited by Sarah Lang



## A Visit from the Goon Squad

**Jennifer Egan** (Corsair, distributed by Southern Publishers Group, \$34.99)

The 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winner is a beauty. Darting between lives and decades, from the 1970s to the 2020s, it's technically the tale of the fortunes and associates of music mogul Bennie and his PA, Sasha. She's a pill-popping kleptomaniac; he's a divorced, disillusioned music mogul stirring gold flakes into his coffee to cure his impotence. As postmodern as fiction gets, the story spider-webs out to show us slivers of self-destructive characters such as Dolly, a publicist "rehabilitating" a genocidal dictator's image. The eye-of-God narrator unsettlingly but effectively rewinds and fast-forwards time – the "goon" of the book's title, which will eventually obliterate everything, including the 2020s when "word husks" (like "friend", "real" and "change") "no longer had meaning outside quotation marks".

SARAH LANG

## The Emperor of All Maladies

**Siddhartha Mukherjee** (HarperCollins, \$39.99)

This thrilling, superbly written and humane "biography of cancer" ("Magnificent... it is literature," said the *Guardian*) bagged this year's Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. And rightly so. American oncologist Siddhartha Mukherjee spent years researching and writing this nail-biting tale of ancient suffering, dashed hopes, euphoric victories, moronic drug companies, pain-in-the-arse researchers proved right and genius proved wrong – everything swirling around the increasingly rebellious bunch at the heart of the book: the patients. Mukherjee's prose is so crystalline that the complex, liquid universe of mutant genes and their maniacally replicating cells will race giddily into life before your eyes. A side effect? You'll never smoke again.

JENNY NICHOLLS

## Zero Sum World: Politics, Power and Prosperity after the Crash

**Gideon Rachman** (Allen & Unwin, \$39.99)

"The promoters of free-market economics and democratic politics succumbed to intellectual arrogance and hubris. They pushed their ideas to their logical conclusions and then well beyond them." That, argues Gideon Rachman, is what caused both the Iraq fiasco and the 2008 financial crisis. A venerated foreign correspondent for the *Economist* and the *Financial Times*, Rachman has written a history covering the Age of Transformation (1978-91), the Age of Optimism (1991-2008), and the Age of Anxiety (2008-now). He begins adroitly with Chinese reformist Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher, who controversially supported fascist Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. From dark humour in Putin's Kremlin to anarchy in Pakistan, *Zero Sum* is an engaging, informative account, leavened with parched Brit wit.

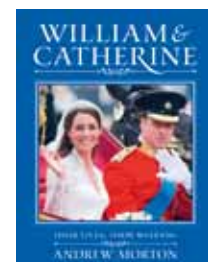
ALEXANDER BISLEY

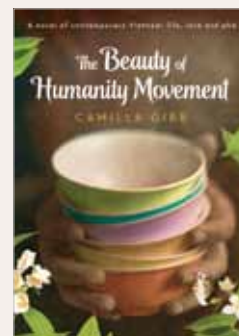
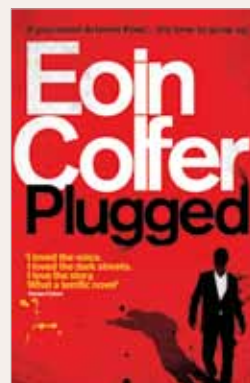
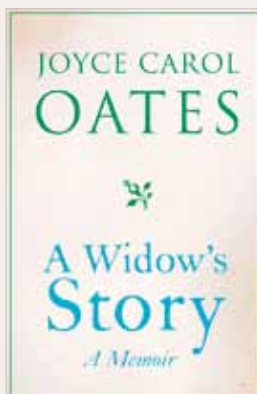
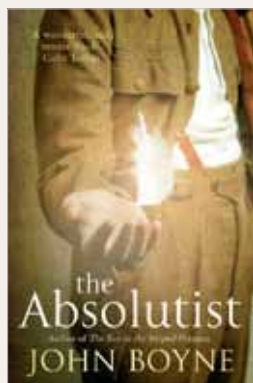
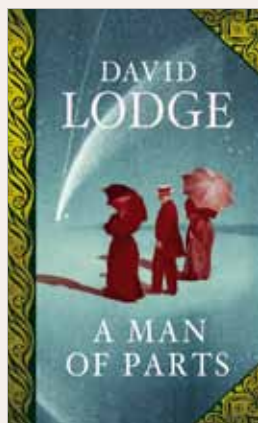
## Elizabeth Taylor: The Lady, the Lover, the Legend

**David Bret** (Random House, \$39.99)

This biography of the late acting great claims to be "revealing, incisive and definitive". It certainly isn't definitive, but what makes this an interesting and, ultimately, a fun read is it's just so catty.

*Trivia* William and Kate teabags, condoms and "Throne-Up" sickbags were just a few items of memorabilia made for the royal wedding, reveals notorious biographer Andrew Morton in *William & Catherine: Their Lives, Their Wedding* (MICHAEL O'MARA, DISTRIBUTED BY BOOKREPS NZ, \$49.99).





Showbiz biographer Bret's claws are out, producing a work that has a bitchiness the great Hollywood gossip columnists would envy. While he does praise Taylor's fundraising efforts for AIDS charities, he thinks little of her film and stage career – and less of her seven husbands. Curiously, the photo captions are complimentary and even flattering, while the text is the exact opposite. This book wouldn't be out of place on the shelf next to the legendary, sleazy exposé *Hollywood Babylon*. **MATT ELLIOTT**

## **A Man of Parts** **David Lodge**

(Random House, \$39.99)

Writing and rutting were the two great loves of H.G. Wells, the father of science fiction and of four children by three women. Indeed David Lodge, the author of this fact-based biographical novel, may have needed a spreadsheet to keep track of all Wells' wives, mistresses and liaisons. It's 1946 and the dying man is remembering a life that began in poverty and ended in aristocracy and fame, if waning influence. Plagued by romantic scandal, the frustrated reformist considered writing not an art

form but a means to an end: social equality that was never attained – though the women kept coming. Why read a biography when this “faction” is double the fun? **SARAH LANG**

## **The Absolutist**

**John Boyne**

(Random House, \$39.99)

At barely 20, Tristan Sadler is a Great War veteran and survivor of the Western Front's meat-grinder. He may have returned physically intact, but what mental scars still burden him? The novel starts with Sadler, haunted by the war's horrors, travelling to return a packet of letters to a fallen comrade's sister. As the story progresses, flashbacks reveal Sadler's secrets and tease out the twists that keep you guessing right till the end. John Boyne, author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, has crafted a taut novel about the cost of being true to yourself and the pressure to conform to the mores of the time. **MICHAEL HENRY**

## **A Widow's Story: A Memoir**

**Joyce Carol Oates**

(HarperCollins, \$39.99)

After the author's husband of 47 years died, insomnia set in and she passed the time

writing. This is her account of a grief-filled year unfolding in real-time like a diary. It's unflinching: we're party to the widow's suicide fantasies, her sedative habit, and the moments she experiences her grief not as something romantic or honourable, but as goofiness and black comedy. Oates' husband, an editor, had never read her many novels. During *A Widow's Story*, we see her transgress their habit of a lifetime to seek out her husband's unpublished novel, written decades before. This is a compelling meditation on the unknowability of those we love, by a complicated and appealing woman. **HANNAH SPERBER**

## **Plugged**

**Eoin Colfer**

(HarperCollins, \$36.99)

*Plugged* has a classic cast of gangsters, drugs and guns, but Eoin Colfer – seasoned crime writer and author of the hit *Artemis Fowl* series for children – has put so much love and creativity into his oddball characters that the story feels fresh. Dan, the novel's hero, is a loveable rogue with the hair plugs (mini-transplants) that contribute one half of the

title's pun. Soon, Dan's pursuit of his sometimes girlfriend's killer descends into absolute mayhem. Its witty dialogue and outlandish plot makes this a fantastic read but, as with many crime thrillers, it's a guilty, one-time pleasure which may or may not make it onto the bookshelf.

**CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG**

## **The Beauty of Humanity Movement**

**Camilla Gibb** (Allen & Unwin, \$35)

In this novel, Vietnam's turbulent past is embodied by an elderly street hawker who learned to cook pho noodle broth as a boy in 1930s Saigon. Old Man Hu'ng has continued to make the traditional soup throughout a life marked by deprivation, war, communist rule, and the more recent westernisation of northern Vietnam. In modern-day Hanoi, where his broth attracts a cult following, Hu'ng is befriended by a Vietnamese-American woman trying to discover her father's fate. Hu'ng's surrogate grandson, the entrepreneurial, Nike-clad Tu, is roped in to help. The exotic locale is a star in its own right in a story that claims Hu'ng's soup bowl contains “the history of Vietnam”. **SUE HOFFART**

