



book | reviews

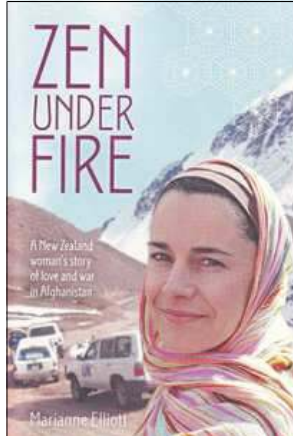
Zen Under Fire
By Marianne Elliott
Penguin \$34.99
Reviewed by Mandy Evans

"I am about to be left in charge of the office. I'm not sure I am ready for the responsibility, so I double-check with my boss. He reassures me. 'You'll be fine, Marianne. As long as no-one kills Amanullah Khan, you'll be fine.' By midday, Amanullah Khan is dead."

I really can't improve on this intro, used on the first page of *Zen Under Fire*.

Marianne Elliott is a New Zealand human rights lawyer. This book is her story of working for the United Nations in Afghanistan.

After a story opening like the one above, you'd think the rest of the book might be anticlimactic. Not a chance. I found Marianne's story compulsive reading. As well as a fascinating account of what it's like to be on the front lines of aid work physically, emotionally and spiritually, *Zen Under Fire* is a personal account of Marianne's journey to accept both herself and the world around her as imperfect. Under great stress, she loses her way for a while, questioning herself, her motivations, her relationship and the ethics of her work. Marianne learns to use yoga and meditation to find her way, gaining new insights that help her personally and professionally.



Zen Under Fire also explores the forms that human resilience takes, from carrying on regardless, to finding a place inside with a well of compassion deep enough to offer comfort to those who need it, without drowning under the sorrows they carry.

The subject matter is fascinating, but another reason I found this book such compulsive reading is Marianne's writing.

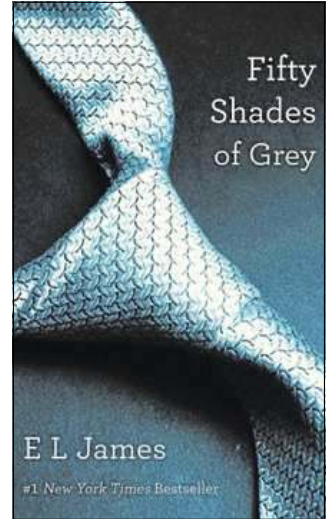
In theory, we all should know that underneath the layers of

cultural difference people really are the same, but in reality, it takes real skill as a writer to show a culture and conflict so far removed from our daily lives in a way that makes it matter to the average reader.

Marianne shows herself very truly on the page, but in such a way that readers will find themselves understanding her situation and then seeing beyond it to the wider story of Afghanistan, much as she did herself.

She explains a complex political situation in a way that is both interesting and easy to understand.

One of Marianne's objectives in writing this book was to fulfil a promise to a friend that she would help the rest of the world to see and understand the situation within Afghanistan. I believe she has succeeded. *Zen Under Fire* will be taking a place on my shelf of favourite books and is one I will be talking about to others.



When kinky romance hits the bestseller list, **Jenee Osterheldt** knows it must be time to take a peek.

Sexy or sick?

That's the big debate about the indie book *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E L James that's taken over the internet and suburban reading circles.

The book, the first in a trilogy, has been described as "mummy porn". It follows the story of Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey. She's a graduating college senior, an innocent. He's a young





billionaire humanitarian who enjoys domination. Sultry and taboo stuff for a bestseller, right? While erotic books have long been around, it's rare the genre sees mainstream success.

But the ladies are loving *Fifty*. Mum blogs and romantic novel sites alike are making it a book club favourite among women. It's hard to believe it started out as free: online fan fiction, largely inspired by *Twilight*, but definitely written for adults.

The dark romance became such a hit that the British author reworked it into three books, which were picked up by a small Australian-based publisher last year.

It's sold more than 250,000 copies and has become largely popular as an e-book, recently earning the top spot on the *New York Times* e-books bestseller list. The trilogy was acquired by Vintage Books. Talks of a movie are under way.

With so much hype in the webosphere, I finally decided to read this book. On my iPad. I think the power to download and read

it anonymously helped propel this book's online sales. No-one can see the cover on an e-reader.

But just what is it that has fuelled the word-of-mouth popularity? It's not the writing. E L James is no Erin Morgenstern, whose fantasy-powered novel, *The Night Circus*, drew flocks of readers last year.

Still, the allure of *Fifty Shades of Grey* cannot so simply be reduced to the steamy sex scenes. I've never read much of the genre, so as I tried to figure out what is driving this *Fifty* phenomenon, I decided it's equal parts fantasy and sheer curiosity.

With so many people talking about a dominant-submissive "love story" which started out as *Twilight* fan fiction, women want to know what's it all about. And I have to be honest – despite the clunky prose, James does cause one to turn the page. Just this week, I've sped through two of the three books.

I can't say it's because I'm suddenly a fan of S&M love stories.

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Frankly, it's not exclusively about that, which is likely why so many different women are reading it. And for the record, I don't agree with critics who claim this book is harmful to women.

Yes, there are unhealthy parts of this fictional relationship – creepy control issues and problems with trust and communication. Keyword: fictional.

I doubt women read this book and want to mimic the bad stuff anymore than they wanted to marry a vampire or run off with a wolf post-*Twilight*. It's a fun escape from reality, like so many popular books.

For me, reading the series is like catching an episode of *Keeping up With the Kardashians* during one of the E! marathons. You're both mortified and intrigued by the glamour and dysfunction. Sometimes, you can't stop looking. I keep reading because I now want to know what is going to happen to Anastasia as she becomes captivated by Christian's world and he learns to love.

And I am curious about Christian's life story. He was born to a crack whore, abused by her pimp, adopted by wealthy do-gooders and lost his virginity at 15 to a woman who made him her submissive.

I don't know if I hate or like the story. I'm not done yet. But what I can say with certainty is so far I find it 50 kinds of crazy.

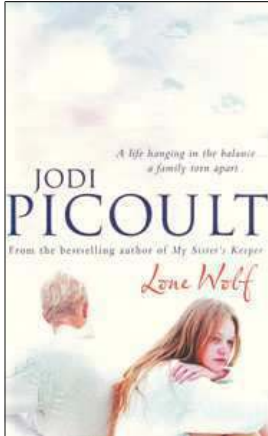
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Lone Wolf
by Jodi Picoult
Allen & Unwin \$39.99
Reviewed
by Mandy Evans



When is it time to say goodbye?

Famous wolf biologist Luke Warren lies in a coma with serious brain trauma after a car crash. His daughter Cara was also injured in the accident. His estranged son, Edward, flies home from Thailand, where he has been living for several years.

Doctors say Luke will never recover. Edward wants to terminate life support. Cara wants a miracle.

Lone Wolf explores the circumstances that have led these family members to this stage in their lives, what they mean to each other and how the relationship each sibling has with their father influences what they believe to be the right thing to do.

As with the other Jodi Picoult novels I've read, the story is told from multiple perspectives. In a parallel stream, readers learn of Luke's experiences living with a wild wolf pack and how he came to consider that pack his family; perhaps a closer family than his human one.

Picoult, as always, has researched this novel thoroughly and has come into the termination of life support dilemma from an interesting angle; two siblings with opposing views who have, through circumstance, what would morally appear to be an equal right to make the decision.

When Picoult began researching wolves to delve into Luke's character, she found a real-life "Luke" in the form of English wolf biologist Shaun Ellis, who lived with a wild wolf pack in the American Rockies and now works in a wildlife park where he has several packs of wolves in captivity.

This research has paid off; Luke's story gave me a fascinating glimpse into the dynamics and values of a wolf pack and the dedication of a biologist passionate about his chosen species. On the flip side is the fallout within his human family when they feel cast aside in favour of his four-legged "brothers".

While an underlying theme in the book seems to be choosing the right time to say goodbye, whether it's Luke, departing his pack to return to his family or stepping away from his family to go to his wolves, a wife who's finally had enough, a son who feels he must move to the other side of the world or a daughter who just can't let go, it left me with a sense of hope. That's because this is also a book about families, be it wolf families or human ones, and the bonds and ties a family has despite their differences.

Don't read this book without some time on your hands because you won't want to put it down. A box of tissues might come in handy too.

Trial by Ambush

Joe Karam

HarperCollins \$44.99

Reviewed by Anna Wallis

Trial by Ambush (The Prosecutions of David Bain) goes through the first court case that found 19-year-old David Bain guilty of killing his family, the appeal to the Privy Council and his retrial.

The book is an easy read if you like court room procedure.

Author Joe Karam, who has been a steadfast supporter of David Bain, was eventually vindicated for his stance when the retrial found his friend not guilty.

How the reader feels about what happened in the first trial, and the guilt or innocence of David Bain after reading this book may depend on how much you think he left out.

Most people know the case very well and the points of difference, particularly with regard to where blood was found. But we also know which side of the case Karam was on, so it is not a impartial analysis

of the case as presented. And it can be argued Karam's points are often more about the quality of the defence, in the first trial obliviously, than the strength of the prosecution.

The book goes over familiar territory – that it was father Robin Bain that killed the Bain family, not David.

It is true the successful prosecution of David Bain was most unusual. The author makes that point effectively – he says no sane person in the world of David Bain's age or situation has ever killed so many members of the family and then not taken their own life.

That is probably a little extreme and hard to prove but it does seem a bizarre case for someone so young to do such a thing.

I came out of this book still not convinced David Bain is an innocent man.

But I am convinced of something else. This book is probably the last time Joe Karam should write a book about the Bain case.

He's not the person we want to hear from.

The next volume should be from David Bain himself.