

# What to Read Now. And Why

From Newsweek.com June 27, 2009. We know it's insane. We know people will ask why on earth we think that an 1875 British satirical novel is the book you need to read right now—or, for that matter, why it even made the cut. The fact is, no one needs another best-of list telling you how great *The Great Gatsby* is. What we do need, in a world with precious little time to read (and think), is to know which books—new or old, fiction or nonfiction—open a window on the times we live in, whether they deal directly with the issues of today or simply help us see ourselves in new and surprising ways. Which is why we'd like you to sit down with Anthony Trollope, and these 49 other remarkably trenchant voices.



1.



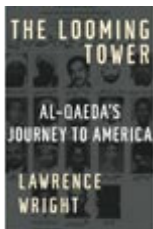
## THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

by Anthony Trollope

Fiction

The title says it all. Trollope's satire of financial (and moral) crisis in Victorian England even has a Madoff-before-Madoff, a tragic swindler named Augustus Melmotte.

2.



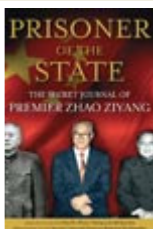
## THE LOOMING TOWER

by Lawrence Wright

973.931 W

Perhaps no two questions are as important in the early 21st century as the ones Wright answers: how 9/11 happened, and why.

3.



## PRISONER OF THE STATE

by Zhao Ziyang

951.058 Z

Chinese officials are confiscating copies of this memoir by the party chief who was ousted for opposing military force in Tiananmen Square. They have reason to be nervous.

4.



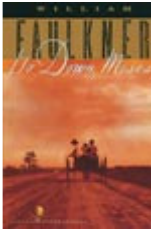
## THE BIG SWITCH

by Nicholas Carr

303.48 C

You've heard of "cloud computing," but let's be honest, you really don't know what it means. Or why it's going to change everything.

5.



**THE BEAR** (in **Three Famous Short Novels**)      **Fiction**  
by William Faulkner

A boy comes of age in the 1880s by learning the ways of the fast-disappearing Mississippi forests. The best environmental novel ever written.

6.



**WINCHELL**      **B Winchell**  
by Neal Gabler

Before there was Rush Limbaugh-or Us Weekly-there was Walter Winchell: gossip columnist, commentator, McCarthyite, radio celebrity, has-been.

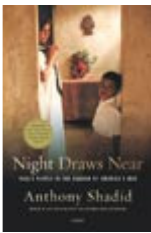
7.



**RANDOM FAMILY**      **974.727 L**  
by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

It took LeBlanc 10 years immersed in the lives of one Bronx family to produce this gripping, cinematic account of urban poverty and its causes. It will take you two days to read it.

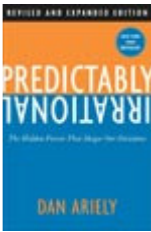
8.



**NIGHT DRAWS NEAR**      **(WLS)**  
by Anthony Shadid

While the book is about the run-up to the Iraq War and the immediate aftermath, its strength is its insight into how Iraqis really think, which is instructive as we head for the exits.

9.



**PREDICTABLY IRRATIONAL**      **330 A**  
by Dan Ariely

Overturns the notion that we weigh pros and cons logically. Read it to understand why we obey honor codes-and other irrational behaviors.

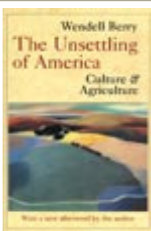
10.



**GOD: A BIOGRAPHY**      **(WLS)**  
by Jack Miles



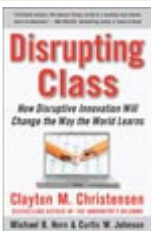
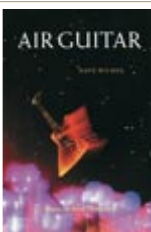
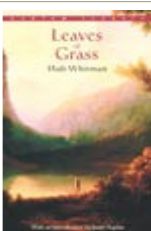
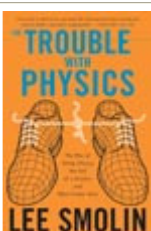

Miles, a journalist and former Jesuit, treats the God of the Bible as a literary protagonist-and discovers infinitely human depths.

11.

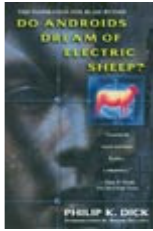


**THE UNSETTLING OF AMERICA**      **(WLS)**  
by Wendell Berry

First published in 1982, this book-length argument for the family farm-and against agribusiness-is simply the most thoughtful book on modern agriculture.

- 12.**  **A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND** in **The Hudson Book of Fiction 808.83H**  
by Flannery O'Connor  
Stories of the New South, Christ-haunted and out of control, are as scary as they were when published in 1955. "Shut up, Bobby Lee, it's no real pleasure in life."
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- 13.**  **UNDERGROUND** (WLS)  
by Haruki Murakami  
Critics love Murakami's surrealist fiction, but this collection of interviews with victims and perpetrators of Japan's 1995 sarin-gas attack is a useful study of modern terror and its aftermath.
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- 14.**  **DISRUPTING CLASS** 371.3  
by Clayton Christensen  
The Harvard Business School professor who introduced the idea of disruptive innovation in *The Innovator's Dilemma* applies the same principles to education, with provocative results.
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- 15.**  **AIR GUITAR** 306.47  
by Dave Hickey  
A seamless blend of criticism, personal history, and a deep appreciation for the sheer nuttiness of American life, with essays on Norman Rockwell, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Perry Mason, to name a few.
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- 16.**  **LEAVES OF GRASS** 811.3  
by Walt Whitman  
There's no better season to read the Great American Poem than summer, and no better place than the outdoors for savoring its charms, both contemplative ("I lean and loafe at my ease") and ecstatic ("Mad naked summer night!").
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- 17.**  **THE TROUBLE WITH PHYSICS** 530.14  
by Lee Smolin  
Smolin covers string theory and other topics in modern physics as no other has dared: showing that scientific advances are as much about personalities as data.
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- 18.**  **CITY: REDISCOVERING THE CENTER** 307.76  
by William H. Whyte  
Using years of painstaking research, Whyte proved that the way to make a city work lies in the details-the width of a park bench, the height of a subway step.

19.



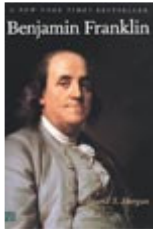
**DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP? SF**

by Philip K. Dick

Before Wall-E, there was this penetrating parable of the grim future of technology and life on an Earth without animals (and the basis for Blade Runner).

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20.



**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (WLS)**

by Edmund S. Morgan

A model biography: pithy, wise, and-despite its brevity-complete. Franklin emerges as a quintessential hero of his time, and ours.

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21.



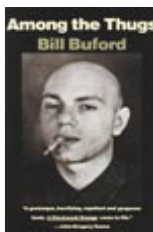
**THE MISSISSIPPI BOOKS (various titles) F/ 817 T/ 910.4 V**

by Mark Twain

When Twain turned his attention to the river that ran by his hometown, what was just run-of-the-mill genius in his other books took on a special Krypton-proof dazzle. Think of these as one book, or three ways of telling the same, very American, very tragicomic story.

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22.



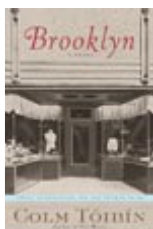
**AMONG THE THUGS (WLS)**

by Bill Buford

A philosophical look at the rise of soccer hooliganism in Britain that also examines the way apparently meaningless violence has its roots in cultural class inequities.

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23.



**BROOKLYN Fiction**

by Colm Tóibín

Captures the experience of homesickness and, in deceptively unadorned prose, builds to a heart-wrenching conclusion about the impossibility of getting everything you want.

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24.



**FRANKENSTEIN YA/ LP Fiction**

by Mary Shelley

In an age of bioengineering, Shelley's novel about a scientist and his creation is especially unsettling-and its message about the necessity of companionship and sympathy is especially urgent.

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**25.** **BAD MOTHER**  
by Ayelet Waldman

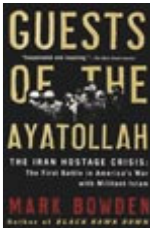


**306.874**

Waldman admits that she's an oversharer-which happens to be a great trait for a memoirist. Her essays about motherhood are hilarious, heartbreaking, and edgy. In our child-centric world, Waldman got slammed for saying she loves her husband more than her kids. What's wrong with that?

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**26.** **GUESTS OF THE AYATOLLAH**  
by Mark Bowden

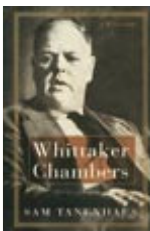


**955.054 B**

On one level, a page-turner on the 1979 hostage crisis by the author of Black Hawk Down. Beyond that, it is a brilliant introduction to a group of young militant (and often ill-informed) Iranian Islamists who are now the militant (and often ill-informed) leaders of Iran.

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**27.** **WHITTAKER CHAMBERS**  
by Sam Tanenhaus

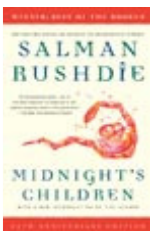


**B Chambers**

Whittaker Chambers (along with his friend William F. Buckley Jr.) was a crucial avatar of the modern right. The forces are all here, embodied to one degree or another within Chambers himself: religion, a tragic sensibility, a fear of centralized control, and a Manichaeian view of good versus evil.

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**28.** **MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN**  
by Salman Rushdie

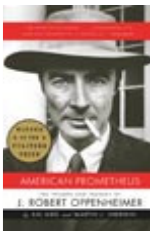


**Fiction**

"To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world," says the protagonist of Rushdie's freewheeling, fanciful allegory of modern India. Published in 1981, Midnight's Children delivers just the opposite: the world through the life of a young man.

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**29.** **AMERICAN PROMETHEUS**  
by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin

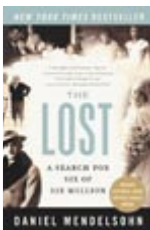


**B Oppenheimer**

J. Robert Oppenheimer gave us (and the rest of the world) the atomic bomb, and with it, he found himself at the front of the line over the biggest military tug-of-war of the 20th century-and beyond.

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**30.** **THE LOST**  
by Daniel Mendelsohn

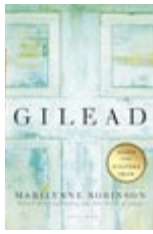


**B Mendelsohn**

A memoir chronicling the author's search for the fates of six relatives killed in the Holocaust. Mendelsohn explores memory-what we know, what we can learn, and what we must remember-in ways that are true to both the living and the dead.

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31.



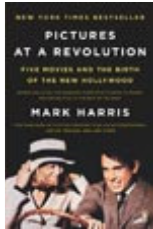
**GILEAD**  
by Marilynne Robinson

**Fiction**

A book for the age of Obama: a letter from a father to a son about fathers and sons-and religion, race relations, and the possibility that the arc of the universe bends toward justice, after all.

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32.



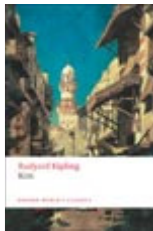
**PICTURES AT A REVOLUTION**  
by Mark Harris

**791.4309 H**

The 1967 Oscar race pitted old Hollywood (Dr. Doolittle) against a new generation (Bonnie and Clyde). After that, Hollywood would never be the same.

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33.



**KIM**  
by Rudyard Kipling

**Fiction**

A boy orphaned in war becomes a junior spy for the English in Pakistan and Central Asia. Kipling's portrait of a quagmire is eerily contemporary.

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34.



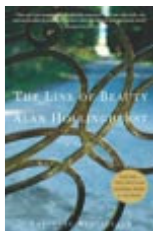
**WALKING WITH THE WIND**  
by John Lewis

**(WLS)**

Lewis's memoir of Freedom Rides, SNCC, Bloody Sunday, the March on Washington, life in Congress, and more. Of all the symbolic moments at President Obama's inauguration, nothing was richer than his embrace of Lewis.

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35.



**THE LINE OF BEAUTY**  
by Alan Hollinghurst

**Fiction**

An elegiac and sumptuous story about nostalgia, longing, and regret as AIDS devastated a generation-in case anyone has forgotten those dark days.

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36.



**THE DARK IS RISING**  
by Susan Cooper

**J Fiction**

Forget Harry Potter. In the tradition of Tolkien, this series of novels about five British children and one mysterious adult battling evil shows how powerful a child's fantasy story can be.

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37.



**PERSEPOLIS**

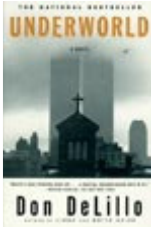
by Marjane Satrapi

**YA Graphic**

Published in 2000, Satrapi's graphic novel about her freewheeling youth in pre-revolutionary Iran quickly became an international hit. Today it's also a glimpse into a country's long, unfinished march toward freedom.

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38.



**UNDERWORLD**

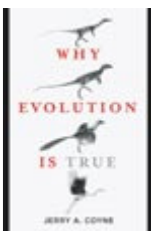
by Don DeLillo

**Fiction**

This sprawling novel traces the currents of anxiety and fear running through the Cold War. The book's first section is as good as fiction gets.

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39.



**WHY EVOLUTION IS TRUE**

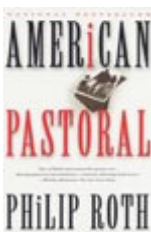
by Jerry A. Coyne

**576.8 C**

Even innocent bystanders in the culture wars should understand the evidence that supports evolution, and this book by a leading evolutionary biologist presents it clearly but not pedantically.

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40.



**AMERICAN PASTORAL**

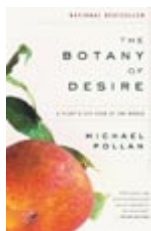
by Philip Roth

**Fiction**

The '60s may be over, but the times still tremble with their shock waves. Terrorism, social upheaval, rage-it's all there, in Seymour (Swede) Levov's ordinary life.

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41.



**THE BOTANY OF DESIRE**

by Michael Pollan

**306.4 P**

Before Pollan became a food-world demigod; he wrote this insightful, engaging account explaining our appetites by tracing the evolution of four plants: potato, tulip, marijuana, and apple tree.

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42.



**THE REGENERATION TRILOGY**

**Regeneration; Eye in the Door; Ghost Road**

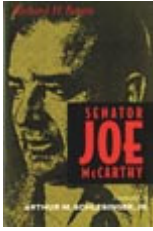
by Pat Barker

**Fiction**

War can wound more than the body. These novels, inspired by the World War I experiences of British soldiers, explore the trauma of staying alive while others die.

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43.



**SENATOR JOE MCCARTHY**

(WLS)

by Richard H. Rovere

An elegant short-form primer on the machinery of Washington's morality-and a timely reminder of what happens when demagogues gain access to what Rovere calls "the dark places of the American mind."

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44.



**YEAR OF WONDERS**

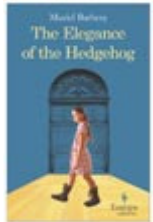
**Fiction**

by Geraldine Brooks

The plague that arrives in a small 17th-century village in Brooks' historical novel makes swine flu seem like the sniffles-but death also brings the possibility of a new understanding.

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45.



**THE ELEGANCE OF THE HEDGEHOG**

**Fiction**

by Muriel Barbery

The unlikely friendship between a middle-aged Parisian concierge and a cosseted 12-year-old drama queen proves cultural sensitivity transcends social background.

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46.



**GONE TOMORROW**

**Fiction**

by Lee Child

Jack Reacher is one of the best thriller characters at work today. Escape into a fantasy where thwarting terrorists is just a matter of grim purpose and quick reflexes in this, Child's 13th installment.

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47.



**THINGS FALL APART**

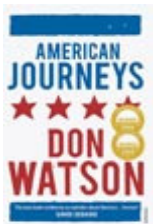
**YA Fiction**

by Chinua Achebe

In one of the first novels in English from an African perspective, Achebe makes our language his own-and the injustices of colonization all too clear.

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48.



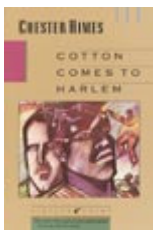
**AMERICAN JOURNEYS**

by Don Watson

Traveling by train, the Australian author scans a post-Katrina America while racking up an impressive trove of insight and observation few natives could match.

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49.



**COTTON COMES TO HARLEM**

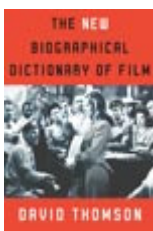
by Chester Himes

**Mystery**

One of a brilliant series of brutal, hilarious, and vivid crime novels featuring Harlem police detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson; no one ever wrote better about race.

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50.



**THE NEW BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF FILM (WLS-Ref)**

by David Thomson

If you don't argue with Thomson on just about every other page, then you aren't paying attention. In a world where film criticism is dying, Thomson makes a case for it-eloquently and adamantly.

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