



BOOK MARKS

ANDREW DONALDSON

## Epic story good for the holidays

**IF YOU READ ONE BOOK THIS WEEK**  
*Conqueror*, by Conn Iggulden (Harper Collins), R180

HISTORICAL fiction, they say, is not what it used to be — and that's good news.

This, the fifth in Iggulden's series on the Mongols, tells the epic story of Kublai Khan's gradual dissolve from peaceful scholar to ruthless military commander at blitzkrieg pace.

It's like Shakespeare on crack, with magnificent set-piece battles, political intrigue and vicious treachery. Just the sort of thing needed for a holiday.

**THE ISSUE**

ALTHOUGH he went on to write a further six novels, two memoirs, several plays and screenplays, and dozens of short stories, Joseph Heller never produced anything as profound as his 1961 debut.

In later years, critics would remind him that he'd never written another book as good as *Catch-22*, and he'd inevitably ask: "Who has?"

There are two new books on Heller — *Just One Catch: The Passionate Life of Joseph Heller*, by Tracy Daugherty (Saint Martin's Press Inc), and *Yossarian Slept Here: When Joseph Heller was Dad and Life was a Catch-22*, by Erica Heller (Vintage).

The latter is a sometimes harrowing glimpse of dysfunctional family life — success brought its own problems and Heller, bluntly speaking, was a crap dad. However, it is the former that will be sought out by *Catch-22* fans as it details

## New book on Heller details genesis of profound *Catch-22*

the genesis of the book that had such a profound impact on the Vietnam-era America.

Daugherty documents how Heller, who flew 60 bombing missions during the Second World War, shunned the realism of contemporaries like Norman Mailer and James Jones to write a different "war novel" by combining black humour and dark horror to capture the true nature of mass slaughter. It's worth revisiting.

**CRASH COURSE**

THE Crime Writers' Association's Dagger awards were announced at the weekend.

Tom Franklin's *Crooked Letter*, *Crooked Letter* (Pan) took the CWA's Gold Dagger for best crime novel of the year; SJ Watson's *Before I Go To Sleep* (Doubleday) got the John Creasey New Blood Dagger for best debut; Steve Hamilton's *The Lock Artist* (Orion) got the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger for best thriller; and the People's Bestseller Dagger went to Peter James for *Dead Man's Grip* (Pan), the seventh in his DS Roy Grace police procedural series.

*Blade Runner* director Ridley Scott has reportedly snapped up the film rights to Watson's story of a woman whose memory is wiped clean every night and has to keep a journal to remind herself of her life, which becomes a record of her husband's deception.

**THE BOTTOM LINE**

"I suggested to my second wife, Pat, that had I not become a writer, I might have done well as a therapist. 'But you don't listen,' she said. 'Oh, that,' I said. 'I'd forgotten.'" — *Lucky Bruce: A Literary Memoir*, by Bruce Jay Friedman (Biblioasis)

# Laying it bare

In the book 'Bad Sex', the author explores the power relations between sexual partners, writes **Andrea Nagel**



INTIMATE CONNECTIONS: Author Leon De Kock's book 'Bad Sex' interrogates sexuality

Picture: SHELLEY CHRISTIANS

HOW to have it, how to avoid it or what to do when it happens to you — at first, the title of Leon de Kock's novel, *Bad Sex*, implies a self-help book. But, anyone who's met De Kock would know that, despite having tried, he doesn't do self-help.

Instead, his novel is an interrogation, through an intensely personal monologue (a life story related to the protagonist's shrink), of masculinity, sexuality and sex.

*Bad Sex* is the story of Samuel L Baptista and his inability to grasp the dynamics of the power relations between sexual partners: men and women, men and men.

The setting for the book is a therapist's room, where the adult Baptista attempts to digest his latest break-up.

"Born into reality, delivered unto 'therapy'," he muses. "Going backwards. Again. Because therapy was a kind of reverse-reel review of life."

From this point, Baptista launches into his earliest experiences of sex.

"The setting of a therapist's room is a technique to write Sammy's story in a kind of manic-monologue. The story that Sammy tells can't be contradicted because it is his understanding [or misunderstanding] of events," says De Kock.

He considers the client in therapy to be in a state of deep uncertainty.

"In therapy you enter the chamber of the second guess."

This admission makes the narrator — the client — unreliable, and makes for absorbing reading as he tries to figure himself out.

"Sammy peaks-overs, he lets things slip," says De Kock.

Sammy has grown up fighting — boxing to be exact. He tells his therapist that he has been taken sexual advantage of. Yet, in doing so he implicates himself and thus diminishes his victimisation. The reader also discovers that, despite his rough upbringing on the streets of Mayfair, where the worst thing you can be called is a *moffie*, he is attracted to men.

In therapy he becomes undone, his vision of himself unravels.

"In speaking, he comes into conflict with his position with women," says De Kock.

## He comes into conflict with his position with women

"He develops a complicity with his father [a man who hangs out in the *kroeg* (bar) and hides behind a cupboard when the husband of the woman he's been drunkenly flirting with comes to take his revenge] — and with other violent males."

As the novel progresses Baptista becomes more and more conflicted. He adopts positions on both sides of the gender war in the therapeutic space.

"There are various ways to read the title. The first understanding is 'operational bad sex', a sticky signifier. The 'yuck' factor is critical, it's one of the risks the novel takes. It's transgressively bad sex that is delicious.

"The title also refers to the bad gender. Which is the bad gender?"

The answer, according to De Kock, is that

the good and the bad gender are deeply implicated in each other and that the contest between them is very often one of guile.

"Men and women are engaged in a war, and both sides fight dirty," he says.

Yet Baptista [and implicitly De Kock] refrains from blaming, and in the end the character casts no aspersions because he finds his own story loaded with contradictions. He begins to recognise his complicity in the mess of his relationships.

"He implicates himself in the co-constitution of the fight," says De Kock. "Men are complicit in their own domestication and rebellion against that domestication. In their rebellion they replay the conditions of their childhoods."

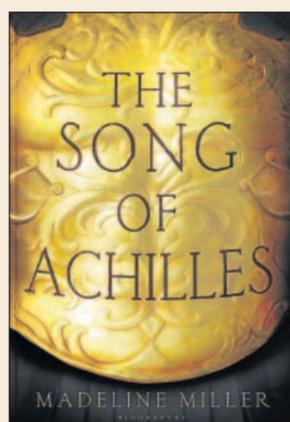
De Kock says writing is a subtle revenge: "Revenge against people who get you wrong and put you in a position of being misunderstood. In therapy you have only yourself as interlocutor. But revenge is also a clearing away, an opening up of occlusion."

In the end Baptista ditches therapy and decides to trust his judgment despite his contradictions and multitudinous personality.

"The subject position, as the novel progresses, becomes so fragmented, made up of so many experiences and voices. Sammy spills over gender lines. He upsets the stabilisation of sex and gender boundaries."

"There's a whole lot of Sammy in me and a whole lot of me in Sammy," says De Kock. "But I'm not telling which is which."

● *Bad Sex* is published by Umuzi, R190



## Q & A with historical novelist Madeline Miller

MADLINE Miller's first novel, *The Song of Achilles* is set in Homeric Greece. It's the story of Patroclus, an unloved Greek princeling from Homer's *Iliad* who meets Achilles, the son of the king and the sea goddess Thetis. An intense relationship develops between them. Their story becomes a tale of love and betrayal set against the backdrop of the Trojan War.

**Why did you write about Achilles and Patroclus?**

I've loved the story of *The Iliad* since I was a little girl, when my mother would read it to me at bed-

time. The character Achilles is a difficult person. He is impetuous and passionate, and hates hypocrisy, lies and political compromise. I'm fascinated by his relationship with Patroclus, a minor character in *The Iliad*.

**Why did you write this book?**

As a teacher (Miller teaches classics at an independent high school in the US), I believe in making these works accessible. I wanted people to enjoy the book without having to know anything about *The Iliad*.

**Why do these stories still ring**



AUTHOR: Madeline Miller  
Picture: SYDNEY SESHIBEDI

true to us?

Like all great works, they have acute psychological insight even though we're in a world of gods and

epic heroes. Homer was writing about corrupt commanders, about the grief of the conquered and the experience of women taken in slavery.

**What is the best book you've read this year?**

I reread Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and it was amazing all over again. The language is beautiful. Right now I am in the middle of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. It's blowing my mind. It's so funny. — Jackie May

● *The Song of Achilles* is published by Bloomsbury, R190