

New York Times

100 Notable Books of 2011

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FICTION & POETRY

***THE ANGEL ESMERALDA: Nine Stories.** By Don DeLillo. (Scribner, \$24.) DeLillo's first collection of short fiction, compiling stories written between 1979 and 2011, serves as a liberating reminder that terror existed long before there was a war on it.

***THE ART OF FIELDING.** By Chad Harbach. (Little, Brown, \$25.99.) This allusive, Franzen-like first novel, about a gifted but vulnerable baseball player, proceeds with a handsome stateliness.

THE BARBARIAN NURSERIES. By Héctor Tobar. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.) A big, insightful novel about social and ethnic conflict in contemporary Los Angeles.

BIG QUESTIONS. Or, Asomatognosia: Whose Hand Is It Anyway? Written and illustrated by Anders Brekhus Nilsen. (Drawn & Quarterly, cloth, \$69.95; paper, \$44.95.) In this capacious, metaphysically inclined graphic novel, a flock of finches act out Nilsen's unsettling comic vision about the food chain, fate and death.

***THE BUDDHA IN THE ATTIC.** By Julie Otsuka. (Knopf, \$22.) Through a chorus of narrators, Otsuka unfurls the stories of Japanese women who came to America in the early 1900s to marry men they'd never met.

CANTI. By Giacomo Leopardi. Translated by Jonathan Galassi. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$35.) With this English translation, Leopardi may at last become as important to American literature as Rilke or Baudelaire.

***THE CAT'S TABLE.** By Michael Ondaatje. (Knopf, \$26.) Ondaatje grants that this novel, about three daring Ceylonese schoolboys on a sea journey to England, sometimes uses the “coloring and locations of memoir.”

***CHANGÓ'S BEADS AND TWO-TONE SHOES.** By William Kennedy. (Viking, \$26.95.) In Kennedy's most musical work of fiction, a newspaperman attains a cynical old-pro objectivity as Albany's political machine pulls out the stops to head off a race riot in 1968.

COME ON ALL YOU GHOSTS. By Matthew Zapruder. (Copper Canyon, paper, \$16.) Much of the poetry here, displaying a consistent stillness and confidence, is the strongest of Zapruder's career.

***11/22/63.** By Stephen King. (Scribner, \$35.) A meditation on memory, loss, free will and necessity, King's novel sends a teacher back to 1958 by way of a time portal in a Maine diner. His assignment is to stop Lee Harvey Oswald — but first he must make sure of Oswald's guilt.

***THE FREE WORLD.** By David Bezmozgis. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$26.) Bezmozgis overturns clichéd expectations of immigrant idealism in his first novel, which follows a Soviet Jewish family awaiting visas in Rome in 1978.

GHOST LIGHTS. By Lydia Millet. (Norton, \$24.95.) Millet sends an I.R.S. agent on a mission to a Central American jungle, providing a fascinating glimpse of what can happen when the self's rhythms and certainties are shaken.

***THE GRIEF OF OTHERS.** By Leah Hager Cohen. (Riverhead, \$26.95.) Complex but fundamentally decent characters hurt one another and are hurt by forces greater than themselves, as a family sinks beneath the weight of a terrible secret.

GRYPHON: New and Selected Stories. By Charles Baxter. (Pantheon, \$27.95.) Beneath the shadowless Norman Rockwell contours of Baxter's Midwest lurks a chilling starkness and sense of isolation reminiscent of the bleakly beautiful work of Edward Hopper.

***HOUSE OF HOLES: A Book of Raunch.** By Nicholson Baker. (Simon & Schuster, \$25.) Hilarious and extremely dirty, this episodic assortment of fantasies — part Plato's Retreat, part Fantasy Island — celebrates desire, frailty and the comedy of life.

THE LAST WEREWOLF. By Glen Duncan. (Knopf, \$25.95.) A wry, world-weary and hyper-articulate werewolf, morally as well as physically ambiguous, is tortured by the spirits of his victims and ready to surrender to his pursuers.

***THE LEFTOVERS.** By Tom Perrotta. (St. Martin's, \$25.99.) In this novelistic version of the biblical prophecy known as the Rapture, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims as well as Christians mysteriously disappear.

LIFE ON MARS. By Tracy K. Smith. (Graywolf, paper, \$15.) Smith's impressive range is on full display in her third poetry collection, in which she mourns her father, who worked on the Hubble Telescope.

THE LONDON TRAIN. By Tessa Hadley. (Harper Perennial, paper, \$14.99.) Hadley's artfully constructed, socially realistic novel is split between two characters who react in opposite ways to their old affair.

LONG, LAST, HAPPY: New and Selected Stories. By Barry Hannah. (Grove, \$27.50.) Hannah, who died last year, had a refined eye for the outrageous; this collection shows he retained full command of his powers to the end of his life.

***LOST MEMORY OF SKIN.** By Russell Banks. (Ecco/HarperCollins, \$25.99.) This novel, about a paroled sex offender, bravely tries to find humanity in people whom society often despises.

***THE MARRIAGE PLOT.** By Jeffrey Eugenides. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$28.) Eugenides adeptly renders the patter of college intellectuals and the sweet banter of courtship, and is particularly astute on the uncertainties awaiting after graduation.

A MOMENT IN THE SUN. By John Sayles. (McSweeney's, \$29.) Sayles's reimagining of America at the turn of the last century nods to both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Thomas Pynchon.

***MR. FOX.** By Helen Oyeyemi. (Riverhead, \$25.95.) This playful tale is presented in the alternating voices of a slasher novelist, his wife and his muse, the last of whom urges the writer to embrace intimacy over violence and death.

***MY NEW AMERICAN LIFE.** By Francine Prose. (HarperCollins, \$25.99.) Prose's sardonic novel of a young Albanian immigrant in New Jersey sets America in high relief, mordant and comic, light and dark.

***1Q84**. By Haruki Murakami. Translated by Jay Rubin and Philip Gabriel. (Knopf, \$30.50.) This voluminous novel, set in 1984, is simultaneously a mystery, a love story and a dystopian fantasy that raises questions of psychology and ethics.

***OPEN CITY**. By Teju Cole. (Random House, \$25.) The peripatetic hero of Cole's indelible novel reflects on his adopted New York, the Africa of his youth, today's America and a Europe wary of its future.

***THE PALE KING: An Unfinished Novel**. By David Foster Wallace. (Little, Brown, \$27.99.) Unfolding on an epic scale, this coherent, if uncompleted, portrayal of our age is a grand parable of "late capitalism," set in the innards of the Internal Revenue Service.

***PARALLEL STORIES**. By Peter Nadas. Translated by Imre Goldstein. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$40.) This nearly 1,200-page novel opens in 1989 and is centered, roughly, on a Budapest apartment building whose residents have been trapped in the torpor of Communist tyranny.

***SAY HER NAME**. By Francisco Goldman. (Grove, \$24.) Goldman's passionate, moving narrative takes as its subject his tragically short marriage to the writer Aura Estrada, who died in a bodysurfing accident in 2007, when she was 30.

***SCENES FROM VILLAGE LIFE**. By Amos Oz. Translated by Nicholas de Lange. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$22.) In these powerful linked stories of longing and disappointment, Oz returns to a spare, almost allegorical style.

***THE SENSE OF AN ENDING**. By Julian Barnes. (Knopf, \$25.) In this Booker Prize winner, an unexpected bequest forces a man to re-evaluate his relationships, present and past.

***SEVEN YEARS**. By Peter Stamm. Translated by Michael Hofmann. (Other Press, paper, \$15.95.) Stamm's protagonist, an aspiring architect in 1980s Germany, wanders between his charming, frigid wife and plain but devoted mistress.

***SHARDS**. By Ismet Prcic (Black Cat/Grove/Atlantic, paper, \$14.99.) The Bosnian hero of Prcic's absorbing and unsettling first novel is shattered by war.

SPACE, IN CHAINS. By Laura Kasischke. (Copper Canyon, paper, \$16.) What may be the most ambitious, and disturbing, of Kasischke's eight books of poems strives to comprehend first and last things.

***STONE ARABIA.** By Dana Spiotta. (Scribner, \$24.) A faded heroine struggles with the loss of her brother, an unrecognized rock star, in this acerbic and deeply sad narrative.

***THE STRANGER'S CHILD.** By Alan Hollinghurst. (Knopf, \$27.95.) Hollinghurst's sharply drawn novel tells the story of relatives and scholars grappling with the legacy of a Rupert Brooke-like poet killed during World War I.

***THE SUBMISSION.** By Amy Waldman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$26.) This resonant and darkly comic novel, by a former New York Times journalist, imagines an uproar over a proposed Sept. 11 memorial.

***SWAMPLANDIA!** By Karen Russell. (Knopf, \$24.95.) Russell's exuberant first novel, an expansion of her story "Ava Wrestles the Alligator," concerns the pleasures and miseries of life in a failing theme park in the Everglades.

TALLER WHEN PRONE: Poems. By Les Murray. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$24.) Viscerally smoldering anger, the signature quality of Murray's poetry, turns conventional pieties inside out.

***TEN THOUSAND SAINTS.** By Eleanor Henderson. (Ecco/HarperCollins, \$26.99.) Henderson's fierce, elegiac novel follows a group of friends, lovers, parents and children through the straight-edge music scene and the early days of the AIDS epidemic.

***THIS BEAUTIFUL LIFE.** By Helen Schulman. (Harper/HarperCollins, \$24.99.) A family's Manhattan life comes apart when their 15-year-old forwards a sexually explicit video made for him, unsolicited, by a girl two years younger.

***THE TIGER'S WIFE.** By Téa Obreht. (Random House, \$25.) In her first novel, Obreht uses fable and allegory to illustrate the complexities of Balkan history, unearthing the region's patterns of suspicion, superstition and everyday violence.

***THE TRAGEDY OF ARTHUR.** By Arthur Phillips. (Random House, \$26.) Phillips's splendidly devious novel consists of a Shakespearean play of his own

virtuosic creation and an “introduction” that devastatingly reveals the psychological life of its author.

TRAIN DREAMS. By Denis Johnson. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$18.) The taming of the American West is encompassed in Johnson’s novella, whose orphaned hero is sent by train in the 1890s into the woods of the Idaho panhandle.

NONFICTION

***AND SO IT GOES. Kurt Vonnegut: A Life.** By Charles J. Shields. (Holt, \$30.) From Dresden to his mother’s suicide, the early death of a beloved sister, serial unhappy marriages and literary anxiety, Vonnegut earned his status as Man of Sorrows, as this diligent and often heartbreaking biography shows.

***ARGUABLY: Essays.** By Christopher Hitchens. (Twelve, \$30.) Hitchens’s esophageal cancer inevitably throws a shadow over this spirited, provocative, prodigiously witty collection.

THE ART OF CRUELTY: A Reckoning. By Maggie Nelson. (Norton, \$24.95.) Nelson examines representations of violence in the media, largely aiming her laments high up the cultural ladder — at the fine arts, literature, theater and even poetry.

ASSASSINS OF THE TURQUOISE PALACE. By Roya Hakakian. (Grove, \$25.) In gripping style, Hakakian recounts the 1992 killings of four Iranian opposition members in Berlin, which ultimately implicated the top levels of Iran’s leadership.

THE BEGINNING OF INFINITY: Explanations That Transform the World. By David Deutsch. (Viking, \$30.) Deutsch’s inexhaustibly curious exploration of the nature and progress of knowledge pivots on the European Enlightenment.

BELIEVING IS SEEING: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography. By Errol Morris. (Penguin Press, \$40.) The filmmaker is chiefly interested here in the nature of knowledge, in figuring out where the truth lies.

***THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE: Why Violence Has Declined.** By Steven Pinker. (Viking, \$40.) Are humans essentially good or

bad? Has the past century seen moral progress or moral collapse? Pinker addresses these questions and more.

***BLOOD, BONES AND BUTTER: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef.** By Gabrielle Hamilton. (Random House, \$26.) This memoir by the chef at the Manhattan restaurant Prune is a story of hungers specific and vague.

***BLUE NIGHTS.** By Joan Didion. (Knopf, \$25.) Mourning the 2005 death of her daughter, Didion presents herself as defenseless against the pain of loss in this elegantly written memoir.

***THE BOY IN THE MOON: A Father's Journey to Understand His Extraordinary Son.** By Ian Brown. (St. Martin's, \$24.99.) The truth Brown learns from his severely disabled child is a rare one: the life that seems to destroy you is the one you long to embrace.

CARAVAGGIO: A Life Sacred and Profane. By Andrew Graham-Dixon. (Norton, \$39.95.) Caravaggio's painting was deeply affected by the squalor, violence and energy of Roman street life.

***CATHERINE THE GREAT: Portrait of a Woman.** By Robert K. Massie. (Random House, \$35.) Massie provides a sweeping narrative about the impressive minor German princess who became empress of Russia.

CLARENCE DARROW: Attorney for the Damned. By John A. Farrell. (Doubleday, \$32.50.) In this biography, Darrow's unsavory side is on view, from his personal callousness to his purchasing of testimony.

***COCKTAIL HOUR UNDER THE TREE OF FORGETFULNESS.** By Alexandra Fuller. (Penguin Press, \$25.95.) Fuller's mother is the star of this funny and affecting memoir, a companion to "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight."

***DESTINY OF THE REPUBLIC: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President.** By Candice Millard. (Doubleday, \$28.95.) A deranged man shot James Garfield, but it was his incompetent doctors who killed him.

***THE ECSTASY OF INFLUENCE: Nonfictions, Etc.** By Jonathan Lethem. (Doubleday, \$27.95.) Lethem's extraliterary enthusiasms are all over this hefty

collection, which includes essays on film, comics, music, Brooklyn and, of course, fiction.

***1861: The Civil War Awakening.** By Adam Goodheart. (Knopf, \$28.95.) In this account of the war's first stage, Goodheart turns his lens upon fascinating figures who loomed large at the time but have now been mostly forgotten.

EXAMINED LIVES: From Socrates to Nietzsche. By James Miller. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$28.) Miller shows philosophers becoming ever more inclined to reflect on their own petty failings, and suggests this makes their lives more, not less, worth studying.

***1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created.** By Charles C. Mann. (Knopf, \$30.50.) This follow-up to "1491" argues that ecological encounters since Columbus have shaped much of subsequent human history.

GEORGE F. KENNAN: An American Life. By John Lewis Gaddis. (Penguin Press, \$39.95.) Gaddis has written a magisterial biography of the man who both invented the cold war policy of containment and was one of its most perspicacious critics.

***GREAT SOUL: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India.** By Joseph Lelyveld. (Knopf, \$28.95.) While many of Gandhi's aspirations (a Muslim-Hindu alliance, a full end to untouchability) remain largely unfulfilled, it is his role as a social reformer that most interests Lelyveld.

HARLEM IS NOWHERE: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America. By Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts. (Little, Brown, \$24.99.) A Harlem transplant documents her own and others' experiences there, working not to define the neighborhood, but to revise received ideas.

HOLY WAR: How Vasco da Gama's Epic Voyages Turned the Tide in a Centuries-Old Clash of Civilizations. By Nigel Cliff. (Harper/HarperCollins, \$29.99.) The Portuguese explorer hoped to find Christians in India and enlist them in an alliance against Islam.

***IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin.** By Erik Larson. (Crown, \$26.) The experiences of the ambassador William E. Dodd and his lusty daughter, Martha.

***INFERNO: The World at War, 1939-1945.** By Max Hastings. (Knopf, \$35.) Hastings has a sober, unromantic and realistic view of battle that puts him in a different category from the armchair generals whose gung-ho attitude to war fills the pages of so many military histories.

***THE INFORMATION: A History. A Theory. A Flood.** By James Gleick. (Pantheon, \$29.95.) Gleick argues that information is more than just the contents of our libraries and Web servers: human consciousness, life on earth, the cosmos — it's bits all the way down.

INSIDE SCIENTOLOGY: The Story of America's Most Secretive Religion. By Janet Reitman. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$28.) Reitman has rendered the most complete picture of Scientology so far.

IS THAT A FISH IN YOUR EAR? Translation and the Meaning of Everything. By David Bellos. (Faber & Faber, \$27.) Against the orthodox view that a translation can't substitute for the original, a scholar argues that the two need not be the same, but only similar.

***JERUSALEM: The Biography.** By Simon Sebag Montefiore. (Knopf, \$35.) Three thousand years, packed with telling detail, in the life of the holy city.

THE KEATS BROTHERS: The Life of John and George. By Denise Gigante. (Belknap/Harvard University, \$35.) A Stanford professor's clever pairing of the lives of the poet Keats and his brother, who emigrated to the American backcountry.

KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR: How Physics and Scientific Thinking Illuminate the Universe and the Modern World. By Lisa Randall. (Ecco/HarperCollins, \$29.99.) A Harvard professor meditates on the nature of science and where physics is headed.

***MALCOLM X: A Life of Reinvention.** By Manning Marable. (Viking, \$30.) This careful biography presents a more complete and unvarnished version of its subject's life than the one found in "The Autobiography."

***THE MEMORY CHALET.** By Tony Judt. (Penguin Press, \$25.95.) Before Judt died last year of a disease that left him clearheaded but immobile, he dictated these vivid autobiographical sketches, the best of which recall life in his native England.

***MIDNIGHT RISING: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War.** By Tony Horwitz. (Holt, \$29.) One of America's most troubling historical figures is the subject of Horwitz's deft narrative.

MOBY-DUCK: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea and of the Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists, and Fools, Including the Author, Who Went in Search of Them. By Donovan Hohn. (Viking, \$27.95.) Where those rubber toys came from, where they drifted, and why.

***MY SONG: A Memoir.** By Harry Belafonte with Michael Shnayerson. (Knopf, \$30.50.) The international calypso star, actor and mainstay of the civil rights movement recalls his life.

THE NET DELUSION: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom. By Evgeny Morozov. (PublicAffairs, \$27.95.) In this challenging and often contrarian book, Morozov explores how the Internet is used to constrict or even abolish political freedom.

ONE DAY I WILL WRITE ABOUT THIS PLACE: A Memoir. By Binyavanga Wainaina. (Graywolf, \$24.) The author describes fiction as his refuge from the confusing realities of politics and adolescence in his native Kenya.

THE ORIGINS OF POLITICAL ORDER: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution. By Francis Fukuyama. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$35.) What countries are capable of "getting to Denmark"? Fukuyama's answer emphasizes the role of contingency.

***PAULINE KANEL: A Life in the Dark.** By Brian Kellow. (Viking, \$27.95.) Kellow's is a fair-minded and deeply reported biography of the provocative and maddening writer whose essays about movies transformed American pop-culture criticism.

PULPHEAD. By John Jeremiah Sullivan. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, paper, \$16.) These thrumming, intelligent magazine essays highlight Sullivan's interest in the rare cultural nexus where genuine artistry intersects with commercial popularity.

***THE QUEST: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World.** By Daniel Yergin. (Penguin Press, \$37.95.) This comprehensive study makes clear that energy policy is not on the right course anywhere.

RIGHTS GONE WRONG: How Law Corrupts the Struggle for Equality. By Richard Thompson Ford. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.) The Stanford professor argues that the progressive left and the colorblind right are guilty of the same error: defining discrimination too abstractly and condemning it too categorically, with similarly perverse results.

***RIN TIN TIN: The Life and the Legend.** By Susan Orlean. (Simon & Schuster, \$26.99.) How the soulful German shepherd, born on a World War I battlefield, conquered Hollywood and became a familyfriendly symbol of cold war gunslinging.

[**SIC**]: **A Memoir.** By Joshua Cody. (Norton, \$24.95.) A young composer's account of his cancer sidesteps the issue of sentimentality by mocking it, in prose bright and jazzy and meandering.

***THE STORM OF WAR: A New History of the Second World War.** By Andrew Roberts. (Harper/HarperCollins, \$29.99.) In a clear, accessible account of the war in all its theaters, Roberts asks how the Wehrmacht, the best fighting force, wound up losing.

***THE SWERVE: How the World Became Modern.** By Stephen Greenblatt. (Norton, \$26.95.) The legacy of the Roman poet Lucretius, and the Renaissance book hunter who saved his great poem from oblivion.

***THINKING, FAST AND SLOW.** By Daniel Kahneman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$30.) Kahneman, a psychologist who won the Nobel in economic science in 2002, presents a lucid and profound vision of flawed human reason in a book full of intellectual surprises and self-help value.

TO A MOUNTAIN IN TIBET. By Colin Thubron. (Harper/HarperCollins, \$24.99.) Weighed down by grief after the death of his mother, the author makes a pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, venerated by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and others.

***TO END ALL WARS: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918.** By Adam Hochschild. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$28.) This stirring account concentrates on the appalling losses in the ranks and on the courage of those who decided the war in Europe was not a just one.

***A TRAIN IN WINTER: An Extraordinary Story of Women, Friendship, and Resistance in Occupied France.** By Caroline Moorehead.

(Harper/HarperCollins, \$27.99.) Moorehead meticulously traces the fates of 230 Frenchwomen sent to Auschwitz as political prisoners of the Reich.

***VAN GOGH: The Life.** By Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith. (Random House, \$40.) Was Van Gogh a high-I.Q. aesthete or an earnest simpleton? A frugal bohemian or a big spender? A man who took his own life or a man who was murdered? This hulking and energetic biography complicates the picture.

WHO'S AFRAID OF POST-BLACKNESS? What It Means to Be Black Now. By Touré. (Free Press, \$25.) The author's interviews with 105 prominent African-Americans suggest that today's "black identity" has cleared the way to a liberating pursuit of individuality.

WHY THE WEST RULES — FOR NOW: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future. By Ian Morris. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$35.) A Stanford historian argues that we face an immediate choice — East-West cooperation or catastrophe.

***A WORLD ON FIRE: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War.** By Amanda Foreman. (Random House, \$35.) While Union and Confederate guns blazed, a battle was also being waged for English hearts and minds, at both the elite and popular levels.