

The woman he loved

BIOGRAPHY

That Woman

Anne Sebba
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson, \$35)
Reviewed by Daphne Guinness

ALMOST everyone knows the story of King Edward VIII's abdication to marry the American divorcee Wallis Simpson but few have read the mountain of books about the saga. *That Woman*, the first biography by a woman of Wallis Simpson, Duchess of Windsor, is for them.

Anne Sebba's intention "to humanise not demonise" the woman works, no doubt to the chagrin of those who still detest her.

It works because of the material discovered in the King's Proctor's files at the National Archives in London but most of all because, as a woman, Sebba could get into Wallis's mind the way male authors could not. So hats off to Sebba for turning a complex slice of history into a gripping yarn.

Just what did Wallis have that made a king give up "the most coveted throne in the world", as his brother Bertie put it? Firstly, she didn't kowtow to him as his other lovers did. She cracked great one-liners. She gave stunning parties and was good in bed, whereas, according to Thelma Furness,

Edward's discarded mistress, he was lousy. And here Sebba drops a bomb. As early as chapter two, she wonders if Wallis, with her boyish looks, was a pseudo-hermaphrodite? If so, was that a turn-on to the Duke, suspected of homosexual tendencies?

From school days on, Wallis was never short of admiring men. She had only to enter a room and the place buzzed. Even women concede that Wallis was a fun girl and popular so, with these talents and ambitions, to ditch an impoverished background, she climbed her way up in American society, then did her dash in England. She was a "smart cutie" (as Winston Churchill dubbed her in the abdication crisis).

Sebba is on Wallis's side but she doesn't spare her the tough stuff, from the Queen Mother's comment that she was "the lowest of the low", to turncoat friends calling her a "Yankee harlot, sadistic, cold, overbearing, mean and grasping". But when what began as a fling – with status benefits to complaisant hubby Ernest Simpson – turns into the King's suffocating need for her, she is trapped. Marriage looms – the last thing she wanted.

She threatens to leave him, he threatens to cut his throat. She sincerely wants to give him up, he



Odd couple ... the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

won't allow it. It's here that a creepy side to the King is revealed.

He abdicates, they marry, her HRH status is denied. Wallis bears it all stoically, unlike the Duke.

Wallis, the dame who stirred the pot, did the world a favour by not marrying Edward when he was king. In fact, she deserves a posthumous gong. A HRH maybe?

Selling panic on the streets of capitalism

THRILLER

The Fear Index

Robert Harris
(Hutchinson, \$32.95)
Reviewed by Frank Walker

LAST May, the New York Stock Exchange plunged 10 per cent in just 13 minutes. Then, in just 90 seconds, it shot back up again to where it was before. The "flash crash" left Wall Street shocked and in panic. Had a trader mistaken billions for millions? Was a computer out of control? Experts wondered whether it was more sinister, such as a cyber terrorist attack, or whether a massive computer program manipulated the

market to crash and recover to siphon off millions of dollars.

Bigger questions arose. Could a supercomputer take over the share markets of the world? What if the HAL computer from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* was put to making money from the global share market? Do humans still control the markets? Do traders do anything to better the world? Is the whole basis of the share market immoral?

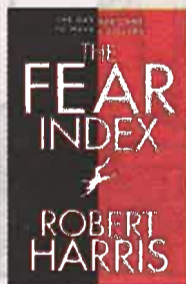
These are questions Robert Harris poses in *The Fear Index*. The best-selling author often rips his yarns straight from daily

headlines and real events. He delves into the world of the hedge funds that trade billions of dollars in just milliseconds, using money that is on promise. While the financial jargon might be complex in parts, Harris has created a thought-provoking thriller of murder, madness and multibillion-dollar market mayhem.

Dr Alex Hoffmann is a brilliant physicist who invents a computer program that makes billions for a Geneva-based hedge fund he co-owns. It's a revolutionary form of artificial intelligence using

algorithms to track the most basic of human emotions – fear – to predict immediate reactions in the share markets to real events. But when Hoffmann is attacked by a sinister intruder in his high-security home, the comfortable life he enjoys is thrown into chaos. Is he going mad or are the threats real? Bit by bit, his life unravels as he tries to find who, or what, is behind the increasingly macabre attempts to destroy him.

Harris is a master storyteller as he's shown in previous bestsellers *Fatherland*, *Enigma*, *Archangel*, *Pompeii* and *The Ghost*. This grabs you from the first page – and if there's a criticism, it's that the ending leaves you wanting even more.



FICTION



The Good Jihadist
Bob Shepherd
with M. P. Sabga
(Simon & Schuster, \$29.99)

Former SAS soldier Matt Logan is doing private security work, first in Afghanistan and then Pakistan, but in both countries it turns ugly. As Logan tries to discover what really happened to his TV-news reporter fiancée in Islamabad, he is drawn into the machinations of a quasi-religious American organisation called ICON. This embroils him with the Taliban and a regional group seeking a breakaway from Pakistan. Shepherd's at times violent tale fairly rips along, his narrative underlining what many have concluded: the Afghan war is a futile and costly exercise in blood and treasure.

Ross Southernwood

CHILDREN



Unicorn Riders (series)
Aleesah Darlison
(Walker Books, \$6.50-\$12.95)

"We ride as one!" Like the legendary Musketeers, these four girlfriends gallop throughout their kingdom doing battle and meeting monster perils. Their steeds are magical unicorns with spiralled horns of gemstone and silky tails. What a winning combination of pink girly glitter and girl power! In Book One, Queen Heart's toddler son has been kidnapped and the Riders' only clues are a trail of ransom notes in taunting riddles. Add a sprinkle of angst – when Rider Quinn discovers why she was abandoned to an orphanage – to tug at readers' hearts. These four books sparkle like rubies.

Jenny Hale

FICTION



Animal People
Charlotte Wood
(Allen & Unwin, \$29.99)

Stephen scrubs deep-fat fryers at a zoo kiosk, lives a lonely existence and plans to dump his girlfriend today. Charlotte Wood takes a single day in Stephen's life, examining the exterior measures of success that have little to do with whether a person is actually good. Many of Stephen's observations are of how we imbue animals with our own values – expecting dogs to be our friends and zoo animals to be cuddly. There is plenty of wry humour here, yet it is anything but jaded. It is what we could all use: a pair of fresh eyes for looking at the ordinary world.

Eleanor Limprecht

CRIME FICTION



Headhunters
Jo Nesbo
(Vintage, \$29.95)

Roger Brown is a hugely successful corporate headhunter – the best in Norway – and prides himself on an almost psychic ability to match job opportunities with the perfect candidate. He has a beautiful wife who owns a chic Oslo art gallery and the couple move in the best social circles. But Brown is also an art thief and an insufferable egotist who likes to control those around him. Has he met his match in executive candidate Clas Greve, who has in his possession one of Rubens' most sought-after paintings? This stand-alone thriller from the creator of detective Harry Hole is a ripping roller-coaster ride.

Winsor Dobbin

FOOTNOTES

Before Bib and Bub

Author and illustrator May Gibbs won the hearts of generations of Australians with her gumnut babies and the book *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*, yet little was generally known of her earlier life and artistic career. Robert Holden has remedied that. His illustrated biography, *May Gibbs: More than a Fairy Tale*, chronicles for the first time the often surprising life and times of a British-born South Australian farm girl who travelled to England with hopes of a career as an artist, supported the suffragettes' fight for women's rights, struggled to break into a profession dominated by men, yet went on to become one of the few commercially successful female artists. To introduce his new book, Holden will be at Stanton Library on Wednesday at 1pm. The author talk is free and there is no need to book. The library is at 234 Miller Street, North Sydney.

As seen on TV

You may remember Merridy Eastman as an associate of Big Ted, Jemima and co on *Play School*, or lately as the charmingly neurotic Donna Mackey on *Packed to the Rafters*. But Eastman is also a writer and you can meet her at Mosman Library on Wednesday at 7pm, where she'll introduce her memoir *How Now Brown Frau*. If you're curious as to how a former children's television presenter and erstwhile brothel receptionist woke one morning to find herself pregnant and in Germany, the author talk costs \$10. Bookings at Pages & Pages bookshop on (02) 9969 9736.

The story so far

Australian writer Isobelle Carmody can turn her hand to science fiction, fantasy, children's and young adult literature but is perhaps best known for the popular *Obernewtyn Chronicles* series, which she began writing at the age of 14. To talk about *The Sending*, the latest novel in the series, Carmody will be at Shearer's Bookshop in Leichhardt on Thursday at 6.30pm. Cost is \$7 and you should book on (02) 9572 7766. Shearer's is at 99 Norton Street, Leichhardt.

A fine romance

American author and screenwriter Nicholas Sparks will be guest author at the Sydney Morning Herald / Dymocks Literary Luncheon on Thursday. Sparks has 16 best-selling romantic fiction novels to his credit, six of which have been adapted to film (*Message in a Bottle*, *A Walk to Remember*, *The Notebook*, *Nights in Rodanthe*, *Dear John* and *The Last Song*) with more in the pipeline. His latest novel is *The Best of Me*, a tale of former teenage lovers forced to confront their past. The luncheon is at the Shangri La Hotel ballroom, 176 Cumberland Street, Sydney, at 12.30pm. Cost is \$85, which includes a two-course meal and drinks. To book, phone (02) 9449 4366.

Afterwords

The word "recto" is not Italian for bottom but refers to the right-hand page of an open book. "Verso", as you've no doubt guessed, is not the Italian word for poem but the left-hand page of an open book. And a blank verso is the other side of a "broadside" – a single sheet printed only on the recto side – not Italian for poetry that doesn't rhyme.

Terry Smyth

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