A weekly look over the shoulders of our scholar-reviewers

Alan Gilmore is superintendent, Mt John Observatory, University of Canterbury, New Zealand. "I have just finished Simon Singh's Big Bang (HarperCollins, 2005), having enjoyed The Code Book (HarperCollins, 2000) and Trick or Treatment? (TransWorld, 2009), a demolition of the alternative medicine nostrum written with Edzard Ernst. Big Bang covers cosmology, from the Greek philosophers to the Wilkinson-MAP satellite, all in the crafty style of Bill Bryson's A Short History of Nearly Everything. Singh provides many fascinating biographical details of the scientists involved."

Isobel Grundy is professor emeritus, department of English, University of Alberta, and project co-investigator of the online Cambridge University Press journal Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present. "Reading William McCarthy's Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) so as to update Orlando's Barbauld entry, I was instantly hooked. She campaigned so much we take for granted: abolition of slavery, civil rights for minority religions, teaching English in schools. Reformers worshipped her, reactionaries hated her. A biography to relish and remember."

June Purvis is professor of women's and gender history, University of Portsmouth. "I am reading Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women by Mania Lazerig (Princeton University Press, 2008). A highly readable, moving book, based on the experiences of Muslim women, it is the most lucid argument I know for doing away with the veil."

Nigel Rodenhurst, an Arts and Humanities Research Council studentship-funded doctoral candidate at Aberystwyth University, is reading Violence by Slavoj Žižek (Profile, 2009). "Looking at different types of violence in society, Žižek is as engaging, digressional and confrontational as ever. He manages to pack in a reference to a different philosopher or event on almost every page, from Homer to Badiou, from the Holocaust to a masturbatation, while continuing to be illuminating and serious."

Richard Rose, director of the Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Aberdeen, is reading By Force of Thought (MIT Press, 2007), by János Kornai. "After escaping the Holocaust, although he was a German Jew in wartime Budapest, and spending ten years as a party warrior for Marxism, Kornai concluded that he would never write anything unless he thought it out from first principles that could be applied to real-world situations, like the pathologies of the planned economy. The book explains why he became a Harvard professor of economics because he had never taken a degree in economics."