



that's how good Yanagihara is. Her novel, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, is intense and at times harrowing, but it's so worth it. Because this is a book that reminds you why you read.

SARAH LANG

ORPHAN #8
KIM VAN ALKEMADE
(HARPERCOLLINS, \$24.99)

First-time author Kim van Alkemade was researching her family history when she came across grotesque medical experiments conducted on Jewish orphans in 1920s New York. Orphan number eight is Rachel Rabinowitz, a four-year-old fictional character disfigured by the experiments. Spring forward to 1954 and Rachel is now a nurse, but her past collides with her present when she is assigned to care for the dying doctor who caused her so much pain and suffering as a child. As she teeters between forgiveness and revenge, it's hard not to wonder how you'd react in Rabinowitz's shoes. Van Alkemade offers glimpses into her early and later life and, apart from a lesbian story arc that doesn't quite flow, this is a memorable debut.

SHARON STEPHENSON

THE BOOK OF SPECULATION
ERIKA SWYLER
(ALLEN & UNWIN, \$32.99)

Simon Watson is plunged into murky waters when he's sent an old carnival logbook, tangled like seaweed with the history of his family. He's drawn to unravel the strands of the past, and chapters swim back and forth in time from the 1780s travelling carnival with mute Amos and the mermaid, Evangeline, to the present day, when Simon's sister returns home unexpectedly and he realises a curse is to be revisited upon the family. Water is the damp, dark heart of the book – eroding relationships, and carving new paths, destructive and nurturing in the space of the same heartbeat. You almost hold your breath as, in the past, Amos is warned of his doom, while, in the present, Simon struggles to pull the remnants of his family from the water's claustrophobic grasp before it's too late. JULIE COOK

THE BOY AT THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN
JOHN BOYNE
(RANDOM HOUSE, \$21)

I was halfway through this novel before I twigged that its target audience was primarily young adults. But I kept reading to see how things would turn out for

Jewish boy Anshel and his friend Pierrot. Orphaned at seven, Pierrot moves from Paris to live with his aunt, who keeps house at Hitler's holiday home at the top of a mountain. Like John Boyne's most famous book, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, this is a myth-like morality tale that rests on the bond between friends. Sometimes it points out what's already obvious – at least to adults – but it's a quick, engrossing read about whether you can resist the ideas of those who surround you.

MICHAEL HENRY

ALONE ON THE WALL
ALEX HONNOLD WITH DAVID ROBERTS
(MACMILLAN, \$34.99)

"There is no adrenalin rush. If I get an adrenalin rush, it means that something has gone horribly wrong," reckons Alex Honnold, perhaps the greatest free solo climber ever. This book reads like pure madness to me, heading hundreds of metres up vertical rock faces, with tiny cracks for finger-holds – and no rope. It's good though, with the 30-year-old American and his co-writer/climber David Roberts exploring motivation, fear, love and reward, as well as the ascent of a series of ridiculous cliffs. "Danger scares me," Honnold admits.

"But... if I have a certain gift, it's the ability to keep myself together in places that allow no room for error." He still has another five years at the top of his game, he thinks. Let's hope he's right.

JIM ROBINSON

M TRAIN
PATTI SMITH (ALLEN & UNWIN, \$36.99)

Smith's poems and recordings often contain imagined conversations between her and the famously deceased: popes, artists, entertainers and her late husband, Fred "Sonic" Smith. In this memoir, which highlights just what an isolate she is, such dialogue is sprinkled throughout the book. It amounts, by my count, to more than the words spoken by Smith to the living. Inanimate objects such as novels, chairs, ephemera from family or celebrities and black-and-white photographs stir her thoughts, alongside visits to Mexico, Iceland and French Guinea. Coffee and television detective series, both English and American, are her daily fixes. This book is hard to put down, not because it progresses towards a great climax – why would a book by Smith have such a structure? – but because one wants to further discover what captivates or troubles her. A mesmerising read.

MATT ELLIOTT