



Time enough to tackle the timeless

Peter Craven suggests some classics to catch up with this Christmas

HOMER'S *The Odyssey* is the supreme holiday book because it is concerned with a journey, the wanderings of Odysseus, and it is full of siren calls and witchy seductresses. All of this seen through the eyes of the myriad-minded man of wiles who served as James Joyce's model for that cultured all-round man, Leopold Bloom, in *Ulysses*. *The Odyssey* does not have the piercing, tragic intensity of Homer's great war story *The Iliad* (which may overshadow it as a work of art) but it is the most spacious and moody of all yarn-spinning romances.

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the tale of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, is one of the saddest and most sparkling of all the stories that created Britain and, at the same time, haunted Western civilisation through its long dream of chivalry and the aftermath.

This is at one level a collection of ripping yarns in the oldest prose that remains current to us but in the last act, where Lancelot's and Guinevere's adultery destroys the Round Table and with it their beloved Arthur, you hear the absolute timbre of tragedy in collision with the consolations of the age of faith.

Shakespeare's history plays are apprentice work by a dramatist of genius and their sheer unfamiliar confusion has its own fascination though they culminate in *Richard III* with its staggering portrait of the murderous goblin usurper.

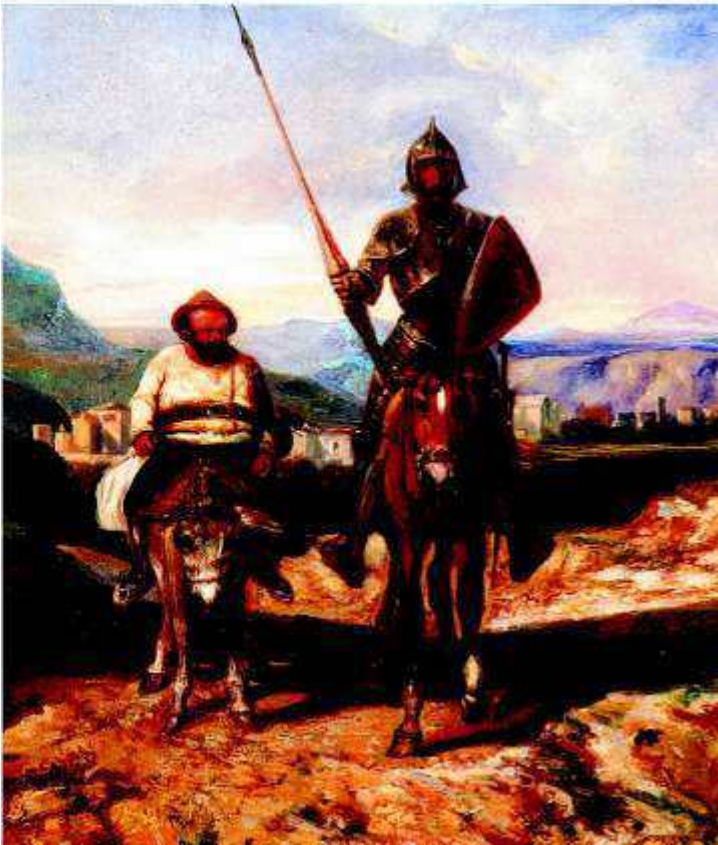
The histories present Shakespeare at his most crypto-novelistic, which is why they can be dipped into between swims and drinks. *Richard II* is, apart from *Hamlet*, his supreme

portrait of the suffering soul as strutting actor but it's in the two parts of *Henry IV*, the story of the cold-hearted party boy Hal and the fat rogue Falstaff, that Shakespeare shows himself to be one of the supreme masters of naturalism.

Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is the first novel and therefore perhaps the greatest, measurelessly sad and hilarious by turns. The gentle mad knight fighting tragic battles in his lofty imagination, while his squire Sancho, sane as dirt, tries to look after him. It's great in any translation.

If you want a Victorian novel completely shorn of sentiment then William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, with its marvellous anti-heroine Becky Sharp, is impossible to go past. Extraordinarily swift for all its length. Speaking of length, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* makes the world seem like a holiday whenever you read it but it's ideally suited to some stretch of time when you have nothing else to do but follow the infinite variety of things that befall Pierre and Andre and Natasha in the midst of the tumult of Russia during the Napoleonic Wars. This is the dazzling prototype of the airport novel as a work of art. No one else has ever come within cooee of the way it transfigures the popular without traducing the reality of the world.

Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is one of the greatest thrillers and it happens to be written by the man who invented modern American prose. This is a hidden treasure of a book, as close as Twain ever came to William Faulkner. A crime story, full of crazy misanthropic humour, that also has a strange and sweeping poignancy.



Don Quixote, with Sancho by his side searches for another windmill to fight

It's easy to say that Robert Musil's Viennese epic *The Man Without Qualities* doesn't have the concentration Joyce achieved in *Ulysses* or the vast cathedral-like proportion of Proust. What he does have is an endless sense of the way ideas and sex, gossip and grandiosity can collide with each other. This is the absolutely sophisticated modernist novel.

To end with two Australians and a trans-Tasman cousin. First, Katherine Mansfield's *Stories*. This frail New Zealander was one of the greatest short story writers. Stories such as *The Garden Party* are the high watermark of what short fiction can achieve. If you're pressed for time in the festive rush, Mansfield, summoning up a world in a word or two, will take your breath away.

The Tree of Man is Patrick White's most comprehensive image of Australian life. It's a saga, moving epically through time, of two country people, Stan and Amy Parker, who are represented through the formal intensity of White's prose as figures of monumental

dignity for all their ordinariness and frailty. This is the epic poetry of egalitarianism, as central to the national mythology as Barry Humphries, though with an opposite emphasis. It doesn't make White a greater writer that we recognise the smell of the gum trees and the fall of the light from his work but it does give us an inwardness with his genius. This is one of the supremely sensuous masterpieces in any medium this country has produced. So, too, is Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*, a dazzling novel of a girl's childhood (one of the best ever written) which transposes harbourside Sydney to Annapolis and Maryland. It's the story of a garrulously bombastic father burbling with love, a shrewd and brilliant girl and her stormy horror story of a stepmother. Miegunyah Press has just released a new edition (\$24.95), with an introduction by Stead's most famous fan, Jonathan Franzen.

Peter Craven's mother read Don Quixote to him in utero.