

Off the Shelf —

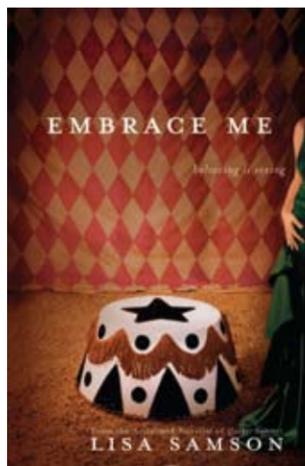
The Woman Alive Book Club

Off My Shelf

Embrace Me

Lisa Samson (Nelson, ISBN 9781595542106, £9.99)

How can I describe this novel? I'm struggling; it's so unusual. The publisher's promotional copy says, "When a 'lizard woman', a self-mutilating preacher, a tattooed monk, and a sleazy lobbyist find themselves in the same North Carolina town one winter, their lives are edging precariously close to disaster... and improbably close to grace." Make you



he can only feel when he burns himself with cigarettes. In this state, he turns to a Catholic priest, making his confession through letters (yes, unusual for a Protestant preacher, but as I said this is no ordinary novel).

Then in the next chapter we jump forward to 2008 and the point of view of Valentine, a deeply scarred woman who appears as a lizard creature in a circus freak show. She is wounded on the outside and on the in; she holds her bitterness

want to rush out and buy it? No, me neither. But I had an advance copy that didn't name this lizard woman, and I've enjoyed Lisa Samson's works in the past. So I dived in. And I read and pondered, and mused and was moved. I didn't want it to end.

Lisa Samson must be one of the most skilled of writers. She weaves the stories of several individuals throughout this novel, jumping back and forth in time in a way that doesn't jar. She is a poster girl of the writing adage, "Show, don't tell," as she leads the reader into a gentle exploration of the lives and emotions of the characters.

Nor does Lisa give cookie-cutter solutions or resolutions; her writing doesn't come across as in-your-face-black-and-white, but as orthodox shades of grey. She explores issues of Protestant versus Catholic beliefs (in a gracious way), community, social justice, lies and falsehood and confession, forgiveness and freedom. All without the reader really realising that she's delving so deeply into these subjects.

The book opens from the point of view of Drew in 2002, a megachurch preacher who has holed himself away in a rundown motel in Ocean City, Maryland. He has run from the lies of his life, and is so numb that

tightly, only showing her true self to a special few, including Lella, the sweet-spirited woman with no arms or legs.

How the author manages to move across the years as she tells the stories of Drew, Valentine and several others is gripping and profound. It's a novel that made me think about what it means to extend and receive grace and forgiveness; how it would be to live in a Christian community; how we measure success versus how God does; and how we ultimately find joy.

I didn't anticipate the ending, but that made the book all the more intriguing and thought-provoking. Definitely one not to miss.

Free, but with a price

Copies of *Embrace Me* will be on their way to those whose letters we have printed this month. For your chance to win next month's book, *The Radical Disciple* by John Stott, simply write a short review of a book you are reading. Send your letters to Amy at *Woman Alive* at the address on page 3, e-mail them to womanalive@cpo.org.uk, or post your review on the Facebook group: Woman Alive Book Club.



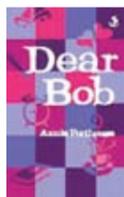
Hosted by Amy Boucher Pye

Off Your Shelf

Dear Bob

Annie Porthouse (Scripture Union, 2003)

It's Jude's first year at university and she's looking for a man. She writes letters/a diary to "Bob", the unknown man she is looking for.



Jude was brought up in a Christian home, but is not sure if she is a Cn (Christian) or even if she believes in God any more, but she joins the Bymouth Uni revival plan – BURP – when she falls in love with Reuben. Unfortunately, he is not interested in her.

It's a long time since I've been a student/teenager, but I loved this book. It was funny, annoying, moving – I didn't even mind Jude's bad spelling – she loves vollervonts! But at the end there were tears in my eyes.

Chris Vickery, Facebook Woman Alive Book Club group

Frida: Chosen to Die, Destined to Live

Frida Gashumba (Sovereign World, 2007)

Frida is an inspirational book about a Rwandan girl who lost *everything* but retained her dignity. She was so badly treated, but has come through and has now not only found faith in Christ, but has also been able to forgive. We have so much blessing and comparatively so little suffering in the West. It pulls us up short, when someone with so little can overcome against all odds. Frida shines out radiantly from this book.



Hope Price, by e-mail

*Amy adds: *This book is one that I'm keen to read; it's even made it from the stacks of books in my study to the side of my bed!*

How to Be a Christian in a Brave New World

Joni Eareckson Tada and Nigel M De S Cameron (Zondervan, 2006)

This book deals with a subject often neglected by the churches; how should Christians respond to new developments in biotechnology, such as IVF, the destruction of unwanted embryos, cloning, euthanasia and the detection of abnormality in foetuses leading to abortion. Aldous Huxley's "brave new world" of science fiction is rapidly becoming scientific fact.



Today, we hear few or no sermons preached on the subject of the new technologies. Many Christians have not given the matter any thought, while others have given active support to artificial reproductive technologies such as IVF, often with little consideration. An embryo that has been conceived in a womb has a soul; so, surely, does an embryo conceived in a Petri dish, yet many thousands of unwanted embryos are destroyed.

With the new technologies, we are fast moving towards a "survival of the fittest" situation; the authors remind us that in Nazi Germany many physically and mentally handicapped people were simply rounded up, taken away and executed. It seems the human race has not learned from the past and may therefore be doomed to repeat it.

Dr Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, actually advocates the killing of some "unwanted" people. In his view, babies born with severe handicaps are "pre-persons", while elderly people with dementia are "post-persons". The authors of this book argue powerfully that every human life is precious to God and should not be ended by human hands.

I find their arguments far more persuasive than those of Paul Badham, whose *Is There a Christian Case for Assisted Dying?* I've also read recently. An ordained priest of the Church of England, Badham's argument is that "choice" around voluntary euthanasia is paramount. He is extraordinarily naïve in claiming that voluntary euthanasia would not lead, as many both within and outside the Christian faith fear, to euthanasia that is anything but voluntary.

How to Be a Christian in a Brave New World is a depressing and alarming book in many ways, yet one which very much needs to be read by Christians. At the end, an appendix gives suggestions for further reading, useful websites, addresses of various organisations and information on academic courses.

Katherine Davies, Cumbria

*Amy adds: *Thank you, Katherine, for this thoughtful review. Surely issues we as Christians need to be concerned about.*

Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert

Rowan Williams (Lion, 2004)

I was very surprised by this book, for I expected it to be academic and hard to read, but it wasn't. It is beautifully written, explaining how 'desert' experiences when we feel alone can help us mature as Christians. I found it refreshingly easy to read and didn't want to put it down. I have learnt from it – when I next have a 'dry' period, I'll know not to get anxious. Definitely a book that has touched my life.



Karen Hall, Facebook Woman Alive Book Club group

A Life Less Lost: My Son's Decision, But Will He Choose Life?

KB Walker (Richard Netherwood Ltd, 2009)

This book recounts the author's events in her life, which have compelled her to lean heavily on her Saviour. It is an honest reflection of her life as an outsider (she moved here from America), a student then teacher, a wife and, most of all, a mother.

As a mother, she faced the ultimate threat of the possible loss of her eldest child to cancer. The book charts the journey through the hospital visits, misdiagnoses, endless appointments and the stress of facing an unknown future. Through it all, she has a hope which helps her to keep fighting, a hope which helps her to trust in the inner voice, to stay calm yet firm with the medical profession and to pass on her faith and optimism to her son.

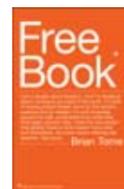
I can recommend this book to anyone who thinks life's tough at the moment – you will get encouragement from turning the pages! It is excellently written, thoughtful and challenging.

Jean Worswick, by e-mail

Free Book

Brian Tome (Thomas Nelson, 2009)

The first thing to know about this book is that it is not free! It is about freedom and how to obtain it.



The chapter on forgiveness is excellent. Stop rehearsing what people have done to you – forgive them and pray for them – you know it makes sense. Spiritual abuse was touched upon, which I am sure many have experienced. We also have chapters on living out our freedom in God, in personal relationships, in community, in submission to authority (yes, there is freedom in this).

On the whole, an excellent book. Forget the "what ifs" and live!

Margaret Vaughan, Facebook Woman Alive Book Club group

Off Her Shelf

Anne Rogers

Anne Rogers is Sales & Marketing Manager for the Baker Publishing Group (UK). She's been working in publishing for over 20 years, but still likes reading.



Any books in your beach bag?

I'm not a beach person, but on holiday I like books that are complex, but not taxing. I get bored with family sagas and I dislike chick-lit. I prefer reading mysteries/suspense or historical novels and, as I'm a keen photographer, photography books. I also read quite a few children's books, old and new. Revell and Bethany House [part of Baker Publishing Group] publish quite a few historical and suspense titles, so these have been my re-introduction to Christian fiction beyond Francine Rivers. Though neither suspense or historical, I particularly enjoyed *At the Scent of Water* by Linda Nichols, the story of a couple torn apart when their daughter drowns. I've been positively surprised by the quality of much of today's Christian fiction. It's light years ahead of books published a decade ago.

When travelling for work I limit what I take, but I often tuck a Brother Cadfael story into my bag. I love them and probably re-read the whole series every year.

You collect children's books from the 40s and 50s. Why? Which ones?

I think I never properly grew out of my pony books phase! Although she hated her books being called pony books, I've been collecting first or early edition books by Monica Edwards for most of my adult life. My favourite is *Storm Ahead*, published in the 50s but based on the real-life loss of the Rye lifeboat in 1928. I collect other children's books based purely on whether I like the story or the illustrations.

I understand that you enjoy Adrian Plass's writing. Why?

I like the way that he can make you think while still being funny and entertaining. His books often make me laugh aloud.

An all-time favourite novel/book?

The Secret Garden and *A Christmas Carol*. Both are wonderful on many levels.