



# Book club

FIVE OF OUR MOST ACCLAIMED WRITERS TELL US A S

ABOUT THE BOOKS THAT CHANGED THEIR LIVES

## Sarah-Kate Lynch

*Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut was, literally, the book that changed my life, when a would-be employer spotted it just as I knocked the final nail into the coffin of a disastrous job interview.

I'd applied to be a sub-editor at a women's magazine because it had nude male centrefolds but, under cross-examination, it was revealed that (a) I did not know what a sub-editor was and (b) the magazine no longer had nude male centrefolds.

As I stood to leave the room, my soon-to-be boss saw *Slaughterhouse Five* in my bag, declared himself a huge Vonnegut fan and a spirited conversation ensued.

Actually, my befuddled night-owl flatmate had given it to me on my way out the door that morning, thinking it was a piece of toast. I'd only read 20 pages of it but I didn't mention that, so the job was mine.

However, someone else's writing had touched me years before and it's thanks to her I was even in that office in the first place.

Erma Bombeck was an Ohio housewife who quickly rose to fame and fortune with her 1970s American newspaper columns about being a wife and mother.

Her book, *If Life Is A Bowl Of Cherries What Am I Doing In The Pits?*, was the first funny grown-up book I ever read.

What a 16-year-old St Mary's girl had in common with Erma and her suburban domestics is hard to imagine but in reading her essays it occurred to me, for the first time, that an ordinary person – an ordinary she-person – could write about ordinary things in a way that made people laugh.

And these things might one day even end up in a book.

Of course, now that a 4-year-old can trip over a skateboard lying in the hallway and accidentally blog something with their nose on Grandma's iPad that a million people will eventually see, it's hard to believe that how to get your thoughts out into the universe was once a mystery.

But it was. I loved writing as a child but never dreamed that someone like me could end up doing

it for a job. Instead, I was attempting to pass U.E. physics so I could end up doing something I hated, like a normal person.

Then along came Erma.

Unlike her, I did not have a husband or kids (I wasn't that sort of a St Mary's girl) or a household – but I was ordinary.

I'm not saying I thought at that tender age if she could do it, I could do it. Show me a 16-year-old with that sort of foresight and confidence and I'll show you – oh, hang on, Lorde.

Yes, well, anyway, most of us assume the stars are beyond us so don't bother reaching for them.

But Erma opened my mind to the tiniest glimmer of possibility that if I only got 51 per cent for physics and could not get into vet school, there might be something else I could aim for.

And so I went to journalism school instead and bore in mind over the years that if I stuck with what I was doing and got on with my life, even if it wasn't that exciting, I might one day find a way to write about ordinary things in a way that would make people laugh. And these things might one day even end up in a book.

SARAH-KATE LYNCH TALKS ABOUT HER NEW BOOK, *SCREW YOU DOLORES: A WICKED APPROACH TO HAPPINESS*, WITH PETRA BAGUST AT THE AUCKLAND WRITERS FESTIVAL, TOMORROW AT 2.30PM, AOTEA CENTRE.

## Paul Cleave

There are a few books that changed my life, most of them fiction, but it's actually a non-fiction book that has had the biggest influence on me. Thinking back, it's this book that actually changed the kind of writer I wanted to be and, if I hadn't found it one night when Christmas shopping 15 years ago, then right now I'd be on a very different path in life.

It's funny how one random moment can change everything – if I hadn't gone to that mall, that bookshop on that day, maybe I'd never have found it. I'd still probably be unpublished, working away at pretty



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