Books of the year 2008

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The New Statesman's round up of the best books of 2008 as suggested by critics and contributors including David Marquand, Tahmima Anam, Fatima Bhutto and Anthony Howard

TIM ADAMS

Julian Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (Cape, £16.99) is a nice corrective to the one-note atheism of Dawkins and the rest. It is human, clever and full of doubt: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him . . ." Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke* (Simon & Schuster, £20) makes you challenge all you thought you knew about Churchill, and about war. The book I have carried with me all year, though, is Mick Imlah's *The Lost Leader* (Faber & Faber, £9.99). Imlah's poetry is that rare combination of erudition and conversation: perfectly crafted lines from the heart. The collection dwells on the idea of Scotland, of how where we come from shapes where we end up; it contains memorable meditations on a nation's heroes, never forgetting that it is the local and particular which stays with us. Imlah's voice holds all the histories together, easy as a ballad, forever crackling with one-liners.

FATEMA AHMED

How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read by Pierre Bayard (Granta, £12) is not a self-help book for lazy book reviewers, but an entertaining essay on literature, anxiety and the canon, and the eighth instalment in the author's "Paradoxes" series. Bayard is the kind of French academic who is more interested in how we can change Proust than in how Proust can change us. He also knows who killed Agatha Christie's Roger Ackroyd and who was really killed in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Someone should translate and publish the whole series in time for next Christmas. *Beautiful Image* by Marcel Aymé (Pushkin Press, £12) is a novel about a man who finds one day that he has a different face. It is less unsettling than Kafka, but its combination of charm and creepiness is pleasantly disorientating.

ROGER ALTON

The Booker panel ran true to form this year by inexplicably ignoring Zoë Heller's wonderful new novel *The Believers* (Fig Tree, £16.99). This is a really big book , dealing with massive themes - love (sexual, family, adulterous, parental, sibling, etc), and hate (ditto) - set against an epic background of political activism in New York, and told in 300 taut pages. Immaculate. My great discovery this year has been the crackling, brilliant, and funny thrillers of Don Winslow, a former private eye from New York, whose books are set against the surfing beaches and desert highways of southern California. His characters are hugely believable, complex, human and loveable. Winslow is the true heir to Chandler. Kick off with *The Winter of Frankie Machine (*Arrow Books, £7.99), or *The Death and Life of Bobby Z* (Arrow Books). Utterly brilliant stuff.

TAHMIMA ANAM

My favourite book of this - or any - year is Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (Faber, £17.99). Charting the story of Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion to the present day, the novel gives a vivid and heartbreaking glimpse into the ravages of history. Each character - brought together by Marcus Caldwell, whose home is lined with frescos and books nailed to the ceiling - is mourning the loss of a loved one. As their individual stories are unravelled, the brutality of the violence in Afghanistan is made poignantly real. It's stunningly written, with images that float off the page and dance around the room. I can't recommend it highly enough.

RACHEL ASPDEN

The Book of Dead Philosophers (Granta, £15.99) might sound rather grim Christmas reading, but Simon Critchley's survey of the ends met by 190 great thinkers - from the Stoics and Epicureans through the Desert Fathers and Zen monks to Marxists and Existentialists - is concise, witty and oddly heartening. Two highlights: the last bows of the hard-living medieval Muslim physician Avicenna, and the Oxford logician A J "Freddie" Ayer. Equally fascinating is Hugh Miles's *Playing Cards in Cairo* (Abacus, £10.99), an insightful account of expat sloth and local suffering in the city Arabs call Umm el-Dunya, Mother of the World.

STEPHEN BAYLEY

It was an unusual pleasure to read Simon Henley's *The Architecture of Parking* (Thames & Hudson, £24.95). He's an architect who has made the parking garage his specialism. There are layers of postmodern irony in the subject of the multi-storey car park to match the levels of the concrete structures that dominate many city centres. I enjoy this elegy of the banal: we all use them, so let's understand and appreciate them. Henley's wonderfully original book is a Pevsner of parking. In delicious contrast is Dian Hansen's *The Big Book of Breasts* (Taschen, £29.99). Against Henley's structural brutalism, here is voluptuous naturalism. The breathtaking anaphrodisiac quality of so much dangling matter is weirdly consoling.

FATIMA BHUTTO

Roberto Saviano, the author of *Gomorrah* (Pan, £8.99), isn't just dishy: he's brave. The controversy behind his peek into the Camorra mafia has inspired Nobel laureates to come to the book's defence since the mob granted the author a death threat with a Christmas deadline. In *The Book of Other People* (Penguin, £7.99), Zadie Smith, Dave Eggers, and David Mitchell, among many others, band together for a volume dedicated to making up the strangest characters their imaginations could create. Mitchell's story is hilarious. Buy the book for him. For travel and history and a hefty dose of South Asian oddities, including eunuchs in Karachi (which is always nice), Alice Albinia's *Empires of the Indus* (John Murray, £20) hits the spot.

MARTIN BRIGHT

The Spy Who Tried to Stop a War by Marcia and Thomas Mitchell (PoliPoint Press, £14.95) is the almost forgotten story of Katharine Gun, the GCHQ translator who blew the whistle on a dirty tricks campaign to fix the UN vote on Iraq. It's a great account of extraordinary bravery in the face of a bullying state. I was also deeply impressed by Bernard Donoughue's *Downing Street Diaries, Volume Two* about his years with James Callaghan (Cape, £20). My favourite sub-plot is Dono ughue's pet project, which he is convinced will be a winner with the voters and turn around Labour's fortunes; unfortunately for him, the sale of council houses was only adopt ed when Mrs Thatcher came to power.

CRAIG BROWN

This has been a particularly good year for English - very English - autobiographies, among them Jeremy Lewis's bitty but comical *Grub Street Irregular* (HarperPress, £20), with its poignant and hilarious sketch of Barbara Skelton; Ferdinand Mount's elegant *Cold Cream* (Bloomsbury, £20), with its brilliantly vivid distillation of the heroine and the monster in Margaret Thatcher; and Simon Gray's final volume of diaries, *Coda* (Faber/Granta, £14.99) - as funny and sad as ever. A word, too, in praise of another cussed Englishman in Kitty Hauser's *Bloody Old Britain: OGS Crawford and the Archaeology of Modern Life* (Granta, £16.99), an accomplished dissection of an awkward life. A book which is in terrible danger of being overlooked, rather like its subject.

MICHAEL BYWATER

Perfumes: the Guide by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez (Profile, £20) is a must-read for anyone captivated, mystified or infuriated by the fragrance industry, whose clogged prose and peculiar imagery - insane women and posturing homoerotic muscle-men - are the nearest we get to selling pure image. The pair have invented a whole new way of describing what things smell like. Best of all, they treat perfumery as an art and judge it as such. Howard Jacobson's *The Act of Love* (Cape, £17.99) is no less strange, with its central propos ition that no man can truly love a woman unless she's giving herself to another man. Jacobson's exploration of the subject is infinitely subtle: the Chanel No 5 of paraphilias. The stylistic virtuoso at his most compelling.

TOM CAIN

The west is obsessed by the fight against terrorism: a threat so serious that we must apparently abandon our civil liberties to combat its menace. To read Misha Glenny's *McMafia: Crime Without Frontiers* (Bodley Head, £20) is to understand that our leaders have picked the wrong enemy. The danger of al-Qaeda is nothing compared with the havoc wrought by human traffickers, arms dealers and drug barons. Combining action-packed reportage with analysis, Glenny travels the world to depict the sheer scale, power and wealth of multinational crime as it fills the post-Cold War power vacuum. Few books in recent years have informed, inspired or terrified me as much.

RACHEL COOKE

Kate Summerscale's Victorian murder-mystery, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (Bloomsbury, £11.99), beautifully delineates the beginnings of tabloid news culture, while Susan Hill's short but immaculate novel, *The Beacon* (Chatto & Windus, £10), acts on her hunch that some misery memoirists are prone to embellishment, and examines the impact of one such volume on its author's family. It's fantastic: moral, and resonant. For sheer girlish pleasure, I recommend *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Shaffer (Bloomsbury, £12.99), an epistolary love story set in the Channel Islands shortly after the war. It might as well be by Dodie Smith, it's so comforting. A real satin coverlet of a book.

SAMIR EL-YOUSSEF

One expects to be depressed, or bored, reading about God and mortality, but I found Julian Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (Cape, £16.99) hugely enjoyable. He uses the autobiographical essay form, for which he has a natural knack, to reflect gently on personal belief and anxieties. However, the humorous anecdotes, soberly illuminating thoughts and quotations and, most of all, the neat prose make the book seem more about art than the morbid issues of deity and death. Edward Said's posthumous *Music at the Limits* (Bloomsbury, £20) is a stunning reminder of what a great critic and passionate artist he was. These brilliant essays and reviews has a range and depth that sustains the quality of his classic works.

DUNCAN FALLOWELL

St Petersburg and the British (Frances Lincoln £25), by Anthony Cross, is subtitled *The City Through the Eyes of British Visitors and Residents*. It is a glorious compendium of our love-hate affair with this most romantically strange of all European cities, beginning with Daniel Defoe and ending with Bel Mooney. *Moscow & St Petersburg 1900-1920: Art, Life & Culture of the Russian Silver Age* (Thames & Hudson, £24.95), by John Bowlt, covers the modernist explosion in the fine arts and design in these two Russian cities. Packed with hundreds of colour pictures, it's wonderful value, with an intelligent text and very informative captions. My only reservation is that the two cities should be reversed in the title, since it was St Petersburg which really mythologised the period. *Art & Sex* by Gray Watson (I B Tauris, £14.99) is a cool survey of one of the most provocative aspects of postwar European and American art. Watson demonstrates, using sex as his example, how adventurous art can transform society.

NIALL FERGUSON

The book that gave me most pleasure this year was Simon Schama's exhilarating hymn to liberal America, *The American Future: a History* (Bodley Head, £20). It's an extraordinary piece of writing, which brilliantly illuminates

the deep roots of Barack Obama's presidential election victory. Far less well timed - indeed, about five years behind the zeitgeist - was Philip Bobbitt's *Terror and Consent: the Wars for the Twenty-first Century* (Allen Lane, £25). Yet when terrorism rears its ugly ahead again (as it surely will), this is the book we'll hope Obama has read.

RYAN GILBEY

Two recent collections of journalism use absurdity to draw blood. *Spoilers* (£13.30, available online at www.lulu.com) gathers together film writing by the claws-out, trash-happy critic Anne Billson. *We Need to Talk About Kevin Keegan* (Penguin, £7.99) shows the sports writer Giles Smith at the peak of his powers, riffing on everything from Lee Sharpe going to seed on *Celebrity Love Island* to the Kit-Kat's status as the pre-eminent half-time snack. Back of the net, Smith - as I believe the parlance has it.

JO GLANVILLE

Ma Jian’s Beijing Coma (Chatto & Windus) is a devastating political satire on the silencing of a generation. Dai Wei has been lying in a coma since he was shot during the Tiananmen Square protests – his memory and consciousness link past and present in a searing and moving critique of modern China. Its publication marked an important counterpoint to the Olympic spectacle. Sara Maitland’s enthralling exploration of absolute solitude in A Book of Silence (Granta) is a personal and cultural journey into the meaning of silence. Her courage and candour in this beautifully written book raise profound existential questions about the way we live our lives. A disturbing and illuminating read. Malu Halasa is one of the most original writers and editors covering the Middle East. Her two books this year The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie (Chronicle Books, written with Rana Salam) and Transit Tehran (Garnet Publishing, edited with Maziar Bahari) are witty, sumptuous and genuinely revelatory. They’re also superbly produced and designed.

MISHA GLENNY

The cumbersomely titled *The Gods that Failed: How Blind Faith in Markets Has Cost Us Our Future* by Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson (Bodley Head, £12.99) is a superbly timed, trenchant analysis of the Anglo-American political culture that has turned the sober profession of banking into a supercasino where the house always wins. *The Consequences of Love* by Sulaiman Addonia (Chatto & Windus, £12.99) is a beautiful love story set in Saudi Arabia. Dodging the scrutiny of the religious police and predatory older men, the hero is a teenage refugee. One day a young woman in a burqa drops a love letter in front of him, confessing her affection. He falls in love with her despite identifying her only through her pink shoes. Rendered in crisp language, this simple plot develops into an acute political novel. A real gem - don't miss it.

JOHN GRAY

I found the greatest pleasure this year in new editions of near-forgotten masterpieces. Tom Stacey's *The Man Who Knew Everything* (Capuchin, £6.99) is the story of a once-famous foreign correspondent's last days and the overthrow of his friend, the aged ruler of an imaginary Gulf emirate. An evocation of old-time Fleet Street and a laconic narrative of failure and mortality, it's one of the few books I've ever read that I finished in one sitting, and then immediately had to read again. Ivan Bunin (1870-1953) is one of the great short-story writers of all time - at his best as good as, or better than, Chekhov (I know this sounds impossible). He is widely admired in his homeland but little read elsewhere. *Dark Avenues* (Oneworld Classics, £9.99), his last collection, is lyrical, sensuous and elegiac. Vignettes of pre-revolutionary Russia and life in the Russian diaspora show Bunin at the height of his powers.

ROBERT HANKS

Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read* (Granta, £12) isn't as silly or smart-arsed as the title suggests. It's really a guide to maintaining a healthy, guilt-free relationship with books. I found it liberating. Paul Willetts and Black Spring Press have been spearheading the revival of Julian Maclaren-Ross, leading light of

Forties bohemia and a thoroughly objectionable man. This admirable project has culminated with his *Selected Letters* (£9.95), in which whingeing and scrounging are elevated into art by the sheer clarity of his prose.

OWEN HATHERLEY

Christmas ghosts (past): *Bright Underground Spaces* by David Lawrence (Capital Transport Publishing, £25) is a gorgeously illustrated monograph on the work of Charles Holden, the London Underground's architect of choice in the interwar years. It is full of haunting monochrome images of his extraordinary and abortive attempts to make the commuter belt into a modern metropolis, with the smog and the mock Tudor always lurking in the corner of the frame. Ghosts (present): *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, edited by Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk (New Press, £11.99), is an anthology charting how the gated community has become a new spatial paradigm, from the tax-avoidance ship to the amoral outposts of the UAE. Ghosts (future): *Savage Messiah 10: Abandoned London*, the most recent issue of painter and psycho geographer Laura Oldfield Ford's urbanist zine, is an oneiric vision of a depopulated, post-catastrophe capital, pieced together from snatched conversations and reminiscences, set in a landscape of the labyrinthine ruins of 1960s architecture and today's negative-equity banlieue.

NOREENA HERTZ

Psalm 119 by Heather McRobie (Maia Press, £8.99) is a thoughtful, touching coming-of-age story that also succeeds in insightfully weaving into the narrative the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. McRobie has written an original, moving and intelligent debut novel that jettisons stereotypes and preconceived ideas. It is a wonderful read.

SEBASTIAN HORSLEY

And I thought I was depraved. The hand of God, reaching down into the mire, couldn't elevate Tony O'Neill to the depths of depravity. Just when you think he has scraped the bottom of the barrel of indecency, he lowers the bottom. *Down and Out on Murder Mile* (Harper Perennial, £8.99) is funny, moving and completely authentic. It is a map of hell with directions showing his readers exactly how to get there. Clayton Littlewood's *Dirty White Boy - Tales of Soh*o (Cleis Press, £8.99) is tender, warm and full of humanity. Soho is like an upturned dustbin and Littlewood like a drunk rummaging through it.

VERONICA HORWELL

Pushkin Press's small, square, careful reprints give me the same kick as buying sheets of fine drawing paper, the crisp promise of an interesting night ahead. So far my favourite is the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (£9.99), the memoirs of the great stage clown, as rewritten by Charles Dickens, aged 25 in 1837 and otherwise working on *Oliver Twist*. A tragic life - the hard physical labour of pantomime crippled Joey's limbs as family losses broke his heart - with truly peculiar stories of suburban crime, of his posh mate Lord Byron, of thieved geese and sausages, of fortunes found and substantial box-office takings lost. Like an extra Dickens novel, only so much weirder.

ANTHONY HOWARD

The biography I most enjoyed this year was Stephen Robinson's *The Remarkable Lives of Bill Deedes* (Little, Brown, £20). It brings that indestructible *Telegraph* figure back to life in a splendid way and, without diminishing him, allows us the occasional glimpse of feet of clay. An equal tour de force is Jonathan Dimbleby's *Russia: a Journey to the Heart of a Land and its People* (BBC Books, £25). Published to coincide with the author's successful sum mer TV series, it is much more than the book of the film. Politically perceptive, it makes a formidable case against Vladimir Putin as someone of whom the world would be wise to be wary.

KEVIN JACKSON

Simon Winchester's *Bomb, Book and Compass: Joseph Needham and the Great Secrets of China* (Viking, £20) was an entertaining introduction to the greatest Sinologist Britain has ever produced, and one of its greatest polymaths. Needham, whose masterwork is the multi-volume *Science and Civilisation in China* (still in progress), not only brought the west's attention to the fact that China anticipated many supposedly Occidental inventions by

decades or even centuries, but opened paths of intellectual communication that may well grow more essential for both cultures. His obituaries compared him with Erasmus; they may have been too grudging. Richard Holmes's *The Age of Wonder* (HarperPress, £25), an account of science and feeling in the Romantic period, was splendidly thoughtful and thought-provoking: a delight.

RHODA KOENIG

In *Semi-Invisible Man* (Cape, £25), Julian Evans makes a full-bodied figure of the elusive Norman Lewis, the brilliant adventurer in South-east Asia, Spain and southern Italy, who dared not only to uncover the Mafia's secrets but to marry into it. Evans matched Lewis's curiosity and evocative writing with his own accomplished observation and penetration in this portrait of a writer who was not only a fascinating man but a good one. Less sympathetic but more glamorous are the theatrical dynasties chronicled by Michael Holroyd in *A Strange Eventful History* (Chatto & Windus, £25). Bring ing alive not only his dead subjects (Henry Irving and Ellen Terry) but their long-gone perform ances, Holroyd magically reconstructs the gaslit extravagance of Victorian theatre and the character of Terry's son, Edward Gordon Craig, who dedicated himself to smashing it to bits.

JOHN LANCHESTER

It was an especially good year for new non-fiction. Patrick French's *The World Is What It Is: the Authorised Biography of V S Naipaul* (Picador, £20) is an extraordinary book. If it isn't the best biography ever written of a living subject, I'd be curious to know what is. I also hugely enjoyed Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (Bloomsbury, £11.99), Ferdinand Mount's *Cold Cream* (Bloomsbury, £20) and Graham Robb's *The Discovery of France* (Picador, £9.99). From the fiction shelves, three very different corkers: Richard Price's *Lush Life* (Bloomsbury, £12.99) - he writes for *The Wire*, so anyone who likes that should like this; Geraldine Brooks' *People of the Book* (HarperPerrenial, £7.99); and Will Self's *Liver* (Viking, £18.99).

ALYSSA MCDONALD

David Sedaris seems to have softened a bit in his old age: in his latest volume of loosely autobiographical essays, *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* (Little, Brown, £11.99), he only compares a member of his family with a confused prostitute once. But it would still be hard to find a more savagely funny rumination on mortality published this year. Shena Mackay's collection of short stories, *The Atmospheric Railway* (Cape, £17.99), is a gentler read but just as dark - the scenarios she describes range from the mundane to the eccentric, but her observations of the tiniest details are always so accurate that it is impossible not to be drawn in.

BEN MARKOVITS

I came across a copy of *Rosemary's Baby* in a secondhand shop, the novel by Ira Levin, first published 40 years ago. He died last year. It was a real pulpy paperback: blood-red cover, with a fringe of looming gothic Manhattan real estate on the bottom. In fact, it's beautifully and simply written. All the horror lets him get away with a quietly observed novel about living in New York: the little familiarities of strangers, the search for apartments, the odd neighbours. Loneliness and excitement playing off each other. The horror isn't bad, either. As a metaphor for the strangeness of childbirth Satanism works pretty well.

DAVID MARQUAND

I had always admired John Stuart Mill, but I had always found him a slightly forbidding figure. Richard Reeves's brilliant and mind-expanding biography of Mill, *Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic, £12.99), shows, with wonderful insight and empathy, that Mill was not just an awe-inspiring polymath but a passionate and generous radical who fought for justice and against tyranny. David Owen's fascinating *In Sickness and in Power* (Methuen, £25) is a study of the medical conditions of rulers ranging from Anthony Eden to JFK and from the Shah of Persia to François Mitterrand. Which is more alarming: the fact that they all suffered from illnesses that would have debarred them from top-level positions in almost any other walk of life, or the systematic deception that concealed their true condition from the people they led? A book to give you sleepless nights.

ANDREW MARTIN

I choose *The Second Plane* by Martin Amis (Cape, £12.99). This year I have gone hoarse at two dinner parties sticking up for Amis, which, given that he is obviously the best prose writer of his time, is rather exasperating. Not that he really needs my help. He'll be back in fashion any time now. Two of my favourite books are *Shout!*, Philip Norman's biography of the Beatles (I remember sitting in silence for about 15 minutes after finishing it), and *Babycham Night*, his memoir of growing up on the Isle of Wight. His Lennon biography, *John Lennon: the Life* (HarperCollins, £25), which I am halfway through, is equally magnetic.

JONATHAN MEADES

Dylan Jones is a lad-mag editor who evidently has a sideline in advanced proctology. His surgical removal of several metres of Dave's bowel in order to accommodate his tongue, nose and entire bald bonce belongs more to the history of medical marvels than it does to that of mere sycophancy. We should be grateful. *Cameron on Cameron: Conversations with Dylan Jones* (Fourth Estate, £12.99) is a major work of entirely unintended comedy. And it's also a warning. Dave, given every opportunity to shine, reveals himself as gormless, platitudinous and even more vapid than Toni. *Going as Far as I Can* by Duncan Fallowell (Profile, £12.99) is a vision that doesn't go away. Duncan's New Zealand supersedes all previous versions of that country. It's a place which, far from being green and geysered, feels friable, dusty and dry as parchment. The buildings crumble, the people are ghosts. If the author, too, is a revenant, he enjoyed his former life as de Chirico. The text has the movement of a dream.

SHAZIA MIRZA

Everyone’s got an autobiography out. People who I’ve never even heard of have got colossal books out the size of the Himalayas. I don’t understand it. Surely no one’s life is really that interesting. I can understand Nelson Mandela having a monumental book out, but not some topless model from series five of some reality show on a cable channel in China. The best autobiography I’ve read so far has to be Julie Walters's That’s Another Story (Weidenfeld & Nicholson). It’s funny, evocative, honest, self depreciating but not too revealing. She has great stories to tell and describes them with candour. From her humble beginnings on the outskirts of Birmingham, becoming a nurse, and then the long road to Hollywood are all sprinkled with funny stories often told from her being the outsider. My favourite one being her getting very drunk at an awards ceremony where she was on a table where she knew no one. Lacking in confidence and feeling out of place she gets very drunk, wins an award, hobbles onto the stage to collect it, can’t speak and says "thank you" around 100 times to Michael Aspel. While she struggles to make it back to her table upright Aspel turns to the audience and says "She could have at least said thank you!" and brings the house down. Wonderful stories told with great humanity.

EDWARD PLATT

Raised "like a veal" in the Orthodox Jewish town of Monsey, New York, Shalom Auslander learnt 14 different names for God, and countless reasons for fearing His righteous anger. His memoir, *Foreskin's Lament* (Picador, £12.99), records his childhood tribulations and attempts to escape the strait-jacket of religious conformity. It's very funny, and very angry. *Lords of the Land*, by Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar (Nation Books, £17.99), explores another aspect of Jewish fundamentalism: the religiously inspired movement to settle the occupied territories. It's an essential resource - exhaustively researched and vividly written. I also enjoyed J G Ballard's autobiography, *Miracles of Life* (Fourth Estate, £14.99). Written in his characteristically lucid prose, it provides a new perspective on a life that has been as rich and unexpected as his fiction.

AGNÈS POIRIER

I like angry authors. His 54th book to date, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's latest novel, *Ritournelle de la Faim* (Gallimard, £17.99), which will undoubtedly be translated into English after its author won the Nobel Prize for Literature, is of a quiet, grave and classic beauty. Set in Paris in the 1930s, it tells the story of Ethel, a young woman who must save herself and her parents, torn by the age's politics and their hatred for each other. I

recommend American historian Susan Jacoby's *The Age of American Unreason* (Old Street Publishing, £18.99), which offers a pugnacious take on America's dumbing down. From junk food to junk thought, Jacoby draws a map of a country in which the values of the Enlightenment have been superseded by 24-hour infotain ment and anti-rational fundamentalism.

ANTONIA QUIRKE

My Judy Garland Life by Susie Boyt (Virago Press, £15.99) was a breathtaking surge, documenting the author's lifelong worship of the actress. The prologue alone was packed with enough love and proof to carry most memoirs. Boyt is a curious individual - super-alert to suffering and grief, but a believer in the primacy of glamour, of putting on a good dress and a brave face, of keeping your blouse shipshape and your cocktail shaker crystal - and always being cautious for your poor heart, because she has ripped open hers and it's hurting enough for the rest of us. Yes, the show must go on. It did for Judy - and so it sure as hell must for us. *Dreams from my Father* by Barack Obama (Canongate Books, £8.99): you scan it looking for a chink in the armour, for evidence of something diminished, something lacking and never finding it once. If you want proof that he is a good thing, it's all in here. A person simply cannot lie over 300 pages of prose. In the end, the soul will out. And it does - and some.

SIGRID RAUSING

All the books that have had a profound effect on me are about dislocation, the notion of home, longing and belonging. Adam Nicolson's *Sissinghurst: an Unfinished History* (HarperPress, £20) appealed to me, I think, for essentially the same reason. It is the story of how Nicolson and his family moved back into Sissinghurst as National Trust tenants, and the long negotiation to restore the land of Sissinghurst to an organic farm. It's about a tremendous rootedness - Adam's relationship to the land and the house is profound and knowledgeable - and about dislocation: a home lost twice, once when his mother left his father and Sissinghurst turned cold and quiet, and a second time to the National Trust. Anthony Doerr's book about moving to Rome with his wife and newborn twins, *Four Seasons in Rome* (Fourth Estate, £8.99), is also about dislocation, from the Midwest to Rome, and from childlessness to fatherhood, written with Doerr's simultaneous intimacy and detachment.

CARNE ROSS

There are a lot of books about international relations, the world and how to see it, but very few that report how the world actually is. Parag Khanna is a young American scholar who took the trouble to travel to the world that others pontificate about. *The Second World* (Allen Lane, £25) is part travelogue - from Argentina to Uzbekistan - and part thoughtful analysis of an emerging "second" world. While not all his conclusions are right, you do not always have to be right to be interesting. *Peeling the Onion* (Harvill Secker, £18.99), Günter Grass's autobiography, has been much commented on for its revelation of his SS past. But it is a great deal more: a thoughtful, subtle reflection on the early life of a writer, a boy, a father, a sometime sculptor, a lover and an observer of the complex whorls of the German past. The translation by Michael Henry Heim is superb, rendering the complex and alliterative German into rich, dense prose. A masterpiece.

SUKHDEV SANDHU

Air France. The Tough Alliance. Jens Lekman. Swedish pop music, so airy and heartfelt, so dreamy and so danceable, has been winning fans for a good few years now. Few people though know much about that country’s rich punk tradition. Peter Jandreus’s The Encyclopaedia of Swedish Punk 1977-1987 (Premium Publishing) is a lovingly researched and presented compendium of discographies, flyers and sleeve-art photos that honours forgotten bands such as Raped Teenagers, Shit Kids and Zeppo and the Zepp Zepps (fronted by Harpo of ‘Moviestar’ fame). Peel favourites Rude Kids, best known for their "Raggare Is A Bunch of Motherfuckers" 7-inch, also appear. All in all, it’s a wonderful corrective to the Anglo-American focus of so much punk historiography. Bill Wells is a Scottish bassist and pianist who has for many years drifted elegantly and independently across jazz, Japanese folk and progressive pop. The Loathsome Reel Book (available from http://www.monorailmusic.com/)

is a gorgeous collection of sheet-music, illustrated by Annabel Wright of the enduringly enchanting Glaswegian band The Pastels that is as delightful to gaze at as, accompanied by a 61-song CD, it is to hear.

ZIAUDDIN SARDAR

Bhikhu Parekh's *A New Politics of Identity* (Palgrave, £19.99) sums up the thoughts of a political philosopher who has devoted his life to thinking about multiculturalism. Lord Parekh explores the changing nature of different kinds of identities and develops new political principles that should guide human relations between and within societies. It is a profound meditation on how to be truly human in an increasingly dehumanised and globalised world. The end results of unbridled modernity are well described by Christopher Davidson in his eye-opening portrait of *Dubai* (Hurst & Co, £25). Dubai's remarkable transformation from a sleepy fishing community to the foremost shopping complex and property market of the Arabian Gulf is not without serious consequence. It is now the best global example of the city of the living dead.

ALEXEI SAYLE

I haven't read much fiction this year as other's authors styles seem to seep into my own writing - there's one short story I've been working on for years that suffers from a particularly persistent Saul Bellow infection - but one book I enjoyed was Andrew Miller's One Morning Like a Bird (Sceptre). I don't usually like books with the sort of meticulous research he's employed but here it really works. Apart from that I'm half way through Tony Judt's Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945 (Heinemann). I can't wait to find out how it ends.

FRANCES STONOR SAUNDERS

Mark Thompson's *The White War* (Faber, £25) is a brilliant account of the "lost front" of the First World War, which opened with the unprovoked Italian assault on Austria in May 1915. He describes in harrowing detail a war measured out in vertical inches ("Flanders, tilted at 30 to 40 degrees"), and reveals the deceit and incompetence of the military and political class that committed Italy to this insane adventure. My other choice is a literary Christmas stocking: a film script by Patrick Marber, an insider account of the Adolf Eichmann diaries, a guide to the cemeteries of Europe, and the culmination of one of the century's great elegiac sequences by Christopher Reid, all wrapped up in the new issue of *Areté* magazine. John Updike has described *Areté*, edited by Craig Raine and now in its tenth year, as "a journal as exquisite in its execution as in its intentions".

JOHN SWEENEY

Stepping on to Oleg's gin tug this summer I would have felt outclassed, but thankfully I had a copy of *The Age of Assassins: the Rise and Rise of Vladimir Putin* (Gibson Square, £16.99) by Yuri Felshtinsky and Vladimir Pribylovsky. The front cover has a nice snap of Vlad looking like a really scary small bouncer outside a nightclub. The text is a chaotic muddle of dodgy deals and horrible murders, but you end up wondering why quite so many of Vlad's critics have ended up dead. History for me jumps straight from 1066 to Henry VIII to Hitler with virtually nothing in between. so E H Gombrich's *A Little History of the World* (Yale, £6.99) joined the dots of global history - the naming of China, Therms, the Huns, the Visigoths - brilliant scholarship, worn lightly and no donnish tomfoolery.

HEATHER THOMPSON

Poor old London - its modern-day, money-grabbing grubbiness has rarely been exposed as eloquently as it is in Emily Perkins's *Novel About My Wife* (Bloomsbury, £12.99). Tom is a screenwriter, grimly trying to balance an ever-more overdrawn bank account with the stubborn remains of his artistic integrity. He and his sexily eccentric artist wife Ann are too poor to live in a really nice neighbourhood, but too middle class not to fear hooded youths. Perkins describes their downward spiral with empathy, wit and skewering insight. Equally skilful, but worlds apart in style and substance, *Sea of Poppies* (John Murray, £7.99) deserved its Booker nomination. Amitav Ghosh manages to combine a sharp look at the grievous effects of the Indian opium trade with humour, adventure and a vivid cast of (nearly) hundreds.

MARINA WARNER

In *The Baby in the Mirror: a Child's World from Birth to Three* (Granta, £12.99), a new father tries to empathise with his daughter's inner workings as she begins to relate to the world - and to others, including himself. Charles Fernyhough is a psychologist and writer of fiction, and he illuminates this intense tie between parent and child with a rare, tender, day-to-day absorption. The result is a double portrait: fascinating, unsettling and highly original. *The Novel* (Princeton University Press, £19.95 each), a hugely ambitious two-volume study edited by Franco Moretti, explores fiction with a capaciousness that's exhilarating as well as eye-opening, as a galactic crew of critics swoop in on subjects ranging from ancient China to Toni Morrison.

PETER WILBY

I found Nick Davies's *Flat Earth News* (Chatto & Windus, £17.99) a brilliant account of what has gone wrong with British journalism over the past 20 years. Reporters, columnists and feature writers are spoon-fed by a swollen public relations industry, propagating a partial view of the world on behalf of the rich and powerful. I also enjoyed Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke* (Simon & Schuster, £20), a riveting account of the early stages of the Second World War. Using a series of documentary snapshots, Baker argues that the war wasn't fought for humanitarian or democratic ends and that it is doubtful that it saved lives. His case is a pacifist one, which I do not accept, but I found it stimulating, and the parallels with the Iraq War are instructive.

FRANCIS WHEEN

If you're present-hunting, hunt no further than *McKie's Gazetteer: a Local History of Britain* by David McKie (Atlantic, £30), our greatest living explorer of forgotten byways. The book is one long digression, meandering from the River Aan to Zoze Point, pausing en route at a submerged medieval village, a modern caravan park - Barbaraville, named in honour of Barbara Cartland - and a bleak patch of Sussex known as Poverty Bottom. *Vaut le détour*, as Michelin would say. Snappers-up of unconsidered trifles will also love *I Once Met: Chance Encounters with the Famous and Infamous* (Oldie Publications, £7.99), a collection of richly comic vignettes. Contributors include the plumber who fixed Anthony Powell's kitchen sink and the shopkeeper who sold Enoch Powell a washer for his garden tap.