

THIS MONTH'S TOP READS

fiction feast

THE FALL

Claire McGowan, *Headline*, £12.99

Charlotte is living the dream. She has a swanky flat in north London, a glamorous career in PR and, best of all, is about to walk up the aisle in a fairy-tale wedding to wealthy banker Dan.

Keisha's life couldn't be more different — tiptoeing around her violent boyfriend Chris, struggling to make ends meet and, worst of all, trying to prove she's a suitable mother to her daughter Ruby, who has been taken into care after Chris hurt her.

In a nightclub one evening, the two women's lives collide

— and are ripped to pieces. Dan has been hiding the pressure he's been under at work, but his frustrations boil over in an altercation with the club's owner. When the man is later found stabbed to death, Dan is arrested for his murder.

Charlotte is convinced Dan is innocent, but as whispers of racism and bullying intensify,



her friends and colleagues abandon her — and Dan refuses to even see her. Keisha, meanwhile, has suspicions of her own after she finds Chris' blood-soaked shoes in their flat.

She summons the courage to knock on Charlotte's door, intending to warn her, and the two form an unlikely bond. But will their fragile friendship survive when the truth finally comes out in this riveting crime debut? (LT)

THE WIFE WHO RAN AWAY

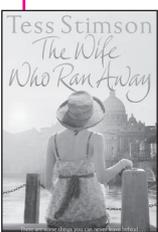
Tess Stimson, *PanMacmillan*, £6.99

When Kate Forrest is late for a meeting it's the final straw. She hails a taxi, but instead of going to the office, she heads for the airport. She buys herself a ticket to Rome and jets off with only the clothes on her back — abandoning her husband, two children, demanding mother and high-powered job. With her 40th birthday approaching and feeling like she is invisible, she's just had enough.

In the glorious Italian sunshine her guilt quickly fades and she rediscovers herself in the arms of a young, attentive lover — no longer wondering when she will return home, but if. It is only when tragedy strikes that she must fly home to be faced with the hardest choice — going back to her past life or running away into a new, glamorous future.

Pulling no punches, Tess Stimson's latest book is

honest and shocking with plenty of twists to keep the reader engrossed right up until the bittersweet end. (VH)



THE PLAYGROUP

Janey Fraser, *Arrow*, £6.99

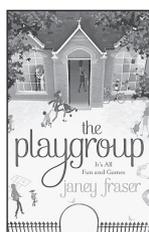
For anyone who has ever been through the nursery years with their children, this warm-hearted look at playgroup life will strike a chord.

Not that any of the little Puddleducks have any problems — no, it's their mums who have all the issues! There's Fussy Mum who loiters outside all morning worrying about germs, Late Mum who can never get her kids in on time, Pushy Mum fretting because four-year-old Poppy only got three gold stars for her letter outlines, and Couldn't Care Less Mum, who turns up in her PJs, pushing her kid through the door with unseemly haste.

At the helm is smiley Gemma Merryfield, mopper of tears and spills. But even her sunny disposition is tested when Joe Balls — the brooding, grumpy banker-turned-teacher — turns up at the neighbouring primary school and decides to make a few suggestions of his own. Will he and Gemma ever see eye to eye?

As term progresses, people are forced to confront their fears and overcome their

foibles. Secrets will come bursting out and past heartbreaks will be revealed. It's messy play all round in this warm and humorous read. (CW)



THIS IS A LOVE STORY

Jessica Thompson, *Coronet*, £6.99

Nick and Sienna first meet on the tube as they catch each other's eye smiling over a picture in the newspaper of a water-skiing squirrel!

An hour later they are both shocked to meet again — this time in the offices of The Cube, the publishing house where Nick is an artist and Sienna the new writer.

There's a big attraction, but neither wants to admit it. So they settle on trying to be friends, dating other people and denying their feelings.

Meanwhile, Sienna befriends and confides in Pete, a homeless man, and vows to help him get his life back on track, and Nick dates the office temp who turns out to be slightly unhinged...

Five years pass and both Nick and Sienna are finally in relationships, but when tragedy strikes their friendship is tested to the limits.

A sweet, quirky novel, which tackles the

enduring question of whether men and women can ever just be friends. (AP)



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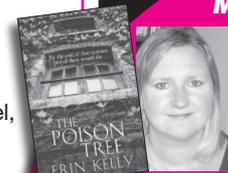
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My favourite book

Linda Middleton recommends *The Poison Tree* by Erin Kelly. *'This is the story of ordinary Karen,*



who meets Bohemian Biba, a wannabe actress, in the summer of 1997. By the end of the summer, nothing will ever be the same and years later, as events come back to haunt her, Karen fears she will never be free. The setting and characters are so vivid you are drawn into the book and the twists and turns keep you hooked to the end.'