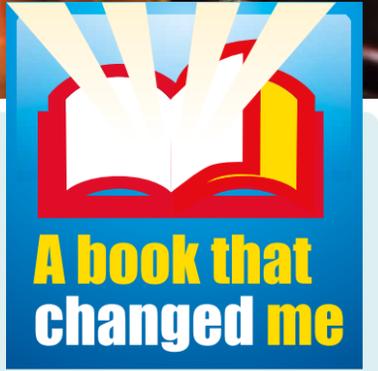


Winter READING SPECIAL



A book that changed me

Poetry opened the door to faith

Paul Mitchell tells of how an initially-covert interest in poetry as a young man led him on his Christian journey, and a writing career of his own.

CHOSE TO DO YEAR 11 ENGLISH Literature because I liked to read. It might sound like a casual approach to take, but it was the only way to make a subject selection in the '80s because you didn't get subject information.

Like, this subject will see you read a style of writing with which you haven't engaged since you were a toddler, poring over story-book rhymes. Or, this subject will introduce you to a book that'll change your life: *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English*, edited by John Leonard.

My giggling peers and I pencilled rude drawings in our copies of Leonard's compendium. At my high school, students who showed the least interest in schoolwork were *ipso facto* the coolest. And I had to sketch the rudest drawings during poetry study because I was secretly the most interested student.

At home, I read *Seven Centuries*' poems in a way I later understood was close to *lectio divina*; I inhabited the works, allowed them to settle in me and drop deep roots. I'd no religious upbringing, no belief in God, and I'd never read the Bible. But I wanted to know why on earth I was on earth. And, in *Seven Centuries*, the poets to whom I gravitated – William Blake, Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot – seemed to be writing about something I understood as being "beneath" physical existence:

"What are the roots that clutch,
what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?
Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess,
for you know only
A heap of broken images,
where the son beats,
And the dead tree gives no
shelter, the cricket no relief. . ."
T.S. Eliot
– from "The Waste Land"

"There came a Wind like a
Bugle –
It quivered through the Grass
And a Green Chill upon the
Heat
So ominous did pass
We barred the Windows and
the Doors
As from an Emerald Ghost –"
Emily Dickinson
– from ["There came a Wind
like a Bugle"]

"When the stars threw down
their spears
And water'd heaven with their
tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb
make thee?"
William Blake
– from "The Tyger"

I stared out my bedroom window at Mum's rockery, the banksia, shrubs and fountain grass. What was beneath physical existence? Was it under Mum's garden?



Paul Mitchell.

Careful to hide the fact from peers and, well, everyone, the footy-playing jock that I was started writing his own versions of Blake, Dickinson and Eliot's poems. He plumbed the universe as he knew it, scrawling plaintive doggerel, trying to write his way through to this realm beyond the rockery:

"If the doors of perception were
cleansed, everything would
appear to man as it is, Infinite."
William Blake – from "The
Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

I finished Year 11 – and 12 – English Literature, but didn't put *Seven Centuries* up for sale to a new cohort. And I kept writing poetry, until, when I turned 20, one of them became a prayer.

Seven Centuries' poets had lit a fire and I'd been, without realising it, investigating Christianity for three years. A couple of friends, U2 and stray copies of *The Plain Truth* led me to think deeply about

Jesus. But when preachers shouted at me on Friday nights in Geelong's CBD and scandals hit American prosperity gossellers, I couldn't see myself becoming Christian.

Simultaneously, I understood my *Seven Centuries*' poets were writing about the spiritual realm. They were even, sometimes, writing to God. I thought I'd give that a go.

I still have the poem I addressed to God in pencil, complaining about religious violence, church hypocrites and moralists. And, to cut a blockbuster movie-style conversion story short, editing out Blakean visions of heaven and hell, two weeks later I believed in God.

Writing and reading poetry has remained part of my Christian journey. Earlier this year I started reading the late Denise Levertov's *The Stream and the Sapphire*, a collection of religious poetry from her books. I listen for the spirit in her rhyme and meter, seek the Word within her words. Poets whose work engages seriously with the divine – Kevin Hart, Les Murray, Wendell Berry, Maura Eichner, Annie Dillard, R.S. Thomas, to name fewer than I want to – have helped me explore faith, doubt, heartbreak, peace and failure, made me remember light lives in me and will break through my darkness. Which often happens through writing poetry.

I've poured my faith, doubt, rebelliousness and hope into three poetry collections. Before I published my second, I was reading from my first book, *Minorphysics*, in an event at Readings Bookshop, Hawthorn in 2006. Afterwards, a man with longish grey hair and glasses with one frame shaded

black told me how much he'd enjoyed my poetry. I said thank you and he introduced himself.

John Leonard. *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English!*

My heart didn't skip a beat, but it did some kind of gymnastic trick. Seven centuries of poetry and mine was going okay?

John gave his time to me freely as I worked on my next book, *Awake Despite the Hour*, helping me craft poems and give the manuscript shape. I've had some divine experiences in the poetry world: a masterclass with the late Les Murray where he told me my work was full of love and reading my poems live in New York. But to get John's encouragement and guidance made me feel more than ever that my poems could help give the doors of perception a quick wipe so we can see what's beyond there, or underneath:

"I am breathing my eyes open,
air leaves me, a mist of words.
I am speaking to the breathing
air. And what the air's missing
I speak. There is no answer
to my breathing, but I hear
the flutter of a bird's wing,
the curl of a cloud through air.
This is as close as I come."
Paul Mitchell – "Prayer"
– from *Awake Despite the Hour*.

Paul Mitchell is a Melbourne-based poet, fiction writer and essayist. He has published three poetry collections, a volume of short stories and a novel – www.paul-mitchell.com.au

Lockdown READING RECOMMENDATIONS



I HAVE enjoyed some more time to read at night over the past two months. Three lockdown reading highlights so far: Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads*, a world history with an Eastern focus, rather than told with European and colonial eyes. Tom Holland's *Dominion*, a history of Christian influence on the Western mind. Both exceptional books, highly recommended, engaging and stimulating. And Peter Carey's *The Tax Inspector* for light relief, along with a range of Italian and Icelandic crime fiction. Hoping the lockdown continues long enough to read Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light* and Dickens' *Bleak House*.

Bishop Paul Barker is Bishop of Jumbunna Episcopate. He is on TMA's book review committee.

FICTION HIGHLIGHTS include Charlotte Wood's book *The Weekend*, a beautiful exploration of friendship, and Heather Rose's book *Bruny*, a thriller and love story set in Tasmania.

A more reflective read is Leigh



Sales' book *Any Ordinary Day, Blindsides, Resilience and What Happens After the Worst Day of Your Life* – a deep exploration of resilience through stories of those recovering from trauma. Spiritual reading has included *Fragile Mystics: Reclaiming a Prayerful Life* by Magdalen Smith and *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* by the Revd Dr Samuel Wells, who says the word "with" is one of the most important words of the Christian faith.

The Revd Rachel McDougall is Vicar of St Paul's Canterbury.

IT SEEMS I've been reading books about women claiming freedom. In *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman, Eleanor is drawn from her skewed isolation into a series of awkward encounters that change her life. Tracey Chevalier's *A Single Thread* presents another solitary woman, Violet, who's lost a brother and fiancé in WWI. She finds the will to leave her bitter mother and move to Winchester where she joins the society of broderers – women who embroider kneelers for the Cathedral. It's an unusual move towards an authentic life.

And in *Being Well When We're Ill*, Canadian theologian Marva Dawn explores the journey to wholeness and hope amidst multiple chronic illnesses. I didn't connect with it all, but am grateful for its insights.

Carol Clark is Parish Renewal Co-ordinator for the Diocese of Melbourne.

LESS THAN two years have passed since Malcolm Turnbull had the Prime Ministership wrenched from his grasp, yet his recently released memoir *A Bigger Picture* sometimes seem

to be of more distant times. The reason is coronavirus.

When Mr Turnbull began writing the conclusion of his book on 5 January, the "apocalyptic" (his description) bushfires of last summer were scorching much of Australia.

"It looks like the end of the world, people are saying," he wrote. "But what if it doesn't just look like it, but is?"

Had he known what was to come, he might have posed the same question about COVID-19's impact on the world we knew up till last Christmas.

Mr Turnbull's book is not about a life lived quietly, with steady progress through the years. It is one shaped by personal and professional triumphs, losses and frequent changes of direction, fuelled by ambition, intellect and perseverance – often played out in the public glare: as a journalist, lawyer and in a 14-year political career, including almost three as PM.

Mark Brolly is a TMA journalist.