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## Books of the year

Jonathan Franzen's family epic, a new collection from Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin's love letters, a memoir centred on tiny Japanese sculptures... which books most excited our writers this year?

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Detail of an

illustration by Kate Slater

### **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

In **Red Dust Road** (Picador) Jackie Kay writes lucidly and honestly about being the adopted black daughter of white parents, about searching for her white birth mother and Nigerian birth father, and about the many layers of identity. She has a rare ability to portray sentiment with absolutely no sentimentality. Isabel Wilkerson's **The Warmth of Other Suns** (Random House) is a fresh and wonderful history of African-American migration. Chang-rae Lee's **The Surrendered** (Little, Brown) is a grave, beautiful novel about people who experienced the Korean war and the war's legacy. And David Remnick's **The Bridge** (Picador) is a thorough and well-written biography of Barack Obama. The many Americans who believe invented biographical details about Obama would do well to read it.

### **John Banville**

William James, brother of the – in some quarters – more famous Henry, was that rarest of beings, a philosopher who wrote clear, elegant and exciting prose. In **The Heart of William James** (Harvard University Press), James's biographer Robert Richardson has put together a dazzling selection of this great thinker's work, with perfectly judged short pieces to usher in each of the selections.

Tony Judt, too, had a wonderful prose style, and his little book **The Memory Chalet** (William Heinemann), a collection of autobiographical essays, is beautiful and moving. Although Judt, who suffered from motor neurone disease, died earlier this year, this late work is more sustaining than sad.

Death stalks the pages of Seamus Heaney's collection **Human Chain** (Faber), but as we would expect from this most affirmative and celebratory of poets, the book in the end is really a meditation on life in all its fleeting sweetness.

### **Julian Barnes**

Unfit for life, unsure of love, unschooled in sex, but good at washing up: Philip Larkin, in **Letters to Monica** (Faber), lays out his all-too-self-aware catalogue of reasons for

being uncheerful. The reader is made slightly cheerful by the thought of not having had Larkin's life, but very cheerful that poems of such truth, wit and beauty emerged from it.

If Larkin represents native genius in its costive English form, Stephen Sondheim represents the fecund American version: **Finishing the Hat** (Virgin Books) is not just a book of lyrics (with cut and variant versions) but an exuberance of memories, principles, anecdotes, criticism and self-criticism.

Edmund de Waal's **The Hare with Amber Eyes** (Chatto & Windus) unexpectedly combines a micro craft-form with macro history to great effect.

### Mary Beard

The most moving book of the year for me was Tony Judt's **Ill Fares the Land** (Allen Lane) – a powerful "living will" written as Judt succumbed to the complete paralysis of motor neurone disease. It is a marvellous denunciation of modern politics ("Something is profoundly wrong with how we live today"), written with all the grace and intensity that only the dying can muster.

On a cheerier note, I have only just caught up with Reaktion's series of books on animals. Robert Irwin's quizzical investigation of the **Camel** (one hump and two) and Deirdre Jackson's elegant exploration of the frankly rather dull life of the **Lion** will appeal even to those who would never normally pick up a book on the natural world.

### William Boyd

Stephen Sondheim, who has just turned 80, is the unrivalled genius in the world of musical theatre with five or six masterworks that have redefined the form. A superb, generous melodist and a lyricist up there with Cole Porter and Noël Coward, Sondheim has now given us **Finishing the Hat**. His detailed commentary on his wonderful songs is honest, shrewd and fascinating. The ideal fix for Sondheim addicts.

Poetry addicts, meanwhile, should swiftly acquire Oliver Reynolds's latest collection, **Hodge** (Areté Books) – poems of beautiful precision that reveal their secrets slowly. And **Samko Tále's Cemetery Book** (Garnett Press) by the Slovak writer Daniela Kapitánová offers us, in a superb translation by Julia Sherwood, one of the strangest and most compelling voices I have come across in years. Muriel Spark meets Russell Hoban. An astonishing, dark and scabrous novel.

### Anthony Browne

I was fascinated by the fattest book I read, **Freedom** by Jonathan Franzen (Fourth Estate), an epic novel that tells a funny and moving story of an American family unravelling in the first few years after 9/11. It's about the problems that come with liberty, seen through the lives of what at first seems like the perfect couple.

In contrast, my second choice is a small, exquisite picture book, **Eric** by Shaun Tan (Templar). This is the tale of a strange foreign exchange student, told from the point of view of the host family. Eric is drawn as a tiny, shadowy figure living in a world of giants. The narrator hints at the "cultural things" that divide them. This is a true picture book in that the illustrations tell as much as the words do, and is that relatively rare thing: a picture book appealing equally to both adults and children.

### AS Byatt

I bought Rowan Williams's book, **Dostoevsky** (Continuum), because I have always needed to understand Dostoevsky's Christianity in order to understand how he shaped his characters. Williams's account of that is a revelation. He is also a good reader of the novels and often sharply witty. I liked his chapter on the Devil. I was moved and excited by Edmund de Waal's **The Hare with Amber Eyes**. My choices also include one novel – Neel Mukherjee's sharp, sad and lively **A Life Apart** (Constable) – and one book of short stories – Yiyun Li's **Gold Boy, Emerald Girl** (Fourth Estate). She is becoming, indeed is, a great short story writer. Seamus Heaney's **Human Chain** is a wonderful collection. The poems connecting personal grief with Aeneas's journey to the underworld are brilliantly quiet and profoundly moving.

### Jonathan Coe

Some of the most important publishing events take place quietly, behind the scenes, far away from the clamour and hype surrounding prize announcements and the impatient quest for the Next Big Literary Thing. I spent much of this year back in the 18th century, trying to rediscover the roots of English satire, and one of the landmark publications for me was the appearance of Jonathan Swift's **A Tale of a Tub and Other Works** (edited by Marcus Walsh) in its definitive Cambridge edition. It's heartening to know, not just that one of our greatest writers is finally being given the editorial treatment he deserves, but that such a quixotically ambitious publishing series can still be contemplated in the digital age.

Alasdair Gray, of course, is one of the most Swiftian of contemporary writers, and – returning to the 21st century – surely there was no more handsome book published this year than **Alasdair Gray: A Life in Pictures** (Canongate). The illustrations are as lavish, and the text as eccentric, as even the most optimistic Gray admirer could have wished.

### **Jilly Cooper**

I adored **One Day** by David Nicholls (Hodder). An exquisitely written love story, it describes the passionate attraction yet reluctance to commit of two opposites: Dexter, a charming, promiscuous public-school Adonis, and clever, chippy, idealistic working-class Emma. As they slide in and out of affairs, marriage to other people, having children and careers which soar and nosedive, one longs for them to get it together.

I also loved **Comfort and Joy** by India Knight (Fig Tree), a hilarious, bawdy yet touching portrait of Christmas over three years. In a desperate attempt to achieve harmony for the sake of the children, Clara, the enchanting heroine, invites a vast extended family of parents, steps-in-laws, embattled ex-husbands, warring couples and lame-duck friends to stay.

### **William Dalrymple**

My favourite book this year was **Under the Sun: The Letters of Bruce Chatwin** (Jonathan Cape). Chatwin was a writer blessed with three remarkable gifts: he was a thinker of genuine originality, a reader of astonishing erudition and, above all, a writer of breathtaking prose. All these gifts are on display in his letters, and they are a reminder of just how much we lost with his death. He was also one of the few major British writers who knew and loved the Islamic world.

I certainly don't share Christopher Hitchens's views on Islam, but I loved his witty memoir, **Hitch-22** (Atlantic), which had me laughing out loud at a rate of once every other page. The best jokes are in the chapter about Salman Rushdie, and I have had great fun trying (and failing) to beat Rushdie in a literary game that Hitch and he invented: renaming Shakespeare plays with new titles in the style of Robert Ludlum – so *The Merchant of Venice* becomes "The Rialto Sanction", *Hamlet* is "The Elsinore Vacillation" and *Macbeth* becomes "The Dunsinane Reforestation".

Finally Rushdie's own **Luka and the Fire of Life** (Jonathan Cape) gave great pleasure: he has shown that he is also – rather unexpectedly – one of our best writers for children. I am currently reading it out to my boys at bedtime, and they are both loving it.

### **Roddy Doyle**

Amy Bloom's collection **Where the God of Love Hangs Out** (Granta) is brilliant. The stories are shocking and lovely. Willy Vlautin's **Lean on Pete** (Faber) is only brilliant; I hated finishing it. Joseph O'Connor's **Ghost Light** (Harvill Secker) is absolutely brilliant – a beautifully written love story and, somehow, a chunk of Irish social and political history. There's a section in the middle of Emma Donoghue's **Room** (Picador) that reminded me of reading *Catch 22* when I was 15 – the same excitement, the same "I've never read anything like this before". The whole book is absolutely f\*\*kin' brilliant.

### **Margaret Drabble**

Hilary Spurling's biography of Pearl Buck, **Burying the Bones** (Profile), is a remarkable and shocking work, full of immensely difficult material so thoroughly

absorbed and so well organised that the reader risks underestimating the art and skill that lie behind this strange account of missionary hardship in China and worldly success in the west. The violent history of China in the early years of the 20th century forms a turbulent backdrop, and Buck's reputation as a novelist takes second place to the story of her singular life and times.

Stevie Davies, in **Into Suez** (Parthian Books), also tackles historical material in a novel that personalises the forces of imperialism and the British class system as it moves with ease from Egypt immediately after the second world war to the 21st century and back again. Davies has a fine eye for colour and place, and a keen recall of the sensations of childhood, and her characters are full of quirks and eccentricities while telling the story of a whole generation.

### **Helen Dunmore**

If depression took a form, what would it be? Winston Churchill, like Samuel Johnson, cast his melancholia as a black dog. In Rebecca Hunt's **Mr Chartwell** (Fig Tree), Churchill's dog becomes brutally and absurdly real as he arrives to sink his teeth into the life of a young widow. The richness of Hunt's language and the hidden patterns that link Esther Hammerhans and Churchill make this first novel a vivid, moving delight.

For many years, the poet Lawrence Sail has produced a new poem each Christmas, and now these are collected in **Songs of the Darkness** (Enitharmon Press), which is as starkly truthful about winter and darkness as it is about the frail threads of hope that light the season.

### **Geoff Dyer**

People seemed to get their knickers in a right old twist over David Shields's **Reality Hunger: A Manifesto** (Hamish Hamilton), a subtler and more nuanced book than the "Is-the-novel-dead-(again)?" controversy it generated. Full of bits filched from other people's books, it was highly original, consistently stimulating – and it nudged me, belatedly, towards the work of David Markson, whom I started reading a couple of months after he died. First published in the US in 2001, Markson's **This Is Not a Novel** finally waded across the Atlantic – courtesy of the enterprising CB Editions – this year. A swirl of unattributed quotations from other authors, an energising expression of readerly ennui and a meditation on mortality, it felt like a book one had unconsciously been waiting to discover. Let's hope this is the beginning of a Markson . . . I was going to say revival, but first we need a proper vival.

### **Dave Eggers**

Marlon James's **The Book of Night Women** (Oneworld Publications) is one of those contemporary masterpieces that seems like it came out of the author's head, fait accompli. But of course it didn't. James is just a great writer, and he's conjured a complete and believable world – 18th-century Jamaica – and has got so deep inside his characters, most of them slaves on a sugar plantation, that the reading experience is immersive: any time you put the book down to, say, drive a car or get a sandwich, it's a shock. It pulls no punches, so be prepared to be knocked sideways.

### **Richard Ford**

Only two novels made my heart beat faster in the past 12 months. One was **The Privileges** (Corsair), by an already acclaimed young American named Jonathan Dee. Depending on whom you believe (the critic James Wood and I diverge), *The Privileges* is either a novel of curretting ironies about a young Gotham family that gets rich (but also gets "poor") on the financial bubble now burst, and loses its soul; or else – my view – it's a spot-on, straightforward, not especially ironical family saga about the same subject; and is full not of lost souls but of interesting, layered characters you might come to empathise with and not forget. Either way, it's tone-perfect, ingenious in its acuity about modern life. It seems to have the right words for everything. It's blazingly funny. And it's unabashedly serious. I loved it.

The other memorable book was **The Pregnant Widow** by Martin Amis (Jonathan Cape). There certainly isn't a brilliant novelist in English that the English (and

American) reading populace takes more stunningly for granted than Amis. He's what we'd over here call the "pound-for-pound" English sentence writer. OK, this novel is about seemingly serious business: the social order, the sexual revolution, the "M" word (morals), societal change with a big "C". But I just came back day after day for the sentences, the wit, the fully internalised cultural nous. This book has that rare and wonderful quality of taking the reader into a charmed confidence he's not quite sure he deserves, but that he (in my case) wouldn't miss for the world.

### **Antonia Fraser**

My two favourites this year were a novel that reads like history and a historical study which reads like a novel. **Heartstone** by CJ Sansom (Mantle) is the latest in the adventures of Master Matthew Shardlake, the hunchback lawyer who finds himself wherever in the 16th century the scene is darkest, most cruel – and most exciting. This particular book centres on Henry VIII's great warship the Mary Rose, getting ready on the south coast of England to invade France; readers of so-called real history will know in advance what will happen to the ship and those aboard, but none of this detracts from the intricacies of the plot.

**Operation Mincemeat** by Ben Macintyre (Bloomsbury) concerns what is in effect a spy story of the second world war: the elaborate plot to plant counter-information about the projected invasion of southern Europe by the allies, with the use of a corpse belonging to an innocent bystander. Le Carré never did better in his prime.

### **Stephen Frears**

**The Hare with Amber Eyes**, Edmund de Waal's account of two journeys: that of his diasporic family, the great Jewish banking Ephrussi dynasty, who came from Odessa to Paris and Vienna, and on to Croydon and Tunbridge Wells; and that of the 246 netsuke figures which lay hidden during the German occupation in a mattress used by the lady's maid Anna before returning to Japan. Highlights include Charles, the 19th-century art collector, who can be seen in one of Renoir's paintings and who is the prototype for Swann; and Hitler and Goebbels arriving in Vienna after the Anschluss. Elegant. Modest. Tragic. Homeric.

And I choose Duncan Hamilton's biography **Harold Larwood** (Quercus), if only for the amount of beer Arthur Carr would pour into the demon Nottinghamshire bowler before unleashing him.

### **John Gray**

John Ashbery's **Collected Poems 1956-1987**, edited by Mark Ford (Carcenet), is a book I found inexhaustible. Possibly the greatest living English-speaking poet and one of the most prolific, Ashbery takes language to its limits, so that words serve as pointers to shifting experiences that elude description. Containing his masterpiece "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror", one of the most penetrating 20th-century meditations on what it means to be human, this collection succeeded in stirring my thoughts as well as delighting me.

**The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise** by Jorge Luis Borges (Penguin Classics) is a collection of short pieces in which the Argentine ponders the great metaphysical questions with playful scepticism and ranges happily over his favourite writers, poets and films. In the 18 selections here – on Oscar Wilde and GK Chesterton, Alfred Hitchcock, the *Arabian Nights*, the joy he felt when Paris was liberated from the Nazis and his tranquil acceptance of his blindness, among other things – Borges demonstrates that profundity and wit need not be at odds. These little essays are morsels of sheer intellectual pleasure.

### **Tessa Hadley**

William Dalrymple's **Nine Lives** (Bloomsbury) came out in paperback this year. He tells the stories of nine individuals in India and Pakistan, all steeped in one kind of religious practice or another: a Jain nun, a singer of Rajasthani epic, a sculptor carving gods in Tamil Nadu, a woman in a trance in a Sufi shrine in Sindh. He earns their stories through his personal involvement and careful listening; he insists on the persisting

importance of their visions and traditions in our contemporary world. His touch as a writer is so fine – exact, sensual, charged with history and politics. No mystification, just authentic mystery.

It's as if I've chosen one book in hot colour, one in black and white. I'm reading Colm Tóibín's new book of stories, **The Empty Family** (Penguin). Tóibín doesn't write like anybody else: his spare sentences carve out new spaces in our collective thought. The protagonists here are usually solitaires – unattached gay men in middle age, Lady Gregory lonely in her marriage, a girl in Menorca taking possession alone of the house she's inherited. They know they are missing out on the heat of family life and relationships; they're half sorry but they're also half relieved. It's not love that's redemptive in these stories, only hungry life itself: the solidities of landscape and cityscape, the intricacies of history, the physics of the grey waves of the sea, a glass of cold beer in a bar. The mood is sad but the joy is in the sentences: exhilarating, penetrating, fresh.

### **David Hare**

Does it matter if **Freedom** is the kind of book of which you approve? Does it matter if it conforms to your theoretical agenda for the future of the novel? Is it the exact novel you yourself would write if, of course, you ever got round to writing one? Who cares? Far more important is the fact that, for as long as you're reading it, Jonathan Franzen pulls off the extraordinary feat of making the lives of his characters more real to you than your own life. He writes with fabulous assurance about sex, death and the environment – three things we keep reading that novelists can't manage any more.

Another treat was **The Ghosts of Belfast**, which I bought at an American airport. In the UK it's less helpfully sold as **The Twelve** (Vintage). Stuart Neville takes one of today's defining subjects – truth and reconciliation – and writes a crime novel about the dishonesty and violence necessary to the success of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Great subject, great thriller.

### **Eric Hobsbawm**

Two excellent books this year remind me of some of my own past researches: John A Davis's **The Jews of San Nicandro** (Yale University Press) is about the Italian peasants who converted to Judaism; and Charles Van Onselen's **Masked Raiders: Irish Banditry in Southern Africa** (ZebraPress, Cape Town).

### **Michael Holroyd**

Andrew McConnell Stott's **The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi** (Canongate) presents Grimaldi's extraordinary stage career from the late 18th to the early 19th centuries not only as a record of the British theatre at a time of revolution but also as an extreme visual satire on political and social events. The book is full of wonderful descriptions of how this manic yet poignant clown beat off competition from talented animals (the dancing horse, the singing duck, the mathematical pig) as well as from infant prodigies in frilly costumes, to become the "supreme comic being, part-child, part-nightmare". He had a magical effect on audiences who, on seeing their friend Joey on stage, forgot all the torment and anxiety of their lives outside the theatre.

Sjeng Scheijen's **Diaghilev: A Life** (Profile Books) is a highly detailed and impressive account of his subject's career. We are shown Diaghilev, like the leader of a superior coalition, gathering a team of all the talents – composers, choreographers, dancers, singers, writers, painters – and giving them a new aesthetic agenda. He emerges as a man of action and of imagination, of ruthless and relentless charm and devastating ambition: not always sympathetic, but almost always inspirational.

### **Jackie Kay**

Kazuo Ishiguro writes brilliantly about nostalgia. In **Nocturnes** (Faber), his rich and satisfying quintet of stories – each playing a different piece of music – the characters' voices are as rich as the music itself, striking true notes about the nature of love, regret, choices and roads not taken.

Another wonderful collection of stories to emerge was Petina Gappah's **An Elegy for Easterly** (Faber): an impressive cast of characters and stories emerge in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe, with fighting spirit, making you think about survival, love and grief.

Rupert Thomson's moving memoir **This Party's Got to Stop** (Granta) is a surprisingly funny study of grief. Three brothers move back into their father's house. It's a riot and tear-jerkingly sad.

#### **AL Kennedy**

I would highly recommend **Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man** by Bill Clegg (Jonathan Cape). I haven't read a book at a single sitting for a long while, but this held me for the duration – it's an honest and wonderfully crafted book by a man as intoxicated by language as he was by crack. Not at all the standard recovery memoir, it has real literary depth and complexity of construction without seeming in any way contrived.

I would also mention Derren Brown's **Confessions of a Conjuror** (Channel 4) – in some ways an oddly similar book in its levels of intimacy and self-awareness. It combines a playfully baroque prose style with pinpoint observation and almost excruciating levels of self-examination, if not loathing. It's a fascinating experience.

#### **Hanif Kureishi**

Gary Greenberg's **Manufacturing Depression** (Bloomsbury) is a witty sprint through the attempts of psychiatrists and scientists to reduce myriad forms of mental distress – always better described by poets than neuroscientists – to a single illness treatable by a pill. By 2005, 10% of the American population were using antidepressants.

If doctors are the real dealers, Mike Jay's **High Society: Mind-Altering Drugs in History and Culture** (Thames & Hudson) is a vivid report on the other side of drugs, the ones which get you high and give you pleasure rather than pretend to make you well. (They're less likely to be placebos, too.)

Renata Salecl's **Choice** (Profile Books) is an informative inquiry into our present illusions of freedom and agency, and the madness they can create. She writes well about the political use of anxiety and insecurity as a form of social control. And she says: "When any idea is glorified in a particular society at a particular time, it is necessary to be cautious about it." Big Society, anyone?

#### **David Kynaston**

I enjoyed Juliet Gardiner's panoramic, insightful survey of **The Thirties** (HarperCollins); Jehanne Wake's superbly researched **Sisters of Fortune** (Chatto & Windus), about four American heiresses (1788-1874) who took old Europe by storm; Henrietta Heald's equally thorough **William Armstrong: Magician of the North** (Northumbria Press), the life of a major, remarkably various Victorian; and Harry Ricketts's **Strange Meetings: The Poets of the Great War** (Chatto & Windus), a haunting, almost cinematic group biography.

My book of the year, though, is Philip Larkin's **Letters to Monica**. Thrillingly, one encounters here a very different Larkin from the earlier *Selected Letters*: more domestic, sometimes – but only sometimes – more humane, and often touchingly vulnerable, not least about poems that would come to be seen as among his finest. "You are the one," Monica Jones reassured him at one low point, and for English poetry in the third quarter of the 20th century he surely was.

#### **Nick Laird**

I liked Christopher Ricks's **True Friendship** (Yale) very much, and collections by Alan Gillis (**Here Comes the Night**, The Gallery Press), Jo Shapcott (**Of Mutability**, Faber) and the American poet Timothy Donnelly (**The Cloud Corporation**, Wave Books).

The most frightening book of the year was John Lanchester's astute and funny dissection of the financial meltdown, **Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay** (Penguin).

### **David Lodge**

The distinguished liberal theologian John Hick, now in his late 80s, uses the neglected form of the Platonic dialogue to treat the currently hot topic of the grounds for religious faith and the arguments against it, in **Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason** (Palgrave Macmillan). Although he makes his own position clear – a non-dogmatic belief in transcendence which draws for inspiration on all the great world religions – the work is not didactic, and scepticism gets a fair crack of the whip. Most readers of whatever persuasion (or none) will find their assumptions and prejudices challenged at some point.

The novelist Tim Parks's **Teach Us to Sit Still: A Sceptic's Search for Health and Healing** (Harvill Secker) is an unclassifiable book about his quest for the cure of an undiagnosable condition, a chronic and painful one best described in the medical literature as "a headache in the pelvis". Against all his assumptions and prejudices, he finds relief eventually in New Age-style meditation, but his journey is inward as well as outward, and involves a brutally honest, darkly comic self-examination of his life and character, written with Parks's usual stylistic verve. No mature male reader could fail to be gripped by this story, alternately wincing and laughing in sympathy – but my wife found it equally absorbing.

### **Hilary Mantel**

If God ordained men should rule over women, how can a woman ever rule a nation? This question perplexed medieval Europe, and in **She-Wolves** (Faber) the young historian Helen Castor explores it with energy and flair, taking as her leading ladies four formidable English queens who preceded the Tudors. Each of these women challenged what was seen as the natural order, and Castor makes their complex stories highly readable, exciting and thought-provoking.

### **Pankaj Mishra**

Is short fiction, with its necessarily fragmentary form and brisk epiphanies, better placed than the panoramic novel to capture the weird disjointedness and partial visions of modern life? Certainly, I was more captivated this year by short stories than long novels. David Means's fourth collection **The Spot** (Faber) confirms him as a writer with a distinctive, ceaselessly surprising sensibility. Set in China, Yiyun Li's **Gold Boy, Emerald Girl** illuminates some of the strangest corners of human experience. **The Collected Stories of Deborah Eisenberg** (Picador US) offers a bracing retrospective of one of America's most intelligent and worldly writers.

In non-fiction, I much admired John Calvert's **Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism** (C Hurst & Co). Set against the specific context of nation-building in Egypt, it shrewdly describes a recurrent but little-understood political journey from secular liberalism to violent extremism. I cannot recommend highly enough **The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations** (University of Chicago Press), Tzvetan Todorov's characteristically wise take on the new politics of hysteria in Europe and America.

### **Blake Morrison**

In a very good year for books – Jonathan Franzen's novel **Freedom**, Seamus Heaney's collection **Human Chain**, Philip Larkin's **Letters to Monica**, Howard Jacobson's Booker-winning **The Finkler Question** (Bloomsbury), Jane Miller's candid thoughts on getting older, **Crazy Age** (Virago) – special mention to two publications from smaller presses. Friedrich Christian Delius's **Portrait of the Mother as a Young Woman**, excellently translated by Jamie Bulloch (Peirene), tells the story of a young German woman in Rome in 1943: the single 117-page sentence, covering just an hour-long walk, contains multitudes. John Lucas's memoir **Next Year Will Be Better** (Five Leaves Publications) recalls in astonishing and celebratory detail the sounds, tastes and smells of England in the 1950s, with particular attention paid to poetry and jazz.



### **Andrew Motion**

The six novels shortlisted for the Man Booker, which I chaired this year, all speak for themselves. When the prize-reading was done, I had particular pleasure reading Sarah Bakewell's ingeniously organised and wittily wise life of Montaigne, **How to Live** (Chatto), Alexandra Harris's **Romantic Moderns** (Thames & Hudson) – an exceptionally well-written and deeply illuminating account of mid-20th-century British writers and painters – and **The Mirabelles** by Annie Freud (Picador): original, moving, smart and memorable.

### **David Nicholls**

Paul Murray's **Skippy Dies** (Hamish Hamilton) is a brilliant depiction of the heaven and hell of male adolescence. Sam Lipsyte's **The Ask** (Old Street Publishing) is funny, smart and mean, and I also admired Tim Pears's heartbreaking **Landed** (William Heinemann) and Philip Roth's **Nemesis** (Jonathan Cape). But Candia McWilliam's much-praised memoir **What to Look for in Winter** (Jonathan Cape) is my favourite book of the year, startlingly honest, wry, sad and wise.

### **Craig Raine**

Frances Stonor Saunders's **The Woman Who Shot Mussolini** (Faber) moves from close-up (the nick in Mussolini's nose left by the bullet) to a kind of Google Earth. This riveting biography of Violet Gibson – a forgotten, pitiable, slightly potty, peripheral figure – also encompasses the deranged psyche of the 20th century. A bygone world in a grain of true grit.

**Hearing Ourselves Think** by Philip Hancock (Smiths Knoll) is crammed with unpoetic qualia from the world of City and Guilds. Hancock left school at 16 to take up an apprenticeship. Twenty-odd years ago, the former probation officer Simon Armitage founded the Democratic People's Republic of Poetry. Hancock is a citizen – with a commonsense understanding that technical drawing, Halfords, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, Everton Mints and Frank Spencer can hold their own in poetry.

### **Ian Rankin**

**Must You Go?** (Weidenfeld) is Antonia Fraser's story of her life with Harold Pinter, presented in the form of her diary entries. Great figures from recent (literary) history flit through its pages, but what really engages is the sense of life and love intertwining.

Many of us north of the border were dumbfounded when James Robertson's novel **And the Land Lay Still** (Hamish Hamilton) failed even to make the Booker longlist. This is Robertson's sweeping history of life and politics in 20th-century Scotland. Bold, discursive and deep, it should not be ignored.

Saul Bellow's **Letters** (Penguin Classics) takes us deep into the fertile mind of one of the US's most interesting novelists. There are spats, divorces, and revelations throughout. I had renewed admiration for the man by the end of this book, and wanted to reread his novels.

I am a sucker for books about music and the music industry, and Nick Kent's **Apathy for the Devil** (Faber) held me spellbound. Kent's first interviews as a fledgling rock journalist were with the MC5, the Stooges, Captain Beefheart, the Grateful Dead and Lou Reed. If that list whets your appetite, you can be sure that Kent delivers.

### **Helen Simpson**

Martin Stannard's **Muriel Spark: The Biography** (Phoenix) was fascinating despite its occasionally hamstrung tone (yes, Spark invited Stannard to write her biography, saying "Treat me as though I were dead," but – Spark being Spark – this can't have been easy). What is clear from this scrupulous account of her 88 years is that she always put her writing first. How did she produce so much? "I've nothing else to do. I've put myself in that position." Immune to emotional blackmail, refusing to play the victim, she was big on revenge for even the slightest of slights, and refused to cook, clean or go downstairs in front of men ("I have a fear of being pushed from behind").

It would be interesting to know what Philippa Perry would have made of her. **Couch Fiction** (Palgrave Macmillan) is Perry's clever, funny account of a psychotherapy case study, and makes good use of the graphic novel's format, thought and speech bubbles appearing side by side within the same frame.

### **Tom Stoppard**

I started the year by reading a dozen books on the Wall Street implosion. Even if you're bored with it all, **The Big Short** by Michael Lewis (Allen Lane) is unmissable; and if you're not, **How Markets Fail** by John Cassidy (Penguin) has the best, deepest backstory, and is as well written as you would expect from someone who covers economics for the New Yorker.

This year, too, I enormously enjoyed the last 518 pages of Jonathan Franzen's **The Corrections** (Fourth Estate), which I had put aside in 2001 to read when I had time. I am now on page 14 of **Freedom**. Highly recommended.

### **Paul Theroux**

It was EB White who said: "An Englishman is not happy until he has explained America." Jonathan Raban ought to be very happy on this score, because his **Driving Home: An American Scrapbook** (Picador) – essays about everything from Sarah Palin and Barack Obama to John Muir and Gore Vidal – explains the State of the Union, and Raban continues to be the most resourceful refugee on our shores. I greatly admired **The Last Stand** by Nathaniel Philbrick (Bodley Head), a parallel account of Custer and Sitting Bull; and I liked having a chance to find more nuances in **Madame Bovary** in the new Lydia Davis translation (Penguin Classics) and read it blissfully as though floating, as Flaubert puts it in a different context, "in a river of milk".

### **Adam Thirlwell**

I've happily discovered an entire new publisher, Visual Editions, who specialise in what they call "visual reading". And in my love of new and hybrid fictional forms I've read and reread two books with pictures. There was **Wilson** by Daniel Clowes (Jonathan Cape), a very short, very funny and very sad graphic novel. And I loved **Animalinside** (Sylph Editions/New Directions) – a small series of small fictions by the Hungarian novelist László Krasznahorkai, with images by Max Neumann. In them, Krasznahorkai invents a way of miming the way a dog might talk: or even, not quite a dog. The stories are translated by Otilie Mulzet, while George Szirtes has translated two of Krasznahorkai's novels, including **War and War** (New Directions). Via both translators, Krasznahorkai's looping sentences seem to me to be drastically original.

### **Colm Tóibín**

David Grossman's **To the End of the Land** (Jonathan Cape) and David Malouf's **Ransom** (Vintage) deal with war and families; one is set in contemporary Israel and the other in ancient Greece. Both dramatise with breathtaking skill what is intimate and personal; they place their vulnerable people in the foreground against the background filled with recognition of the pain and damage that war causes. Both books have an extraordinary emotional charge.

In poetry, Seamus Heaney's **Human Chain** contains some of his best work – elegiac, beautifully controlled and crafted. And in the public world, both John Lanchester's **Whoops!** and Fintan O'Toole's **Enough Is Enough** (Faber) manage to explain the financial crisis with wit and passion; but more than anything else, both writers offer pure clarity in their interpretation and explanation of how we got here.

### **Rose Tremain**

America's current agitation about its moral standing in the world is powerfully captured in two extraordinary books: Philip Roth's **Nemesis** and Jonathan Franzen's **Freedom**. In these works of fiction, my old friend and mentor Malcolm Bradbury's assertion that "the imagination is the best pathway through troubled times" is brilliantly vindicated.

In *Nemesis*, Roth's best novel for some time, a young man of impeccable fitness and stern moral character, Bucky Cantor, takes a summer job as playground director in a

Newark school in 1944. When a polio epidemic arrives, Bucky knows that he should stay to help the children through this fearful time, yet chooses instead to leave to join his girlfriend at a summer camp in the Pocono mountains. Torn between elation at his escape and guilt at his dereliction of duty, Bucky waits in agony for the punishment he knows must one day fall on him. Roth's message has a deadly clarity: if you know what's right and you turn aside from it, you will never fully recover.

In Franzen's *Freedom*, the Berglund family, mid-western suburbanites who might have lived quiet, unimpeachable lives, find themselves enslaved to the multiple possibilities – sexual, material and political – available to them in a society where the moral compass is helplessly spinning. Like Ian McEwan, Franzen has both the accomplished miniaturist's eye for telling everyday detail and a sophisticated understanding of the contemporary big picture. His choice of a consoling ending doesn't diminish the novel's message: freedom abused can maim and kill.

### **Jeanette Winterson**

For two millennia women have heard how our brains are too small, our wombs too big, our blood too thin or too cold, or how we are too weak/excitable/nervous (supply your own adjective) to do whatever it is we were thinking of doing. Since the 1970s we have been getting even and getting equal, but just when you thought it was OK to do rocket science, along comes neuroscience to tell us it's all in the hardwiring of our brains, and really, women don't have the connections – and I don't mean the ones in the boardroom. Cordelia Fine's brilliant book **Delusions of Gender** (Icon) debunks the likes of Simon Baron-Cohen, dressed up in one of his brother's outfits as a mad scientist, waving mobiles at newborn babies to see if the boys are more "interested" than the girls.

Jackie Kay's poetry readings have audiences alternately weeping with laughter and just weeping, and her autobiography in search of her blood parents does the same. **Red Dust Road** is a lovely book, thoughtful and high-spirited, registering loss and love alike.

Jo Shapcott is such a good poet, with a sensitive ear and a gutsy voice. Her collection **Of Mutability** is about transformation – and that includes decay, life in its leaving as well as its celebrating. This is a book to shove in your pocket and take for a walk, reading one poem at a time, and listening to the voice in your head.

Compiled by Ginny Hooker

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