Books of the Year

Writers list their favourite books of 2008.

Various Authors

15th December 2008

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The book I most enjoyed reading this year is José Eduardo Agualusa's *The Book of Chameleons*. The narrator is a dreamy, funny, brilliant gecko but there is nothing gimmicky in this beautiful, poetic novel about an Angolan albino who invents fake pasts for his clients. It is a grown-up story about a country getting to know itself again, and told in such exquisite language that I wished I could read it in the original Portuguese.

Tahmima Anam

Afghanistan has become a part of our public consciousness, though many of us have little idea of the human tragedy behind the decades of violence. This is the backdrop to Nadeem Aslam's brilliant third novel, *The Wasted Vigil*, though to say the novel is about Afghanistan is not nearly enough, because the novel also tells us about love, faith and the limits of human endurance. Aslam has an uncanny ability to write with great tenderness and honesty all at once. Read and be dazzled.

I also highly recommend Alice Albinia's *Empires of the Indus*: The Story of a River, part travelogue, part historical account of the Indus River Valley. Through personal testimony and exhaustive archival research, Albinia sheds light on the surprisingly diverse roots of modern-day Pakistan.

Diana Athill

I'm a shamefully late, and enraptured, discoverer of Kate Grenville, whose *The Lieutenant* is a supremely good novel. It's published in the UK next February and has excited me more than any novel I've read since those of W. G. Sebald. My favourite non-fiction book is Richard Holmes's *The Age of Wonder* – a real feast of a book!

T. C. Boyle

My reading this year has mostly had to do with ecology and biology – research for the novel I am now writing. Among many others, I re-read one of the great works on the subject of island biogeography, David Quammen's *The Song of the Dodo*. If you don't know this book, you should. It is fluidly and wittily written, very wide-ranging and informative. At present, I am reading an advanced review copy of Blake Bailey's forthcoming biography of John Cheever, under whom I studied one semester at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. This is a very fine biography indeed, assessing and illuminating a complex life, and written with all the power and persuasion of a novel. I have been taking my time with it, savouring it chapter by chapter as I might linger over a box of chocolates. Or no: I don't particularly like chocolates. Let's say a pot of lobsters.

Gordon Burn

The one true classic I feel I read this year is *The Story Of Edgar Sawtelle* by David Wroblewski. This is a magical piece of storytelling, in the true tradition of *The Water Babies* and *Black Beauty* (with the grown-up under-colours of a James Salter or a

Richard Ford). A publishing sensation in the US, it was unaccountably overlooked here.

Junot Díaz

The book that most disturbed, moved and stayed with me this last year was Taichi Yamada's *I Haven't Dreamed of Flying for a While*. Yamada is one of my favourite Japanese writers and this is his masterwork. My God what a love story, my God what a ghost story! And Yamada shows us how little difference there is between these two types of tales. I wish I could read this book again for a first time; that's how fine it is.

Jonathan Derbyshire

Penelope Fitzgerald's collected letters, *So I Have Thought of You*, don't reveal any secrets – either about her or her fiction. It wasn't in her nature, as she wrote to one correspondent, to be 'spectacular or panoramic'. But what this correspondence does present us with is a thoroughly distinctive voice – reticent, sly yet gently rigorous – that it turns out was already fully formed in the early 1940s, more than thirty years before Fitzgerald published her first novel.

Stefan Collini is another virtuoso of voice. The critical essays in *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* hum with an inimitable blend of asperity and wit – whether he's writing about William Empson or the Research Assessment Exercise, Edmund Wilson or the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Shortly before he killed himself in September, David Foster Wallace allowed one of his most admired pieces of extended narrative journalism to be published in book form. *McCain's Promise*, a record of the week Wallace spent following John McCain's campaign in the 2000 Republican Primaries, is an epitaph of sorts – and a reminder that the senator from Arizona was once the repository for the hopes that have now been invested in Barack Obama.

Anthony Doerr

You've got thirty feet of intestines crammed inside you, and to one of the trillions of microbes living in there, that's a wilderness the size of the Mediterranean. Carl Zimmer's *Microcosm: E. coli and the New Science of Life* sinks its reader into the point of view of the humblest microbe: the world-famous, crappy-smelling, Cheeto-shaped E. coli. *Microcosm* is a paean to this diverse, ubiquitous bacterium, and as Zimmer ascends into the spiralling breakthroughs of microbiology, he starts asking important, dizzying questions, including the biggest of all: What does it mean to be a human being?

Paul Farley

The Man Without by Ray Robinson is a disruptive, boundary-crossing, perceptive and moving novel set in a North I actually recognize. Ciaran Carson's *Collected Poems* gathers together the life's work (to date) of this great Irish poet. *Wrongteous*, edited by Leo Fitzmaurice and Paul Rooney, is an odd, *sui generis* pocket book: it contains work

by Malcolm Lowry, David Foster Wallace, Helen Simpson, and many others, cheek by jowl with visual art plates. *The Forever War* by Dexter Filkins presents a selection of views of Afghanistan, 9/11 and Iraq from on the nightmare ground. Deeply disturbing and matter-of-fact.

Joshua Ferris

'The Noble Truths of Suffering' is a short story by Aleksandar Hemon that was published in the September 22 issue of *The New Yorker*. The Bosnian narrator is a loutish menace whose vulnerability is slowly wormed out of its hole by a gnomic American writer. With syntactical sizzles and wonderfully skewed word choices ('chitin', 'angerlessly') every sentence is a little volt of pleasure. The great shudder of joy comes at the end, when the suffering, loss and ruin of war – and significantly for the reader, the mundane details of a lunch described within the story – are transformed into the art of the American's new novel. Hemon wrote the best story of the year.

Richard Ford

One publication I heartily recommend is Vasily Grossman's book of cablegrams reporting on the Nazi push toward Moscow and Stalingrad. It's called *A Writer at War: Vassily Grossman and the Red Army, 1941–1945*. The writing is (even in translation) extremely memorable as writing – not just for its reportorial virtues – and for the actually haunting pictures it puts into one's mind. Grossman was a Jew, reporting on Nazis, at the same time as Stalin was exterminating Jews in various precincts of the Soviet Union. His precarious hold on his life, the truth, his profession, his sense of collegiality, his family, his own writing is a subtle but forceful torque in the writing itself.

Rivka Galchen

I'm trying to overcome the grade school favourite band instinct that makes me not want to let any but the truly 'deserving' know about James Lasdun's 2002 novel, *The Horned Man*. (I feel I don't deserve to know about it, simply because I didn't already know about it.) Lasdun's prose is, well: dappled, counter, spare, original, strange. Narrated by an awkward expat literature professor, one who remains steadfastly unaware of being himself the origins of the very mystery bedevilling him, *The Horned Man* is the descendent of both Saint Augustine and Buster Keaton. It's odd, unfathomably beautiful, very (very, very, very) funny, charismatic and a shade miraculous.

Keith Gessen

Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages by Phyllis Rose teaches a short and simple lesson: Do not marry. Especially do not marry John Ruskin. But if you should happen to marry, do so in a way so offensive to everyone you know that you'll no longer be invited to dinner parties. This is what George Eliot did, which is why she wrote *Middlemarch*, whereas you have not. 2008 was too late for me to learn this lesson. Then again, it would always probably have been too late.

David Goldblatt

In one of the many brilliant footnotes that pepper *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz asks whether we missed our two minutes of Dominican history? I had, but not now. This novel is a multigenerational family saga that tells the story of the Dominican Republic. Díaz takes us from Columbus's arrival and the destruction of the indigenous Tanio, to the two American occupations bookending the unspeakable brutality of the Trujillo dictatorship. From the Haitian genocide no one wants to talk about, to the vast exodus to the United States that finds over a million Dominicans in New York and New Jersey today. But you won't realize what you've learned till the end because along the way you will be gripped, with laughter and crying, by the story of Oscar's family and of Oscar himself – the least Dominican Dominican male in the world: obese, shy, obsessed with sci-fi and fantasy and above all virginal. Told in a variety of exquisitely authentic voices and enlivened by the zip and the zest of Latino street slang, it took Díaz ten years to write. The wait has been worth every minute.

Niall Griffiths

I'd have to say that the best book I read in 2008 was *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* by David Simon – the only cure for end-of-*The-Wire* blues. And *Portions From a Wine-Stained Notebook* by Charles Bukowski, an anthology of his previously uncollected writings that show him to be a much more widely read and culturally aware man than is commonly supposed. And Roger Deakin's *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*; the beautiful necessity of involvement. His death at sixty-three was an immeasurable loss.

Olga Grushin

I am so happy to have discovered John Crowley this year; I have read everything by him I could find. My favourite is *Little, Big* (closely followed by the four-volume *Ægypt*). A multigenerational saga of a family who believe they have a special connection to the world of fairies, *Little, Big* is usually (and unfortunately) classified as a fantasy novel, but it has little overt fairy-tale magic. Rather, it is filled with a different, everyday kind of magic, which Crowley renders even more wondrous: a magic of happy childhoods, complex family ties, love affairs and children, summers and winters, country houses and cities, dreams, memories, and storytelling. It is a piercingly beautiful book about the search for meaning in one's life.

Kirsty Gunn

Without doubt my two books of the year was the mighty double-bill Bildungsroman experience of James Kelman's *Kieron Smith, Boy* and Adam Mars-Jones's *Pilcrow* – both of which drew me entirely into their compulsively drawn, wildly idiosyncratic worlds and, like all great literature, turned me in to someone who lives there with the other characters in the pages. I'm also looking forward to *The Philosopher and the Wolf* as already I believe everything that Mark Rowlands says about the difference between monkey thinking and pure clean lupine sensibility. It will be my book for Christmas.

Tessa Hadley

This year I rediscovered *Far from the Madding Crowd*. I loved Thomas Hardy's novels when I was a teenager, in nostalgic reaction against everything modern; later, I found his style cumbersome – 'a sense of exorbitant profit, spiritually, by an exchange of hearts, being at the bottom of pure passions' – and missed the sophisticated irony he doesn't have. Now I understand that his language is as right in its particular landscape and cultural context as a vernacular architecture, clean and epic and heart-piercing. In this novel there is one of the best sex scenes in all literature, when Sergeant Troy puts on his exhibition of swordsmanship for Bathsheba among the ferns.

Jennifer Haigh

I've just read *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry and loved this absorbing trip through the last Irish century, as remembered by its centenarian narrator, the unforgettable Roseanne Clear, whose own destiny bumped up against the struggles for Irish independence as played out in one town in the West. The novel is a meditation on memory – what we remember and why, and how those recollections change over time. Roseanne's long life contains mysteries within mysteries, all resolving in the most surprising and satisfying way. Above all it's her voice – lucid, ironic and often very funny – that makes the novel a joy to read.

Jim Holt

I'm very excited about *An Introduction to Gödel's Theorems* by Peter Smith, a lecturer in philosophy at Cambridge. It's an elegant, lucid and even witty account of Kurt Gödel's notorious 'incompleteness' theorems, the gist of which is that no logical system can capture mathematical truth. I've been fascinated by Gödel's work for years, and by the way it's been invoked, often ignorantly, by philosophers, scientists, and po-mo lit-crit types. But only after working my way through this elementary but rigorous primer (imbibing no more than four pages a day) did I finally come to see it steadily and whole. If, like me, you take your philosophical/mathematical dilettantism pretty seriously, it will give you months of intellectual pleasure.

Reina James

I've read very little new fiction this year but have been thrilled to discover the outstanding work of Elizabeth Taylor – where have I been? The one new novel that really struck home and caused several late dinners was *The Clothes on Their Backs* by Linda Grant. For non-fiction, I'd single out *London Cemeteries* by Hugh Meller and Brian Parsons, a beautifully illustrated and fascinating guide. And although it isn't a book, I'd have to choose Randy Newman's new CD, *Harps and Angels*. Like all his work, it's spare, inspiring and often very, very funny – check out the track 'A Few Words in Defense of Our Country'.

Kathleen Jamie

Michel Faber reviewed James Kelman's *Kieron Smith, Boy* in the *Guardian*: 'Both revolutionary and very, very dull', 'intolerably wearisome', 'droning on'. Sounded good – I went hot-foot to the bookshop and read the novel over the weekend, couldn't stop, with that thrilled feeling on the scalp you get when you're really on to something. The boy Smith doesn't drone on because you've never heard him before. This is a totally new voice. It's everything else that's dull and wearisome. If you're no great believer in the consolations of narrative, if you find 'stories', told in nicely turned sentences, pointless and naff, then Kelman is your man. The boy's voice, to my ear, is flawless and brilliantly sustained. The diction, the syntax, the sudden cliff-edges Kelman brings us to, where language fails – these are the product of years of careful listening to people who're never listened to. The book, the boy's speaking, unfolds over years; it's like a Greek tragedy, the future is fated, inevitable: there are tiny, huge disasters, a stolen bike, a wrong school, a tenderness which will get nowhere. *Kieron Smith, Boy* got nowhere on the Booker, but has just won Scottish Book of the Year – a consolation for those of us who think it's genius.

Akash Kapur

I really enjoyed reading Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, which was a rare book that actually lived up to its hype; and Damon Galgut's *The Impostor*, strikingly similar in tone and mood to his last book, *The Good Doctor*, and just as finely crafted. But my real discovery this year was John McGahern – particularly his *Collected Stories*, which are wise and calm and delicate, and just wonderful. In non-fiction, I thought Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War* really captured a picture of war in a way that few other books on the post-9/11 world have done. I also stumbled upon a recently republished biography of Nehru, *Nehru: A Contemporary's Estimate*, written by the Australian diplomat Walter Crocker in the 1960s. It's an impressionistic little gem – no heavy-duty history or policy lessons here – that really gives a feeling of the man.

A.L. Kennedy

Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan is a genuine attempt to bring home the realities of the combat in Afghanistan and Iraq using testimonies from service men and women. Horrific, moving, angry and yet filled with a sense that change can be effected and that duty and comradeship and humanity can be redefined. Obama's victory may have been a good thing but this book begins to show the scale of the damages wrought in the last few years, and the immensity of the task of reparation, reconciliation and the restoration of justice.

James Lasdun

Beijing Coma by Ma Jian, a dystopic take on post-Tianenman China, was the most ambitious novel I read this year; and the most memorable too, with its scenes of laconically delivered horror and grotesque comedy escalating to a powerful, almost unbearably painful climax.

Doris Lessing

The Suspicions of Mr Whicher by Kate Summerscale has already attracted a lot of attention. The crime – a small child killed – excited Dickens and Wilkie Collins and other novelists of the time. I can't think of another book which takes you so fast into the smells, tastes and atmosphere of that time.

The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body by Steven Mithen is a book that has you making up your own theories about how grunts became speech and songs.

Finally, I missed two books in 2003 – *The Seven Daughters of Eve* and *Adam's Curse: A Future Without Men* by Bryan Sykes, a geneticist at Oxford. Both are truly revolutionary and wonderful.

Yiyun Li

In this past year, quite serendipitously, I came across Molly Keane, the Anglo-Irish novelist. She had written in her youth under the pseudonym M.J. Farrell, but her later work, published under her real name, has been such a joyful discovery for me: *Good Behaviour*, *The Rising Tide*, and *Time after Time* are the three novels I read with immense pleasure. Her portrayal of characters is relentless, humorous yet deeply sympathetic, her prose is unforgettable, and the landscape of her work haunts me long after I have finished reading.

Benjamin Markovits

A few weeks ago I had a four-hour train journey ahead of me and only sixty-odd pages left in the book I was reading: *Ravelstein*, by Saul Bellow. Published in 2000, when he was eighty-five, this is Bellow's last novel. It's loosely the story of his friendship with Allan Bloom, though it's shaped too by his own approaching death and medical history. I didn't want to run out of things to read, and with nothing else to hand, started from the beginning again before finishing. The pleasure was just as sharp the second time around. Some writers sound pretty by sounding like writers, a basically unnatural gift. Bellow instead wrote like an ordinary man in a heightened state of attention, to everything that matters.

Laura Miller

With her 2003 novel, *American Woman*, based on the experiences of a bit player in the Patty Hearst kidnapping, Susan Choi suggested the pattern for a new kind of political novel, focused on minor figures caught up in major events and weaving together introspection and suspense in a fashion that – miraculously – doesn't diminish either one. *A Person of Interest*, inspired by her own father's friendship with Unabomber Ted Kaczynski in grad school, is the fruition of that idea. The novel describes the disintegration of a undistinguished Midwestern math professor's life when his younger, more successful colleague is killed by a mail bomb and he attracts the suspicion of investigators. Nothing here – not race or community or justice or history – is as simple as it's often made out to be.

Rick Moody

Here are a couple of contemporary books I have read and enjoyed greatly in the last year: *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, a collection of short stories by Jim Shepard, and *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization*, by Nicholson Baker.

The Shepard collection, the very best such thing in recent American letters, is historically obsessed, containing accounts of cosmonauts, Australian exploration, the invention of the guillotine and so on. It's incredibly funny in spots, but also deeply sad. Shepard is known well for his novels and for his love of the movies, but in this book he seems to have set aside all limitations on his ambition. He swings for the fences and, if you'll pardon a baseball metaphor, connects repeatedly for extra bases. No short-fiction collection, in recent years, has delighted me as much.

The Nicholson Baker effort is non-fiction and it is unapologetically polemical. Using only primary sources Baker purports, in very abbreviated morsels of (largely) quotation, to wonder whether the Second World War had to take place in the way it did. There are no heroes in this account – not even among the anti-war pacifists with whom Baker clearly feels some common cause – and Churchill, Roosevelt and Hitler all seem like, at best, liars and dissemblers, and, at worst, bloodthirsty megalomaniacs. The closest analogue to the methodology here is Walter Benjamin, who once made the case for a literature composed entirely of quotation. Yes, *Human Smoke* is a very strange book, and not one that is designed to delight your historian friends, but it is deeply felt and, in its shape, completely original. Lately, Baker has been fearless in terms of what he's willing to say in public and I find his work exhilarating.

Daniyal Mueenuddin

Originally published in 1973, J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* has been reissued with an introduction by Pankaj Mishra. It is a brilliant depiction of a fictional episode in the uprising known, depending on your politics, as either the Great Mutiny or the First War of Indian Independence. (Apparently the embers of the conflict are still glowing.) Jane Gardam's *Old Filth* is extremely moving and deserves highest marks for its title, which can be dropped into conversations with great effect. Finally, Mohammed Hanif's *Case of Exploding Mangoes* establishes what we can hope will be posterity's final image of the Pakistani dictator General Zia – flatulent, hen-pecked, absurd.

Catherine O'Flynn

I'm currently halfway through Karen Russell's *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* and it has already made an indelible mark. Something about it reminds me of the music of The Handsome Family with that same combination of strangeness, sadness, humour and loss. I loved *Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris – a tender and funny book. It perfectly captured the absurdity and emptiness of every job I ever had, but managed to do so with great humanity and warmth. Immediately

after finished reading, I had slightly mixed feelings about Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream*, but now months later I find that many scenes stand out in my memory and make me want to go back and read it again.

It's a bit naff to mention the Booker winner I guess, but I read Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* when it came out, so I'm attempting some early-adopter cred there. Balram's voice was the most refreshing thing I heard all year. For 2009 I'm looking forward most to the publication in May of *Heartland* by Anthony Cartwright. His first novel, *The Afterglow*, didn't get the attention it deserved, but all should be put right with his follow-up, a beautifully written and, I think, important portrait of identity and community.

Philip Oltermann

Me and Kaminski, the predecessor to Daniel Kehlmann's much-praised bestseller *Measuring the World*, made a belated transfer into the English language this year. The satirical send-up of the art world might ring particularly true with critics and curators, but it's an all-round fine novel with a brain and a heart – his real masterpiece.

I thought the whodunit plot device of Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* would make this an unusually gripping work of non-fiction. It does, but it's Summerscale's talent as a cultural historian that turns this book into a standout read.

I also enjoyed Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke*. I like the fact that there is a curious consistency in his approach, in spite of the seeming idiosyncracy of his subject matter. This revisionist history of the international peace movement before the Second World War has something of the footnoting pedantry of *The Mezzanine*. As thought-provoking as it is stylistically innovative.

Finally, Anne Fadiman's *At Large and at Small* is a collection of disparate essays from one of America's finest purveyors of the 'familiar essay', which can be a misleading tag, because Fadiman has the gift to make familiar ground look like un-chartered territory. The piece on her brother's obsession with ice cream is particularly unmissable.

Lydia Peelle

The End by Salvatore Scibona is a marvellous book. It follows the lives of Italian immigrants in America in the first half of the twentieth century. It has been nominated for a National Book Award and I have been recommending it to everyone.

Edward Platt

I spent a lot of time in Israel this year and enjoyed two books about the occupation of the West Bank. In *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman unpicks the complex codes and systems which underwrite life in the Occupied Territories, from the post-modern theorizing which inspired the army's operations in the Second Intifada, to the political pressures that dictate the course of the Separation Barrier. In *Lords of the Land*, by Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, I found the fullest available history of the religiously inspired settlers' movement which necessitates – or justifies – the infrastucture Weizman describes.

Shalom Auslander's memoir *Foreskin's Lament* is about a different aspect of Jewish fundamentalism: it's an account of his childhood tribulations in the Orthodox Jewish town of Monsey, New York, and his adult attempts to escape the straitjacket of religious conformity. It's very funny and very angry.

Matthew Power

It's an intriguing question: What, precisely, would become of the planet, and all the varied detritus of mankind, if we were simply to vanish? Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* offers up a haunting 300-page thought experiment, wandering a post-human landscape from the wilderness of the Korean DMZ to the radioactive ghost town of Chernobyl to a hypothetical New York devoid of its denizens. How would that be? The cockroaches would die off, the cats would take over and the Lexington Avenue subway would collapse and turn into a river. An indelible image for any commuter's post-apocalyptic daydream.

Gary Shteyngart

Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* is a stunning paean to the declining American workplace. Stylistically brilliant, Ferris gets away with using an omniscient 'We' to narrate his tale of a failing Chicago ad agency. As he pokes at the ribs of his corporate crew with a sharp index finger, he still manages to fill the novel with generosity and compassion. As the American economy collapses, we're going to need helpings of both.

Justin Torres

Jeffery Renard Allen is one of America's most important living writers. Yeah, I said it. I read *Holding Pattern*, his magically real story collection, and then I went and ate up everything Allen has produced (his novel, his poetry) because finally I've found an author who is writing what needs to be written, saying what needs to be said; and saying it precise; saying it fresh; saying it right in time.

Alan Warner

James Meek produced another wondrous novel. *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* said so much about our times of war; a desperate love story written with ironic dexterity.

Since his soul shaking short-story collection *Drown*, we had to wait ten years for Junot Díaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Worth the wait.

Gwendoline Riley's novel *Joshua Spassky* shows one of the wiliest English stylists, slowly claiming her delicate territory. Another beautiful voice singing in the wilderness.

Also: *Practical Concreting* by A. E. Peatfield in the 'Teach Yourself' books series is highly recommended.

Various Authors
Books of the Year
Writers list their favourite books of 2008.
15th December 2008

<granta.com/granta-books-of-the-year-2008>