

Out of Africa

The Cloths Of Heaven, just published by Brighton's Myriad Editions, is one of those brilliant books that offers an easy, engaging and entertaining read in the first instance, only to worm its way deeper into your mind.

As soon as you've finished it, you're contemplating a second reading, aware there was so much more going on than you grasped first time round.

Set in West Africa in the early 1990s, the novel focuses on the crossing paths of ex-pat characters, including the adulterous High Commissioner and his equally cheating wife, newly arrived diplomat Daniel who is intent on seeing "the real Africa", long-time residents Isabel and Patrick, crass entrepreneur Bob Newpin and the mission

priest based in the bush.

Such characters suggest high comedy or scathing satire but Brighton-based author Sue Eckstein has managed to do something more special.

She has taken what could have been a stereotypical cast and, with compassion, humour and deft skill, made them human, much as a modern-day Graham Greene might. At the heart of her tale is a mystery:

who is the pale, bored, foreign woman silently cutting cloth in the town's fabric emporium? Daniel thinks he knows – but if he's right, how did she get there and why does she stay?

Unravelling this mystery, as well as enjoying the sub-plots scattered along the way – some of which need close attention to spot – is a pleasurable

pursuit and, happily, leads to a satisfying conclusion.

The one criticism I fear may be levelled at this novel would come from those who think a book set in Africa should be more about Africans and their concerns.

But, fabulous plot aside, this is about what it is like to be an ex-pat and how different people respond to that experience.

As a result, the African characters are largely peripheral. But it would be a shame if political correctness got in the way of this book's success. As an ex-VSO volunteer in Africa, the author deserves credit for spinning her own ex-pat experience into delightful fictional gold.



Anne Hill

● *The Cloths Of Heaven* by Sue Eckstein is published by Myriad Editions, priced £7.99. Sue Eckstein will be doing a talk at The Jubilee Library, Brighton, June 4, 6pm-8pm, tickets available at the Booklovers' Store, Jubilee Library or call 01273 294071.

book chart

FICTION

- 1 The Book Thief by Markus Zusak
- 2 The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga
- 3 The Secret Scripture by Sebastian Barry
- 4 The Other Hand by Chris Cleave
- 5 The Damned Utd by David Peace
- 6 Let The Right One In by John Ajvide Lindqvist
- 7 When Will There Be Good News? by Kate Atkinson
- 8 Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons
- 9 The Cloths On Their Backs by Linda Grant
- 10 God's Own Country by Ross Raisin

NON FICTION

- 1 The Suspicions Of Mr Whicher by Kate Summerscale
- 2 God Is Not Great by Christopher Hitchens
- 3 A Lion Called Christian by Anthony Bourke and John Rendall
- 4 Ghosts Of Spain by Giles Tremlett
- 5 Dreams From My Father by Barack Obama
- 6 Adventures On The High Teas by Stuart Maconie
- 7 Somewhere Towards The End by Diana Athill
- 8 Jade: Fighting To The End by Jade Goody
- 9 McMafia by Misha Glenny
- 10 Renegade by Mark E Smith

Chart supplied by **BORDERS**, in Brighton

24 Saturday, April 25, 2009

book reviews

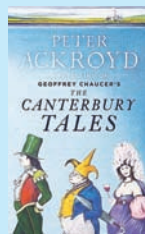


Love and Other Secrets by Sarah Challis (Headline, £17.99)

Jane and her daughter, Florence, couldn't be more different. While kind, gentle Jane was content being a homemaker and mother, ambitious Florence wants it all. And, she's never forgiven her mum for the circumstances of her birth. Florence was the illegitimate child of a 1960s teenager, unwanted, she thought.

But Florence had got it all wrong, and when she becomes a mum too it's Jane she turns to. While thrilled to finally prove herself to her daughter, the arrival of a grandson sees painful memories flooding back for Jane. This is chick-lit for the mature lady at its best. Sarah Challis writes sensitively and observes the differences and similarities between the generations superbly. An engrossing and enjoyable read.

Abigail Jackson



The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, retold by Peter Ackroyd (Penguin Classics, £25)

Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, is one of England's most important literary works. Like many readers, I struggled with the 14th-century, medieval prose and spelling, so was looking forward to reading Peter Ackroyd's modern re-telling. The acclaimed writer and historian has not disappointed.

He has captured all the passion of medieval London without dumbing down the original masterpiece. The courtly romance of the Knight's Tale, the bawdy Miller's Tale and Wife Of Bath's Prologue and the shockingly anti-Semitic tale told by the Prioress are all given a fresh, modern feel.

Laura Wurzal

● ● ● PICKS OF THE WEEK