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BY RICHARD COTTER

Alice Sebold made a literary splash some years back with *THE LOVELY BONES*, the book that is now going before the cameras under the direction of Peter Jackson. Her latest novel, *THE ALMOST MOON (PICADOR)*, although told through a living person and not the ghost of a murder victim, is still concerned with murder, madness and mayhem and should satisfy her fans. For those who have not cottoned on to Sebold, a contemporary American novelist of longer standing and greater canon who she could be likened to is Alice Hoffman.

The title *THE ALMOST MOON* comes from a description of a wife by her husband to their daughter in order to illuminate the mother's mental condition. "The moon is whole all the time, but we can't always see it. What we see is an almost moon or a not quite moon. The rest is hiding just out view...we plan our lives based on its rhythms and tides." It's an apt description of Clair Knightly, whose agoraphobia ostracises her from her neighbourhood and distances her from her family. Now ninety, Clair is drowning in the dark depths of dementia, and her only child, Helen is desperately trying to deal with the mentally delinquent diva. "Dementia, as it descends, has a way of revealing the core of the person affected by it. My mother's core was rotten like the brackish water at the bottom of a weeks-old vase of flowers", muses Helen, the narrator of this murky tale of matricide, suicide and sanity subsided. Clair's unclarity of mind affects Helen also, the daughter's duty met with ingratitude is stifling and exhausting, causing a brain snap that occurs on page one and drives the narrative to its startling conclusion 290 packed pages later. The novel explores the notion that devotion can be a soul corroding emotion; duty devoid of heart and denied due thanks, atrophies and becomes dysfunctional and dangerous. It also explores the idea that mental illness can be passed on not only by genetic proclivity but also by claustrophobic proximity.

Irish lyricism and American sparseness of prose make a marriage and produce a small masterpiece in Gerard Donovan's *JULIUS WINSOME* (Faber). Named after the narrator, the story is set early November in the forestland at the western edges of the St. John Valley that borders the Canadian province of New Brunswick. Julius Winsome lives in a cabin surrounded by books beloved and bequeathed by his deceased Dad.

- My father was a reader of books, and spreading along the walls from the wood stove stretched the long bookcases from the living room and onto the kitchen at the back and right and left to both bedrooms, four shelves high – 3,282 books.

Apart from the population of people pressed in the pages of his books, his only other companion is his canine, Hobbes. When Hobbes is shot and left to die, Julius Winsome snaps, seeks and wreaks bloody revenge on the dog destroyers. The transformed loner and pacifist target anyone toting a trigger in the timbers. His resolve is cold and calculated; it's the killer's callousness and cruelty that are in his crosshairs; they are armed and capable of a canine kill, therefore culpable and deserving to be killed.

These hunters may just be after deer, but someone has killed his dear, and anyone with a weapon in the woods is warranted a would-be and sentenced to the same fate as the hallowed hound. The death of the dog has visited a glacial winter of discontent upon his soul; the senseless slaughter of the pooch is a catalyst to remembrances of things past, of love's labours lost. Hobbes was a lasting, living legacy of a love long gone, his one great intimacy. Now he is an orphan, bereft of flesh and blood companionship, his only legacy his father's library and grandfather's Lee Enfield rifle, with which he dispenses rule 303. Like Prospero in Shakespeare's *THE TEMPEST*, Julius Winsome's library was dukedom enough, as long as he also had his dog. His faithful companion untimely ripped from his mortal coil, creates sadness and then madness, a havoc that slips loose the dogs of war, unleashing such a swathe of revenge and retribution to run red with hot blood the cold snowy shroud of the forest floor.

A hearse, a hearse, his kingdom for a hearse. Sheathed and sheaved and steeped in Shakespearian allusion and lexicon courtesy and legacy of his library, Winsome ponders, plans and executes with the Bard boiling away in his brain, his kingdom for a hearse for canine killers and pet predators; holiday hunters and recreational havoc wreakers. A Rambo for the RSPCA.

DEAD LOVELY by Helen Fitzgerald (Allen & Unwin) is a dead set, dead cert, dyed in the wool thriller to die for. Set in sunny Scotland, it's a case of kilt or be kilt in a story of sporan sporting sparring partners and a series of events more monstrous than the supposed sea serpent tenant of Loch Ness. The summation of the story is pointedly précised on page one, a clever pitch by the author because it piques the reader's interest in what leads to the betrayal and murder promised. The promise of the premise is kept as the story unfolds in split narratives by perpetrators and victims. Fitzgerald has a wicked turn of phrase and keeps the narrative flow coursing through the darkly funny canyons of carnality and criminality.

The dead lovely of the title is more probably, even properly, Sarah, the serious, stunning spouse of a surgeon, but it could just as easily be the comely, carefree, Catholic Krissie, funny and feckless, far from fuckless, and most definitely the young boiler that keeps the pot of plots bubbling, until it jumps from the pan into the fire, and oh what robust combustion results. *DEAD LOVELY* is a dead set delight of a debut from Australian born author Helen Fitzgerald and hopefully a first among sequels.

Third among sequels is the latest Fearless Jones caper from Walter Mosley. Narrated by bookseller Paris Minton, *FEAR OF THE DARK* (Serpents Tail) opens with a classic hardboiled, char grilled to noir, sentence: "I was expecting one kind of trouble when another came knocking on my door." The brace and pace of the story never lets up from that first sentence so if you're going to take this book to the sack, beware, you ain't gonna get no big sleep that night. It will be farewell my lovely to any notion of slumber, so don't say you haven't been warned. It's a cousin of the criminal class that catapults Paris into a maelstrom of mayhem and murder. This cousin was christened Ulysses but everyone calls him Useless, and, as we discover, it's a far more appropriate moniker.

Useless is a black male with blackmail in mind. Useless is the catalyst for the accumulation of corpses that crowd the story and accounts for the arrival of his mother, Three Hearts, said to be blessed with the evil eye, and certainly a force to be reckoned with.

Talking of blessings, Paris Minton's association with Fearless Jones is a mixed one. Sure, Fearless assists Paris with disposal of dead men, but he seems to attract

danger as much as disposes of it. But its dames as well as danger that orbit Fearless Jones and there's a fair amount of satellite activity for Paris, who's no slouch on the couch and is hot in the cot. There are men that want him dead and women that want him in bed and Mosley delivers a fine balance between the mean streets and between the sheets.

That uncommon writer Alan Bennett has produced an uncommonly comic confection in the deliciously sublime *THE UNCOMMON READER* (Faber). Eschewing the care of kingdom, court and corgis, Queen Elizabeth discovers the joys of literature when she happens upon a travelling library and is guided by Palace kitchen hand, Norman as to what to read. Norman's conquest of the Queen's lack of literary appreciation elevates him from culinary skivvy to Her Majesty's amanuensis. It also raises the ire of Liz's private secretary, Kiwi Kev, who counsels against reading as withdrawal. "Were we able to harness your reading to some larger purpose – the literacy of the nation as a whole, for instance, the improvement of reading standards among the young..." The Queen retorts and rebuffs that reading is done for pleasure. It is not a public duty. If her private secretary and prime minister were not alarmed enough already at her voracious reading, her intention to write a book comes with klaxons blaring. "I would have thought" said the prime minister, "that Your Majesty was above literature", "Above literature?" said the Queen. "Who is above literature? You might as well say one is above humanity."

An uncommonly good read, *THE UNCOMMON READER* is a love letter to literature that will strike a common chord for those who do relish a good read and also appreciate good presentation in publishing. The book is delightfully packaged in small format hardback with a stylishly simple dust jacket and gorgeous end papers and sturdy binding. A good gift idea for an opsimath.