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Janet Maslin's Top 10 Books of 2010

THE IMPERFECTIONISTS by Tom Rachman. This debut novel by a former journalist is a splendid original, the hilarious yet wrenching half-century story of a newspaper's rise and fall. But this book is bigger than the life cycle of any one profession. Mr. Rachman structures his story so wittily and unpredictably that figuring out where it's headed is half the fun. (Dial Press, \$25)

SAVAGES by Don Winslow. Mr. Winslow wrote 12 previous crime novels before "Savages," the one that jolts him into a different league. Boisterously stylish, outrageously brazen, this is a ferocious, wisecracking, high-wire act about a Southern California drug deal gone wrong. A snow-white opening page with a two-word obscenity establishes Mr. Winslow's indelible, no-prisoners narrative style. (Simon & Schuster, \$25)

JUST KIDS by Patti Smith. The most enchantingly evocative memoir of funky-but-chic New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s that any alumnus has yet committed to print. Ms. Smith's time with the artist Robert Mapplethorpe in "a doll's house in the Twilight Zone" — the Chelsea Hotel — is summoned with both nostalgic innocence and sharp perspicacity, as are the period's showy luminaries. As she writes exactly of Andy Warhol, "I hated the soup and felt little for the can." (Ecco, \$27)

FAITHFUL PLACE by Tana French. Ms. French's third novel is an Irish mystery story and a richly enveloping family story too. She draws a piercingly astute portrait of the Mackeys, a Dublin clan riven by old secrets, grievances and sibling squabbles. The unsolved disappearance of a neighborhood girl, Rosie Daly, once broke the heart of Frank Mackey, her abandoned sweetheart. But it sets off sparks now that Frank is a middle-aged undercover detective — and there's a suddenly a chance that Rosie may be found. (Viking, \$25.95)

A GREAT UNRECORDED HISTORY: A NEW LIFE OF E. M. FORSTER by Wendy Moffat. This new look at what Ms. Moffat calls Forster's "strange broken-backed career" casts fascinating light on why, after publishing classic works including "A Room With a View" and "Howards End," this towering novelist kept the last two-thirds of his life under wraps. His biographer traces a long, heretofore mostly hidden life and makes it clear why the homosexual Forster, in his last years, looked back so angrily at the world that had forced him to hide his true nature. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$32.50)

FIFTH AVENUE, 5. A.M.: AUDREY HEPBURN, BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S, AND THE DAWN OF THE MODERN WOMAN by Sam Wasson. A bonbon of a book about the making of the movie "Breakfast at Tiffany's," filled with all the delightful anecdotes and none of the dull ones. Its knowledgeable author looks fondly and incisively at the arsenal of tricks that turned Truman Capote's risqué heroine into the bewitching Audrey Hepburn of Blake Edwards's frothy classic. A book as well tailored as the little black dress the movie made famous. (Harper Studio, \$19.99)

61 HOURS by Lee Child. The craftiest and most highly evolved thriller in Mr. Child's smashing Jack Reacher series, even if 2010 also brought the too-smashing, more head-busting follow-up, "Worth Dying For." In the interests of pure gamesmanship, not to mention knuckle-whitening suspense, Mr. Child threw aside his own conventions and did everything differently this time. Thigh-high snowdrifts, precise logistics and a mania for detail made this the robust, he-man version of a closed-town Agatha Christie story. (Delacorte, \$28)

THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS: THE EPIC STORY OF AMERICA'S GREAT MIGRATION by Isabel Wilkerson. In a book that is, quite amazingly, her first, Ms. Wilkerson pulls off an all-but-impossible feat: she documents the migration of black Americans across their own country on a grand,

panoramic scale but also a very intimate one. This work of living history boils down to the tenderly told stories of three rural Southerners who leave their hometowns to emigrate to big cities during the days of Jim Crow. For anyone who has never imagined what it was like for a black man to drive from Louisiana to California without being free to pull off the road and sleep, Ms. Wilkerson puts many such stories on the page. (Random House, \$30)

THE DEATH OF AMERICAN VIRTUE: CLINTON VS. STARR by Ken Gormley. Another work of living history that's full of real voices, including the remarkable ones of former President Bill Clinton and the former special prosecutor Ken Starr. With an exhaustive list of interviewees who attest to Mr. Gormley's impartiality, including some who could not speak freely while under fire, this law professor coaxes forth the dizzyingly convoluted legal mess that plagued the Clinton presidency and led to impeachment hearings. He has pieced together a book that's no cinch to read but is certain to age well thanks to its comprehensiveness. The title leaves no doubt as to how much bipartisan damage Mr. Gormley thinks was done, and the price he thinks we all paid. (Crown, \$35)

MAJOR PETTIGREW'S LAST STAND by Helen Simonson. Funny, barbed, winsome storytelling from a first-time novelist shaping an odd-couple romance. When the rigidly correct British widower of the title meets the dignified, elegant, conveniently widowed Mrs. Ali, he scandalizes his provincial neighbors and sets off a slew of screwball consequences. A bit formulaic and pat, perhaps, but noncopycat mainstream fiction was in oddly short supply this year. With a nod to the genteel flair of Alexander McCall Smith, Ms. Simonson delivers an old-school charmer. (Random House, \$25)

Michiko Kakutani's Top 10 Books of 2010

LIFE by Keith Richards with James Fox. Written with uncommon candor, eloquence and humor, this electrifying memoir channels its author's love of music, even as it creates an indelible portrait of the era when rock 'n' roll came of age. It's a book that does a high-def, high-velocity job of conjuring the past, be it the author's small-town childhood or the madness that was life on the road with the Rolling Stones — a book in which Mr. Richards has magically translated the fierce emotion of his guitar playing to the page. (Little, Brown & Company, \$29.99)

CLEOPATRA: A LIFE by Stacy Schiff. In her captivating new biography Ms. Schiff adroitly strips away the accretions of myth that have built up around the Egyptian queen and plucks off the imaginative embroiderings of Shakespeare, Shaw and Elizabeth Taylor. In place of history's sex kitten Cleopatra stands revealed as a charismatic and capable politician — a historical figure way more complex and compelling than any fictional creation. (Little, Brown & Company, \$29.99)

LETTERS by Saul Bellow. Edited by Benjamin Taylor. By turns cranky and charming, ruminative and cocky, Saul Bellow was a gifted and emotionally voluble letter writer. And this absorbing collection of his correspondence creates a sharp-edged self-portrait of the artist as a close spiritual relative of his heroes: a seeker and searcher, vacillating between the emotional poles of exuberance and depression; a self-made writer, adept at spinning his philosophical ideas and romantic ups and downs into fiction. (Viking, \$35)

SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY by Gary Shteyngart. This super-sad, super-funny novel not only showcases its author's super-caffeinated comic gifts, but also uncovers his abilities to write movingly about love and heartbreak. Set in the near future in a toxic New York City, this is a novel that manages to mash up an apocalyptic satire with a tragic romance and make the whole thing wondrously work. (Random House, \$26)

FREEDOM by Jonathan Franzen. The author's most deeply felt novel yet, "Freedom" is both a gripping portrait of a dysfunctional family and a telling, wide-angled snapshot of our troubled times. The book showcases its author's impressive literary tool kit — all the essential storytelling skills, along with lots of bells and whistles — and his ability to throw open a big, Updikean window on American middle-class life. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$28)

FRANK: THE VOICE by James Kaplan. This is a biography that reads like a novel, a portrait of Frank Sinatra that captures his gifts and contradictions: the tough guy known for his tender love songs; the ring-a-ding-ding Vegas sophisticate with an existential outlook on life; the jaunty heartthrob who turned his own heartache over Ava Gardner into classic torch songs. Mr. Kaplan does a nimble, brightly evocative job

of tracing the development of Sinatra's art, and his remarkable rise and fall and rise again before the age of 40. (Doubleday, \$35)

CRISIS ECONOMICS: A CRASH COURSE IN THE FUTURE OF FINANCE by Nouriel Roubini and Stephen Mihm. Although Mr. Roubini's pessimistic forecasts once earned him the sobriquet Dr. Doom, his predictions of fiscal disaster came frighteningly true in 2008, when the global financial system teetered on the edge of the abyss. In "Crisis Economics," he uses his gifts as a teacher to give the lay reader a lucid and engrossing account of the causes and consequences of that great meltdown. (Penguin Press, \$27.95)

THE LOST BOOKS OF THE ODYSSEY by Zachary Mason. This ingenious debut novel performs a series of jazzy, postmodernist variations on "The Odyssey," imagining alternate fates for Homer's characters and reinventing his hero's relationships with his wife, his mistress and his comrades in arms. The book addresses Homer's original themes — the dangers of pride, the protean nature of identity — while at the same time raising new questions about art and originality and the nature of storytelling. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$24)

YOU ARE NOT A GADGET: A MANIFESTO by Jaron Lanier. A pioneer in the development of virtual reality and a Silicon Valley veteran, Mr. Lanier is a digital-world insider concerned with the effect that online collectivism and the current enshrinement of "the wisdom of the crowd" is having on artists, intellectual property rights and the larger social and cultural landscape. In taking on such issues, he's written an illuminating book that is as provocative as it is impassioned. (Alfred A. Knopf, \$24.95)

THE THOUSAND AUTUMNS OF JACOB DE ZOET by David Mitchell. Best known in the past for his experimental, puzzlelike fiction, Mr. Mitchell has turned his hand, this time, to creating a historical novel set in Edo-era Japan. His suspenseful and meticulously observed story of forbidden love — between a young Dutchman and a Japanese midwife, who is abducted by a mysterious group of monks — unfurls, musically, to become a meditation on East and West, superstition and science, tradition and change. (Random House, \$26)

Dwight Garner's Top 10 Books of 2010

THE BEST OF IT: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS by Kay Ryan. Kay Ryan's poems are as slim as runway models, so tiny you could almost make them Twitter messages. They are also, as it happens, riddled with heartbreak and loss, and possess an essential gawkiness that, despite their wit, draws you close. Ms. Ryan's poems are, in 2010, about as good as American poetry gets. (Grove, \$24)

HITCH-22: A MEMOIR by Christopher Hitchens. Mr. Hitchens's memoir traces his coming of age as a public intellectual and as a man, and it's both electric and electrifying. Mr. Hitchens embraces the serious things, the things that matter: social justice, learning, direct language, the free play of the mind, loyalty, holding public figures to high standards. His book is also a lovely paean to the dearness of one's friends. (Twelve, \$26.99)

THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS by Rebecca Skloot. This thorny and provocative first book — it's about cancer, racism, scientific ethics and crippling poverty — floods over you like a narrative dam break. It's one of the most graceful and moving nonfiction books I've read in a very long time. More than 10 years in the making, it feels like a book Rebecca Skloot was born to write. (Crown, \$26)

SIMON WIESENTHAL: THE LIFE AND LEGENDS by Tom Segev. A meticulous and forceful biography of the legendary Nazi hunter, a man who led one of the 20th century's most interesting lives. Tom Segev's book begins in medias res — with the hunt for Adolf Eichmann — and rarely slows to catch its breath. This biography captures a character, and is cleareyed about its subject's many character flaws. (Doubleday, \$35)

MOURNING DIARY by Roland Barthes. On Oct. 26, 1977, the day after his mother's death, the French theorist and literary critic Roland Barthes began keeping a diary of his suffering. Now, 30 years after his own death, it has been published. This book's unvarnished quality is the source of its wrecking cumulative power. Barthes's ironic intellect is here wrapped around his nakedly beating heart. (Hill and Wang, \$25)

THE LAST HERO: A LIFE OF HENRY AARON by *Howard Bryant*. This confident and brawny book is, incredibly, the first full-dress biography of the man who, in 1974, broke Babe Ruth's home run record and did so as a black man playing for Major League Baseball's first franchise in the Deep South. It's also a striking and elegiac assessment of race relations in America in the mid-20th century, and a rich portrait of a complex, introverted man. (Pantheon, \$29.95)

I.O.U.: WHY EVERYONE OWES EVERYONE AND NO ONE CAN PAY by *John Lanchester*. Mr. Lanchester, who is British, isn't an economist or a business journalist. He's a novelist (and a talented one) who happened to become obsessed with the global banking crisis, and who has written a shrewd, bleakly funny book about it. He explains complicated things like credit default swaps with rigor, but he is also guided by perception and instinct. (Simon & Schuster, \$25)

THE POSSESSED: ADVENTURES WITH RUSSIAN BOOKS AND THE PEOPLE WHO READ THEM by *Elif Batuman*. Ms. Batuman's funny and melancholy first book is ostensibly about her favorite Russian authors but is actually about a million other things: grad school, literary theory, translation, biography, love affairs and how to choose a nice watermelon in Uzbekistan. It asks this plaintive question: How do we bring our lives closer to our favorite books? (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$15)

OPERATION MINCEMEAT: HOW A DEAD MAN AND A BIZARRE PLAN FOOLED THE NAZIS AND ASSURED AN ALLIED VICTORY by *Ben Macintyre*. What makes "Operation Mincemeat" — a book about a corpse with false papers that Allied spies set afloat off the coast of Spain during World War II — so winning, beyond the author's research, is his elegant, jaunty and very British high style. The major players seem to have emerged from an Evelyn Waugh novel that's been tweaked by P. G. Wodehouse. (Harmony Books, \$25.99)

PARISIANS: AN ADVENTURE HISTORY OF PARIS by *Graham Robb*. Mr. Robb's ebullient book is a defiantly nonlinear history of Paris from the dawn of the French Revolution through the 2005 riots in Clichy-sous-Bois, told from unlikely perspectives and focusing on lesser-known but reverberating moments in the city's history. Mr. Robb smuggles into his text a tremendous amount of real feeling and playfulness, those unmistakable signs of a mind that's wide awake and breathing on the page. (W. W. Norton & Company, 28.95)