

4 Books of the year

Writers and guest critics recommend their favourites, from bestsellers to the undeservedly obscure

Season's readings

JG Ballard

Who Runs This Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century by Anthony Sampson (John Murray), is a shrewd and clear-eyed look at the real power centres in Britain today. Drop any notions about Parliament, the monarchy and the unions. Money rules, and the City dominates our lives, with a little help from the prime minister and the media. Brilliantly written and deeply sobering.

If you feel the need to escape, try *The Riviera* by Jim Ring (John Murray), an entertaining history of the Côte d'Azur, charting its rise and fall as a playground of the rich, and its transformation today into Europe's silicon valley.

Iain Banks

Best SF books I've read this year so far: Ken MacLeod's *Newton's Wake* (Orbit), Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster) and Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Stamping Butterflies* (Gollancz). Just started *Iron Council* by China Miéville (Macmillan), which looks promising. Caught up with Ron Butlin's *The Sound of My Voice* (Serpent's Tail) and Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (Vintage) and, in non-fiction, read *Jarhead* by Anthony Swofford (Scribner), digested *The Calendar* by David Ewing Duncan (Fourth Estate) and *Just Six Numbers* by Martin Rees (Phoenix). Been spending arguably far too much time dipping into *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), all 20 volumes of which I finally allowed myself to buy in a fine flush of royalties.

Most valuable — if in some ways most depressing: *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World* by Francis Wheen (Fourth Estate). After *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler (Viking), I revisited *Pride and Prejudice*. Even so, the most impressive re-read this year has been *Voice of the Fire* by Alan Moore (Top Shelf Productions Inc.), a neglected masterpiece.

Julian Barnes

Chekhov admitted to suffering from "autobiophobia" — writing details about himself was "the purest torture". Happily, enough of his correspondence survived to justify the title *A Life in Letters* (Penguin). This new, unexpurgated edition comes in a fine translation by Rosamund Bartlett and Anthony Phillips. The restored suppressions, if far from hard-core stuff, help show us a fuller and marginally less saintly person; and just as

wise a writer. The funniest book I read this year was Simon Gray's *The Smoking Diaries* (Granta), which cunningly present themselves as meandering late-night jottings, but in fact are scrupulously written.

Sidney Blumenthal

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (Cape) tells the story of the family of Roth, a small boy growing up in Newark, New Jersey, in an imaginary country where the pro-Nazi naif and national hero Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin D Roosevelt for president in 1940. Roth's emotionally authentic fantasy suggests the freakish contingency of history. Sinclair Lewis entitled a somewhat similar but hackneyed novel, depicting the rise of a fascist regime in 1935, *It Can't Happen Here* (Signet).

Richard A Clarke's *Against All Enemies* (Simon & Schuster) is an act of fearless integrity by the former chief of counterterrorism on the National Security Council. Without artifice, self-justification or ideological bent, Clarke reveals the true story of the Bush administration's indifference to terrorism before 9/11. The 9/11 Commission Report supported Clarke on every point.

William Boyd

I thought there was nothing more to learn about Evelyn Waugh until I read Alexander Waugh's fascinating Waugh family memoir, *Fathers and Sons* (Headline). Written with wit, great shrewdness and without a trace of sentimentality, his delineation of the tangled bonds between Evelyn Waugh and his father, Arthur, and his brother, Alec, is a revelation. No other biography I've read has exposed this family triangle's fraught and often bitter relationships in such acute detail. Evelyn Waugh is revealed with new and compelling clarity.

Gordon Burn

Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (Simon & Schuster). At first the style appears plain and rather loosely conversational. In fact it is easily, enviably, in tune with the folk mythology and common life and what (caring nothing for PC-ness) Dylan calls the "glory, beauty, wonder and magnificence of America". A wholly unex-

pected, landmark book, which, among many other virtues, is a cautionary classic on the culture of modern celebrity.

The most interesting young fiction writer I came across this year is Ben Marcus. *The Age of Wire and String* (Flamingo) is a linguistically agile (early Dylan-esque) collection that fully deserves the cult status it has earned since it was published in 1997. In 2004 Marcus edited *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*, which cuts a useful cross-section through the "stylistic moment" of David Foster Wallace and other post-metafictionists.

AS Byatt

Thoughtful Europeans will be encouraged and informed by Susan Jacoby's *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (Metropolitan Books). It's powerful, brilliantly written, and moving. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (Sceptre) is a totally readable tour de force. Philip Hensher's *The Fit* (Fourth Estate) combines sharp comedy with bitterness and a melancholy that catches you by surprise. And Peter Rushforth's *Pinkerton's Sister* (Scribner) — written after a 25-year silence — is ambitious, intricate, moving and more than worth persevering with. Finally, John Fuller's poems in *Ghosts* (Chatto & Windus) are elegant, surprising meditations on approaching death — which excites him as an idea — the persistence of past people and things, and the liveliness of infants.

Richard Eyre

The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst (Picador) is set at the epicentre of Thatcher's Britain in the house of a rising star of the Tory party and it's a brilliantly accurate depiction of a social milieu that's almost invariably caricatured. A highly politicised account of the aspirations, vanities, cruelties and hypocrisies of the 80s, as well as an account of a young man's sentimental education, it's funny, sad and illuminating.

Seymour Hersh's *Chain of Command: The Road From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (Allen Lane) is an enthralling and unnerving account of how the US government (and ours) got embroiled in the Iraq quagmire. It's a perfect illustration of the Daniel Ellsberg maxim: "All leaders lie and it's our duty to expose their lies."

James Fenton

The fullest edition of the 144 short poems of Edward Thomas, published in 1978,

ran to 480-odd pages, and gave manuscript variants for each poem on the facing page. Edited by R George Thomas, and published by Oxford, it remains the best version for the student who really wants to go into the detail of each compositional history. Most people don't need this, and will settle more than happily for this shorter version of the Thomas edition, at 260-odd pages, in good paperback format. You still get notes, but not the variants. You still get the prose war diary covering the first months of 1917, the last of the poet's life. All the poems belong to 1914-1916 — all interesting, some uncertain, at least a dozen masterpieces. At £12.99, from Faber, Edward Thomas: *Collected Poems*. The best, most considerate of presents.

Giles Foden

The Oulipo — in full, the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or Workshop for Potential Literature — was founded in France in 1960 by the author Raymond Queneau. Its purpose was to explore the use of mathematics in the creation of fictional texts. As this is something I'm doing in my current novel, I checked out *The Oulipo Compendium* by Harry Matthews and Alastair Brotchie (Atlas) and it blew my head off. My own compositional sequence involves the number eight, remarkable in a wide variety of languages in that if you add an "n" to it, you get night: *noche, nuit, notte, nacht*, etc. N7 would then not be a London postal district but dusk, the holy moment when fish rise. . . in point of which I must also mention *The Longshoreman: A Life at the Water's Edge*, by Richard Shelton (Atlantic), the best book on fishing, wildfowling and related pursuits I have read for ages. Fishing and writing: what connects them is the need to deny the ego.

Jonathan Freedland

Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* (Simon & Schuster) was an essential text. It gave the inside track on the lead-up to the Iraq war, revealing that, for example, the CIA considered the 45-minute claim to be "shit" and that the real special relationship was between the US and Saudi Arabia. Bill Clinton's memoir was like the man himself: excessive, self-indulgent but warm and full of humanity. In fiction, I, like everyone else, could not put down Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (Corgi). But the book of the year, by some distance, was Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (Jonathan Cape). It imagined what fas-



cism in the US would have felt like in the 1940s and, by that route, touched something real about our own times. Flawed by a wayward ending it might be, but it's still the work of a master.

Linda Grant

I have been going out of my way to avoid reading any political polemic this year, so the book I really enjoyed was *Gaza Blues*, the joint collection of short fiction by Israeli Etgar Keret and Palestinian Samir el-Youssef (David Paul), whose wit, insight and humane sensitivity to the people affected by this conflict is worth all the tonne of sloganeering under which they often seemed buried. I also very much admired Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (Headline), Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Chatto & Windus), Gillian Slovo's *Ice Road* (Little, Brown), and, though it doesn't hit the shops till January, Sally Beauman's *The Landscape of Love* (Little, Brown).

John Gray

By far the most interesting novel I read this year was Iain Sinclair's *Dining on Stones* (Hamish Hamilton). All of Sinclair's writing breaks down barriers — between prose and poetry, fiction and reportage, narrative and reverie. He surpasses himself in *Dining on Stones*, a Conradian exploration of the elusiveness of personal identity. I also much enjoyed Pankaj Mishra's *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* (Picador). In a subtle mix of history, philosophy and autobiography, Mishra explores some fascinating similarities between the Buddha's time and our own.

Mark Haddon

In the last year I've been deluged with free books in search of glowing quotes. Three should become classics (two came from my own publisher — but they know where I live and what I like). Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* (Penguin) won the

Guardian Children's Fiction Award but will, I hope, be read by many adults. It's the first book I've read in a long time that transported me so completely I forgot I was reading a book. Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (Cape) continues the story she began in *Persepolis: The Story of an Iranian Childhood*. The books are funny, frightening and addictively readable. They should be thrust into the hands of everyone whose knowledge of Iran comes only from newspapers and television. Rachel Cohen's *A Chance Meeting* (Cape) tells a story of American art and literature from 1854 to 1976 through a chain of real but often surprising meetings. Henry James has his photo taken by Mathew Brady. Brady photographs Ulysses S Grant. Alfred Stieglitz photographs Hart Crane. Hart Crane opens the door one night to find Charlie Chaplin standing in the corridor . . . A real joy.

Sarah Hall

A Complicated Kindness by Miriam Toews (Faber). This novel is exquisitely written and faceted. It combines impossible qualities effortlessly — is blithe and earnest, heartbreaking and humorous, and its expression is as raw as it is delicate. It is a story of family disintegration; faith's rupture, recovery, and reckoning; love's inhibiting aspects and liberty's damages. Toews creates a central voice that is adolescent and wise, haunted, disarming and endearing. From beginning to end the book is unusually calibrated and incredibly compelling.

The Brink by Jacob Polley (Picador). This is an extraordinary and beautiful collection of poetry. It is, by turns, a song-book; an archaeological dig; a reconstitution of the household ordinary; a tidal, totemic manifesto; a landscape of reflection, disruption, curiosity; and the tonic to its own aches. Every poem, every word, has gentle luminosity — there is the strange and lovely phenomenon of the moon rising above the pages every time they open.

James Hamilton-Paterson

Of recent memoirs I treasure Barry Humphries's *My Life as Me* (Penguin) for its scrupulous attention to what is formative about childhood ennui. Humphries unpicks both himself and his homeland with melancholy exuberance.

Jamie Whyte's *Bad Thoughts* (Corvo Books) is a waspish primer of the rubbish we write, think, say, read, hear and believe. Spot the logical errors that render so much public and private discourse quite meaningless.

Imperial Hubris by Anonymous (Michael Scheuer, former chief of the CIA's Bin Laden unit) (Brassey's) is a must-read. An angry patriot, he documents America's fatal misapprehension that Islam hates it for its culture rather than for its insane foreign policy, and explains why a "war on terror" must inevitably be lost.

David Hare

In the line of work, I read more than 40 books about the Iraq war, and the standard was high. People who dismiss "instant history" should wonder why it's so much more interesting and often better written than the proper stuff. Richard Clarke's self-critical description of intelligence failures and strategic stupidity in the US government, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (Simon & Schuster), made for a brave and decent book — a book that electorates really needed — but the most thoughtful was Lewis Lapham's *Theater of War* (The New Press). It has a ringing subtitle: *In Which the Republic Becomes an Empire*.

Seymour Hersh

The unending American (and British) wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have eliminated fiction from my list, excepting Philip Roth, of course. Looking forward oh so eagerly to future wars, in the aftermath of George Bush's re-election, I've been reading *The Crisis* by David Harris, of anti-Vietnam war fame, a compelling account, published by Little, Brown in America, of the fall of the Shah of Iran and the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic Republic. It is a story that we all know too well: the utter failure of the American press to provide timely information; the lack of any historical background (only a few were interested in such); cultural insensitivity (that is, the usual racism), and the daily misjudgments of the men and women at the top of the Amer- **page 6**