



books

Reviewed by Kerre Woodham



ZEN UNDER FIRE MARIANNE ELLIOTT

I'd always imagined people who sign up to work for the United Nations in trouble spots around the world to be supernatural beings - part saint; part fearless hero. But New Zealand lawyer Marianne Elliott's account of her time spent stationed in Afghanistan is the story of a very real woman trying to do her best - and often failing. She tells of the constraints of working for a monolithic organisation - the red tape, the safety regulations that put her under virtual house arrest and the politics involved in even the simplest request - and the kindness of the people of Afghanistan who accepted her into their community and may have helped her more than she ended up helping them. In fact, she wrote the book in part to move beyond media representations of Afghanistan as a country of alien beings, perpetually fighting one another and the rest of the world. And with this, she has succeeded. The locals Elliott meet come across as courteous, dignified and desperate for a better life for their children. And Elliott herself offers a searingly honest account of her own personal and professional struggle to do one of the toughest jobs in the world.

THE GODS OF GOTHAM LYNDSAY FAYE

If you've been watching Boardwalk Empire, you'll love this detective novel with a difference. Set in New York, in 1845, it's the story of two Irish brothers. One, Valentine, is a politician with criminal tendencies - or a criminal with political aspirations, depending on how you look at it. The other, Timothy, is a good boy, working hard and saving money so he can marry the girl of his dreams. But when a fire razes a vast section of Lower Manhattan and Timothy loses his life savings he gives in to his brother and agrees to become a member of the newly formed New York City police department. Within weeks, he has stumbled on a terrible secret. Child prostitutes are being murdered and he's terrified his brother is involved. Gritty, rich in character and evocative of the times, it's a great read.

DEATH ON DEMAND PAUL THOMAS

Those of you who missed Paul Thomas's fabulous detective novels when they were first published back in the nineties may have discovered maverick cop Tito Ihaka and his dour boss, Finbar McGrail when the Ihaka trilogy was published as a collection a couple of years ago. Now, Ihaka is back, fourteen years on from where the trilogy left off. He's been exiled to the Wairarapa after a contretemps with an obnoxious colleague and now he's back in Auckland. A prominent businessman, a man Ihaka has always suspected of murdering his wife, is dying and wants to see Ihaka. His confession sets in motion an investigation into a number of unexplained deaths and leads Ihaka to a gigolo, a hit man and a murdering cop. If you like detective novels, you'll love Paul Thomas.

THE DAY SHE CRADLED ME SACHA DE BAZIN

This is a highly readable debut novel of the life of one of New Zealand's most notorious criminals and the only woman ever to be hanged in this country. Minnie Dean was sentenced to death after being found guilty of murdering the babies and children she was being paid to care for and de Bazin attempts to look beyond the myth of the notorious murderess to find a human being. For the most part she is successful. Minnie comes across as a woman determined to survive no matter what hardship she suffers but had I been on the jury I would have probably found her guilty too. I found the most sympathetic character in the novel to be Reverend Lindsay, the vicar who risks alienating his parish by offering Minnie comfort in her last days. It's an extremely accomplished debut novel and a wonderful work of historical fiction. It's wonderfully written and a beautiful read. Highly recommended but carry tissues.