



Books Editor
SHARON STEPHENSON

On the shelf

Looking for a new read? Sharon shares her thoughts on recent releases.



THE MADISON GAP

by Patricia Donovan (Mary Egan Publishing, RRP \$29.95)

One in 25. That's how many Americans are estimated to be sociopaths. This chilling statistic forms the basis of Kiwi writer Patricia Donovan's second novel, which opens a skylight on family dynamics, bullying and sociopathic behaviour.

It's 2017 and Lexi Madison is living in the Sydney suburb of Glebe. Life is good: Lexi is an art director at a city advertising firm and lives in a nice house which, one day, her beloved architect husband Conor will make even nicer.

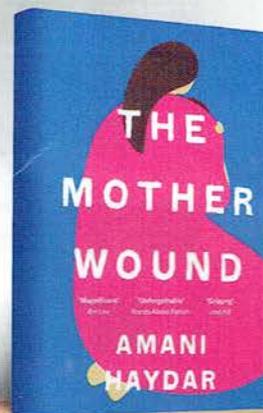
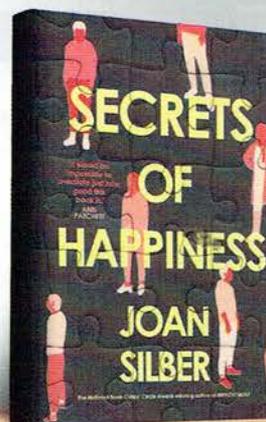
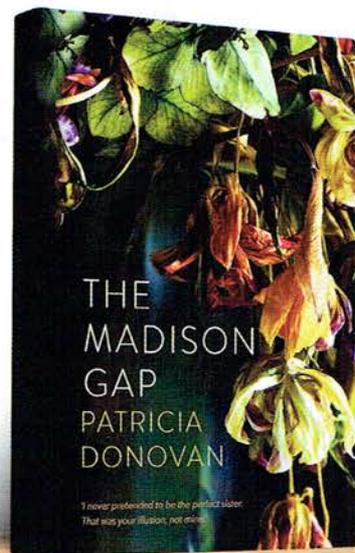
You just know the good times can't last, and when Lexi's older sister Chrissy comes to stay, things start to rapidly unspool. Chrissy is more attractive, glamorous and worldly than her younger sister, a fact she continually highlights.

Lexi, on the other hand, imagines having her sister stay will be all happy families, and she'll get to know the sibling who left home when she was a child. But then Chrissy starts to ingratiate herself with Conor, and Lexi realises that her dreams of a tight familial unit are not to be.

Before you can say, "Blimey, that took an unexpectedly dark turn", their long lost brother Robbie turns up. Family secrets are revealed, but when Chrissy points the finger at Robbie – and he does the same to her – it's hard to know who to believe. Poor Lexi is the literal meat in this nasty family sandwich, and before long it's affecting her job, her home and her marriage. That's hard enough, but then something *really bad* happens – which might make you thankful for your own family, because no matter how bad they are, they surely can't be worse than this lot.

Patricia is a skilled writer who meticulously unpicks what it means to be a family. Just because you share the same DNA doesn't mean you have the same values or view of the world. Or that one of you can turn out to be a sociopath and the other a saint.

A brilliant read with sharp characters, an elegantly constructed narrative and a genuinely disturbing outcome. This has Nicole Kidman mini-series written all over it.



SECRETS OF HAPPINESS

by Joan Silber (Allen & Unwin, RRP \$32.99)

Google the title of this novel and you'll end up with a million self-help books about finding happiness, which does this wickedly funny and intelligent novel a disservice. Joan, now in her seventies, is in fine form with this fictional tale of a man who discovers his father has another wife and children. The interlocking family stories are told layer by delicious layer. Make room on your bookshelf for this one.



THE MOTHER WOUND

by Amani Haydar (MacMillan, RRP \$39.99)

Brace yourself people, this Australian-based memoir about race and violence isn't an easy read. Muslim lawyer/author Amani is five months pregnant when her father kills her mother. That act of savage domestic violence shapes Amani's life forever, as well as her ability to be a mother. There's also the familial and cultural context of her mother's life and death to deal with. A brilliant but harrowing treatise on female resilience.