

The 10 Best Books of 2009 By THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

After so many years, and so many lists, you might think the task of choosing the 10 Best Books would get easier. If only. The sublime story collections alone created agonies of indecision. So did the superb literary biographies we read — and deeply admired. But in the end the decisions had to be made.

Not that drawing up the list — or rather, whittling it down — was a wholly painful exercise. One of the pleasures it afforded was the chance to resample the sometimes surprising chemistry of reviewers and authors, particularly when it came to fiction. Jonathan Lethem, whose “Chronic City” made our list, reviewed Lorrie Moore’s novel “A Gate at the Stairs,” which made it too, while Curtis Sittenfeld, whose novel “Prep” was one of the 10 Best in 2005, reviewed Maile Meloy’s story collection “Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It,” a winner this year. Any book review editor will attest that persuading fiction writers to assess other people’s fiction can be a struggle. These were heartening exceptions to the rule. May more novelists review for us in 2010!

This list will appear in print in the Dec. 13 Book Review. —*The Editors*

BOTH WAYS IS THE ONLY WAY I WANT IT *By Maile Meloy (F)*

In an exceptionally strong year for short fiction, Meloy’s concise yet fine-grained narratives, whether set in Montana, an East Coast boarding school or a 1970s nuclear power plant, shout out with quiet restraint and calm precision. Her flawed characters — ranch hands in love, fathers and daughters — rarely act in

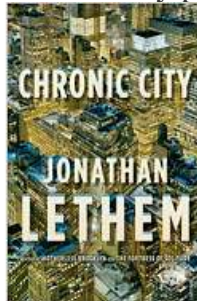
their own best interests and often betray those closest to them.



CHRONIC CITY *By Jonathan Lethem (F)*

Lethem’s eighth novel unfolds in an alternative-reality Manhattan. The crowded canvas includes a wantonly destructive escaped tiger (or is it a subway excavator?) prowling the streets, a cruel gray fog engulfing Wall Street, a “war free” edition of The New York Times, a character stranded on the dying International Space Station, strange and

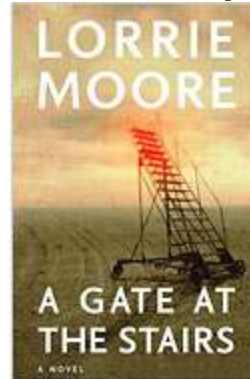
valuable vaselike objects called chaldrons, colossal cheeseburgers and some extremely potent marijuana.



A GATE AT THE STAIRS *By Lorrie Moore (F)*

Moore's captivating novel, her first in more than a decade, is set in 2001 and narrated by a Wisconsin college student who hungers for worldly experience and finds it when she takes a job baby-sitting for a bohemian couple who are trying to adopt a mixed-race child. Meanwhile, she drifts into a love affair with an enigmatic classmate and feels the pressing claims of her own family, above

all her affectless younger brother, who enlists in the military after 9/11.



HALF BROKE HORSES: A True-Life Novel *By Jeannette Walls (F)*

In her luminous memoir, “[The Glass Castle](#),” Walls told of being raised by eccentric and unfit parents. Now, in a novel based on family lore, she has adopted the voice of her maternal grandmother, Lily Casey Smith — mustang breaker, schoolteacher, ranch wife, bootlegger, poker player, racehorse rider and bush pilot. The result re-

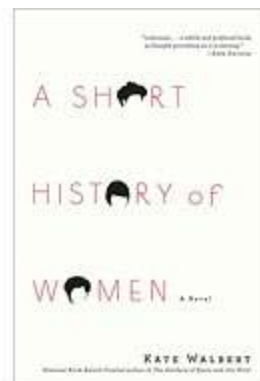
animates a chapter of America's frontier past.



A SHORT HISTORY OF WOMEN *By Kate Walbert (F)*

The 15 lean, concentrated chapters in this exquisitely written novel alternate among the lives of a British suffragist and a handful of her Anglo-American descendants. The theme is feminism, but Walbert is keenly alert to male preoccupations and the impressions they leave on the lives of her female cast. Walbert's prose, cool and intelligent, captures the many ways we silence and

are silenced, the ways we see and hear as we struggle to grasp hold of meaning.

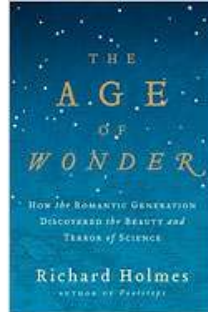


THE AGE OF WONDER: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science

By Richard Holmes (509.41)

Holmes harnesses the twin energies of scientific curiosity and poetic invention in this superb intellectual history, which recreates a glorious period, some 200 years ago, when figures like William Herschel, Humphry Davy and Joseph Banks brought “a new imaginative intensity and excitement to scientific work,” and literary giants like Coleridge

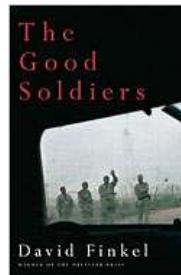
and Keats responded giddily to these breakthroughs, finding in them an empirical basis for their own faith in human betterment.



THE GOOD SOLDIERS *By David Finkel (956.7)*

Finkel, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and editor at The Washington Post, gives full voice to his subjects, infantry soldiers from Fort Riley, Kan. (average age 19), posted in the lethal reaches of Baghdad at the height of the “surge.” Finkel’s own perspective emerges through spare descriptions — of a

roadside bombing or the tortured memories of a single soldier — that capture the harrowing realities of war.



LIT: A Memoir *By Mary Karr (B)*

This sequel to “[The Liars’ Club](#)” and “[Cherry](#)” is also a master class on the art of the memoir. Mordantly funny, free of both self-pity and sentimentality, Karr describes her attempts to untether herself from her troubled family in rural Texas, her development as a poet and writer, and her struggles to navigate

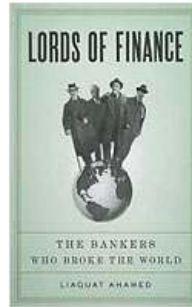
marriage and young motherhood even as she descends into alcoholism.



LORDS OF FINANCE: The Bankers Who Broke the World *By Liaquat Ahamed (332.109)*

The parallels with our own moment are impossible to miss in Ahamed's narrative about four members of "the most exclusive club in the world," central bankers who dominated global finance in the post-World War I era. Ahamed, a longtime investment manager, evokes in glittering detail a

volatile time of financial bubbles followed by busts, all of it guided by players wedded to economic orthodoxy.



RAYMOND CARVER: A Writer's Life *By Carol Sklenicka (B)*

Ten years in the making, this prodigiously researched and meticulous biography sympathetically and adroitly integrates its subject's work with the turbulent life — marred by alcoholism, financial turmoil and family discord — that brought it into being. Sklenicka shrewdly deconstructs Carver's fraught

relationship with Gordon Lish, the editor who played an outsize role in the creation of Carver's stories, the most influential of a generation.

