

Let's get under the covers

Want to read a book that gives you food for thought, or your reading group topics for discussion? Try these 10 titles, voted 2009's top 10 books to talk about

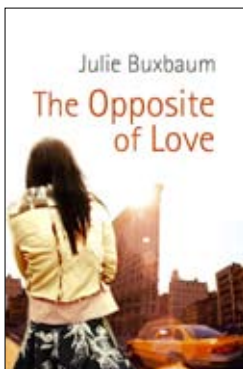


Imagine This Sade Adeniran

London-born, Nigeria-raised Sade Adeniran spent five years writing her debut novel before seeing it rejected by publisher after publisher. It has now won the African-region Commonwealth first novel prize, but to see it into print, Adeniran had to publish it herself.

If that took stamina, it is as nothing compared to what her young heroine Lola endures. One by one, as she tells the diary she begins aged nine, all the moorings of her life are hacked away: first her mother leaves her and her brother; then her father uproots the pair from London to Nigeria, farming each of the children out to relatives.

Lola has to get used to a life of raw subsistence in the village of Idogun, where her days begin with a six-mile trek to get water. This is not the last of the privations she undergoes, but the courage and spirit of Adeniran's heroine make the book as inspiring as it is upsetting.

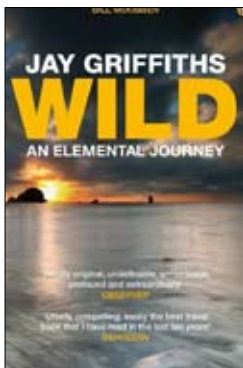


The Opposite of Love Julie Buxbaum

Emily Haxby is about to turn 30, with all the ingredients for happiness apparently in place – a lucrative job as a high-flying lawyer in Manhattan, and a devoted boyfriend warming up to propose. Then, for reasons she can't explain even to herself, she calls off the relationship. Meanwhile, her flashy job is starting to reveal its grubby edges, as she finds herself called on to defend something she hates and her boss's interest in her becomes distinctly claustrophobic.

Amid much snappy comedy, Emily is still coming to terms with the death of her mother when she was a teenager, and bracing herself to lose her beloved grandfather.

Fans of *Sex and the City* and Ally McBeal who enjoyed the zingers and the romance but felt a little short-changed on emotional substance may have met the book of their dreams in Harvard Law School graduate Buxbaum's debut novel.



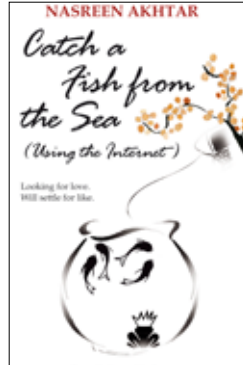
Wild Jay Griffiths

Rarely can a book have been better titled than Jay Griffiths's deeply personal account of her travels and her passions.

At the most immediate level, this is a spectacular account of its author's seven-year's journeying to the earth's last remaining "wild" places. Choosing five locations to represent the individual elements (in keeping with this very idiosyncratic approach, she adds a fifth element, ice, to the usual four) she travels to meet and live with the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian forest of South America (earth), the forests of West Papua (air), Arctic Canada (ice), Bajo, a small island off Sulawesi (water),

and the Australian outback (fire).

It's also a polemic against the "civilisation" that has set its face against nature's wildness in favour of an increasingly toxic order, written with a passion, energy and spontaneity that is wilder than any travel writing you've read in a good long while.



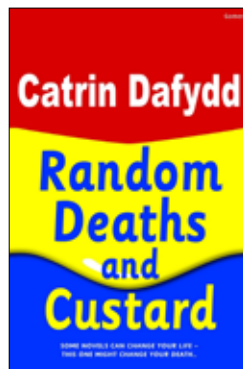
Catch a Fish from the Sea (Using the Internet)

Nasreen Akhtar

Nasreen Akhtar's memoir has been described as Bridget Jones-in-a-hijab, and it is a book offering plenty of romantic comedy. It's a heartfelt account of a young woman trying to balance her religion with her independent spirit and – of course – the restless quest for "The One"..

As a young woman, Akhtar rejected the traditions of arranged marriage, shuddering at the thought of being packaged off with any old "man with moustache". But as she advances into her 30s, and her parents become more impatient with her singleton status and lack of interest in a series of dreary potential matches, she decides to seek someone she might actually love.

Squirring embarrassment, soul-searching, hilarity and heartbreak ensue. Akhtar set up her own company to publish this book, and her own passion has found answering devotion from both Muslim and secular dreamers.



Random Deaths and Custard Catrin Dafydd

Catrin Dafydd's teenage heroine Sam is not exactly enjoying growing up in the South Wales valleys. "The Rhondda looked pretty tonight," she says at one point. "Cos you couldn't see it I suppose."

Sam works at a custard factory run by English speakers, where she uses her rather patchy command of the Welsh language to do some very wonky translation for the management. She spends much of the time she's not disappointing her bosses wondering at the near-misses, coincidences and "random deaths" that have shaped her life, and casting a naïve eye around her down-at-heel community.

Set over a few unexpectedly eventful weeks, playwright, poet and performer Dafydd has written a touching comedy about an awkward 18-year-old, and a warm portrait of small-town eccentricity. Written with an inventive blend of teenspeak and south Wales dialect, this is a novel as sweet as its title.



The Fantastic Book of Everybody's Secrets

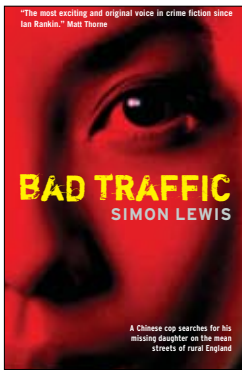
Sophie Hannah

Sophie Hannah has the rare distinction of being known both as a crime novelist and a poet. With her debut collection of short stories, *The Fantastic Book of Everybody's Secrets*, she adds another string to her bow, using the crime writer's knack of springing shocking plot twists on the unwary reader, and a poet's talent for compression.

These distinctly gothic, often bleakly funny stories reveal some very unsettling secrets. Opening story *The Octopus Nest*, a tale of the very unexpected about a young family's encounter with a stalker, won the Daphne Du Maurier prize – a very appropriate

imprimatur for its mix of morbid psychology and suspense.

Elsewhere, we find a former deputy director of a literature living off her daydreams working in a laundry and harbouring a mortifying secret involving Ian McEwan, a woman locked in a manipulative relationship with her much more successful friend, and numerous other disturbed and disturbing casualties of life.



Bad Traffic *Simon Lewis*

The world of the gangmasters and traffickers who prey on illegal Chinese workers in England them is the terrifying setting for Simon Lewis's first crime novel.

Drawing on four years spent working in China, Lewis has created one of detective fiction's odder couples in Inspector Jian – a hardbitten cop from the Siberian borders who comes to Britain in search of his missing daughter – and the much softer-centred Ding Ming, an intellectual doing grim labour as an illegal immigrant who has been separated by a gang-master from his wife. Thrown reluctantly together by their desperate search, this is a far cry from Morse and Lewis.

Inspector Jian goes on to uncover a brutal underworld – all too well grounded in reality – more ruthless than anything he has experienced in China. A very unusual thriller that has the equally unusual distinction for an English novel of endorsement by Elmore Leonard, who called it “a honey”.

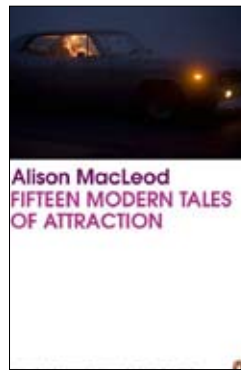


Season of the Witch *Natasha Mostert*

Gabriel Blackstone is a young man with a most uncomfortable talent – for seeing into other people's minds. In the past he used his gifts for the shadowy science of “remote viewing”. These days he's happier as a dashing computer hacker, making a very good living in industrial espionage, until his ex-lover reappears, begging him to help her find missing stepson, last seen with two deeply mysterious sisters living in a dusty old mansion in Chelsea.

With very mixed feelings he begins to investigate the pair, who claim to be witches and are working on reaching beyond the mind's limits by mixing alchemy, IT, and the lost “art of memory”. Gabriel beomes

increasingly obsessed by the women and their deeply spooky house. One of them, he realises, is a killer with paranormal capabilities to match his own. Only by taking her on in the labyrinthine chambers of her own mind can he solve the mystery and save his own life.



Fifteen Modern Tales of Attraction *Alison MacLeod*

There's a giddy range of things to think about in MacLeod's collection of short stories, which range from gleeful comedy to aching tragedy.

Desire in its many, sometimes disturbing, sometimes comic, forms fizzes through all of these stories, from a man who goes chasing after a pregnant woman in the midst of a riot at Ikea, to ECT patient Gloria who thrills to the presence of her anaesthetist, “Dr Numb” and a 19-year-old girl who finds herself erotically drawn to a man on his deathbed. There's also a 21st century version of the harrowing tale of Heloise and Abelard retold through email exchanges.

The collection is as formally inventive as it is original in its subject matter, but MacLeod's tenderness for her cast of eccentric characters keeps them immediately engaging.



Vicky Had One Eye Open *Darryl Samaraweera*

When Vicky slips into a coma, her family gather anxiously round at a London hospital. Family tensions wind themselves around the bedside where a son so devoted he is referred to only as “Vicky's eldest” keeps a tense vigil. As this drama plays out, Vicky herself is setting serenely out on a mental journey that takes her back to a dream version of the Sri Lanka she grew up in and the England of her adulthood.

For his first novel, Darryl Samaraweera has drawn on his own, similarly hyphenated background to portray a family confronted head-on with the tensions at its heart, and the lonely worlds inside even the closest families.

The ambitious, twin-track narrative produces a fascinating portrayal of the first and second generations of a Sri Lankan family in London. Told with tenderness and wit, Vicky Had One Eye Open is also a story that anyone who's ever had a family will recognise.

Get ready to cast your vote

Which book do you think is this year's Book To Talk About?

Whether you are in a reading group or not, you may feel that your reading needs a bit of a jolt. Perhaps you want some suggestions for new books to read, or new directions for a reading habit that has turned into a bit of a rut.

Help is at hand from the people behind World Book Day, who set up Spread the Word – a scheme to promote books that stir up debate. They asked publishers large and small to submit books they thought deserved to reach a wider readership – in particular those that would make good subjects for discussion.

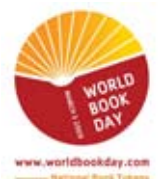
Out of all those submitted, 50 books – fiction and non-fiction, all of them offering something different, refreshing and stimulating – were selected by a specialist team. Details of all 50 are still available

on the Spread the Word website.

Readers left their comments about the books, voted for their favourite, and Spread the Word is now proud to announce the top 10. The very different titles encompass both fiction and non-fiction and all promise to be a fascinating read.

Now Spread the Word needs you to get involved. Voting reopens today and this is your opportunity to vote for your favourite book on the list, so that they can find The Book to Talk About for 2009. National Book Tokens, sponsors of World Book Day, are providing a prize of £100 worth of tokens for one lucky voter a week. The winner will be announced on World Book Day – 5 March.

To have your say, take part in a survey on reading habits and to register your vote, go to spread-the-word.org.uk/



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