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Christmas books

From prizewinning poetry to bestselling thrillers, D-day to the credit crunch, Wolf Hall to a picturebook about a dying duck, our writers and guests pick the best of 2009

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Christmas books. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Julian Barnes

Laura Cumming's *A Face to the World* (HarperPress) examines the subtleties of the transaction which occurs in the self-portrait: painters painting themselves, pretending to be looking at us, knowing we'll be looking at them. Richly thoughtful, perceptive and well written, it's that rare item: an art book where the text is so enthralling that the pictures, however necessary, almost seem like an interruption.

Having last year greatly admired Adam Foulds's long poem *The Broken Word*, I uncharitably wondered whether his novel *The Quickening Maze* (Cape) might allow me to tacitly advise him to stick to verse. Some hope: this story of the Victorian lunatic asylum where the poet John Clare and Tennyson's brother Septimus were incarcerated is the real thing. It's not a "poetic novel" either, but a novelistic novel, rich in its understanding and representation of the mad, the sane, and that large overlapping category in between.

Sebastian Barry

This was the year for me of the two Colm/Colums, Colm Tóibín and Colum McCann, each in their differing ways realising the full height of their respective ambitions. Writers through many books sometimes tend towards a larger destination, and it is marvellous when you see them reaching it, because not only does it constitute a signal achievement, but suggests fresh journeys are being contemplated. *Brooklyn* (Viking) is the station for Colm Tóibín, and New York for Colum McCann in *Let the Great World Spin* (Bloomsbury). These are the books of profoundly gifted world writers, and in that strange way of great books are incontrovertibly "there", radiant and right.

Windus) possesses an astonishing tension which makes it hard to put down. Marías's observation in exquisite detail has prompted many comparisons to Proust, but his themes, including human corruption through state secrecy and power, could hardly be more contemporary. It is probably the most powerful and important novel to appear in European literature for some time.

William Boyd

Selina Hastings's superb biography of Somerset Maugham, *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham* (John Murray) ticks all the boxes an exemplary biography should. As well as being admirably thorough and scholarly it is also revelatory – not least about the wild sexual goings-on in the Villa Mauresque, Maugham's palatial house on the Côte d'Azur. Hastings has the rare gift among biographers of being able to set a scene and establish a character with great vividness in a few deft lines.

Tormented Hope: Nine hypochondriac Lives by Brian Dillon (Penguin Ireland) is a short but fascinating study of literary and other celebrated hypochondriacs. These engrossing glimpses of the "fit unwell" include Charlotte Brontë, James Boswell, Andy Warhol and Marcel Proust (who must surely be the undisputed king of this particular neurotic hill). Written with great elegance and shrewd understanding, it illuminates a condition that probably all of us will suffer from at some time in our lives.

Anthony Browne

The two best illustrated books for me this year have both come from abroad, and both are stunningly original. *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (Templar) by Shaun Tan, from Australia, is a collection of 15 short illustrated stories all stemming from sketchbook doodles. It's an unusual approach – most illustrations in books are reactions to the text, but here the pictures inspire the stories. They are all strange and beautiful. *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch (Gecko Press) is a superb picture book from Germany, that tells a gentle story of the relationship between Death and a duck. Death is portrayed as a sympathetic figure in a dressing gown who is with us all the time, but who only comes into Duck's consciousness towards the end of his life. It is warm, poignant and witty.

AS Byatt

I have read three novels this year, all of which were disturbing, original and brilliant. They are *A Gate at the Stairs* by Lorrie Moore (Faber), *Vagrants* by Yiyun Li (Fourth Estate) and *The Blind Side of the Heart* by Julia Franck (Harvill Secker). Moore describes the pains and hazards of child adoption in the American chattering classes. Yiyun Li describes the effects of the execution of a Chinese dissident on those around her. Franck begins with the abandoning of a child on a German railway station and tells the tale of his mother, damaged by the interwar years. All are heart rending; all find new and exciting ways of constructing a story.

Vince Cable

The Girl Who Played with Fire by Stieg Larsson (Quercus). I was completely absorbed by the complexities of this Sweden-set page turner with its unlikely heroine, Lisbeth Salander: a wild and violent young woman with a personality disorder, bisexual tastes, an obsessive interest in advanced mathematics, a remarkable talent for computer hacking and a photographic memory that helps her to track down her quarry. The plot is not for the squeamish, centring on teenage prostitution, the Swedish establishment's complicity in it and Salander's personal crusade to punish male abusers following her

own traumatic upbringing. The book is, on one level, a gripping thriller, on another a compelling morality tale about the abuse of power.

Jane Campion

Opportunity and *Singularity* by Charlotte Grimshaw (both Cape). I read Grimshaw for the first time this year. She is a master with mystery, very contemporary and astute. These two books take the form of linked stories. They are elliptical, atmospheric and compelling in the way a good crime novel should be. There are complex love affairs, undercover detectives, doctors, adoptions, bad stepmothers and lost children. Her language is relaxed, spare and perfect.

Peter Carey

The final volume of *The Paris Review Interviews* has just been published and writers can once again be reminded that we are not the first to have ridiculous ambitions, doubts and difficulties. The four volumes together will make a generous gift for anyone who writes or reads. One volume would be not too shabby either.

Amit Chaudhuri

Judging the Man Booker International prize this year meant that I discovered many works, including Evan S Connell's superb *Mr Bridge* and *Mrs Bridge* (both North Point Press). The winner, Alice Munro, herself published a new collection, *Too Much Happiness* (Chatto & Windus), in 2009, full of the acuity that age gives, but which she seemed to have come to possess incredibly early. The best writing from south Asia may have made the quietest entries: Aamer Hussein's novella, *Another Gulmohar Tree* (Telegram Books), and Sunetra Gupta's novel, *So Good in Black*. And one of the most compelling books about Africa this year was not a novel, but a study of censorship in apartheid South Africa, Peter D McDonald's *The Literature Police*.

Jonathan Coe

Of the very few novels I've read this year, far and away the best was *One Day*, by David Nicholls (Hodder & Stoughton). It's rare to find a novel which ranges over the recent past with such authority, and even rarer to find one in which the two leading characters are drawn with such solidity, such painful fidelity, to real life that you really do put the book down with the hallucinatory feeling that they've become as well known to you as your closest friends. Hard to imagine anyone encountering characters as well drawn as this and not recognising the extraordinary talent of the writer who has created them. Well, unless you're a Booker judge, obviously.

In non-fiction I enjoyed Miranda Carter's *The Three Emperors* (Fig Tree), which takes what should have been a daunting subject – the interrelationships between the rulers of the three great European powers in the run-up to the first world war – and through sheer wit and narrative elan turns it into engaging drama. Like David Nicholls, in fact, Carter has a notable gift for characterisation – a quality just as important in a popular historian as in a novelist.

Kiran Desai

The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets, edited by Jeet Thayil, is a labour of love that gathers the Indian poets writing in English from the past and the present, from within India, from outside. While there may not be a firm geographical location to the experience of being an Indian poet, there is certainly a firm emotional one.

Proffering a view into a very different landscape of Indian poetry is David Shulman's *Spring, Heat, Rains* (Chicago University Press), that weaves meditative fragments of his stay among the Telugu poets and intellectuals of Andhra with his research. I didn't expect to be moved to tears by a scholarly book.

Aids Sutra, a collection of essays edited by Negar Akhavi (Vintage). I worked on one of these essays, interviewing the sex workers of Andhra Pradesh, famous for the Kalavanthulu caste of courtesans, but I am proposing this book for the strength of the stories behind these accounts. Mukul Kesavan, Sonia Faleiro, Salman Rushdie, William Dalrymple, Jaspreet Singh, Nalini Jones and Sunil Gangopadhyay are among those who record the tales of lonely truck drivers and HIV-positive lovers, Aids orphans, the women of Calcutta's red light district, girls dedicated to the goddess Yellamma and initiated into prostitution. Their stories have the resonance of fiction, hard-won tales of transformation, of camouflage, compromise, humour.

Roddy Doyle

In Ireland, the good things are either brilliant, absolutely brilliant, or absolutely f***in' brilliant. The Dublin that was by-passed by the Celtic Tiger is brought to vivid life in Trevor Byrne's first novel, *Ghosts and Lightning* (Canongate). It's brilliant. I also loved *A Gate at the Stairs*, by Lorrie Moore (Knopf). It's absolutely brilliant. A few pages into Richard Bausch's *Peace* (Tuskar Rock), I decided I was reading one of the best books I'd read in my life. Two months later, I'm a bit calmer, but it's still absolutely f***in' brilliant.

Margaret Drabble

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes* (Faber) is a fine and moving collection of stories, displaying his unique combination of the sad, the stoic and the consoling. It's about failure, but it dignifies failure, and with it, the human condition. There is nobody like him. I am reading Amanda Vickery's *Behind Closed Doors* (Yale), an evocative account of life in Georgian England, which celebrates the domestic arts and explores what we mean by home: how much we owe the historians who trawl through the illegible and scattered archives for us to assemble these alternative narratives of history. The history of needlework, which would have bored me unspeakably when I was a girl, now seems both interesting and important.

Carol Ann Duffy

Rain by Don Paterson (Faber) is the best collection of poetry to appear in years and establishes him as the major poet of the "New Generation" which first brought him to prominence. The long, meditative elegy for his friend, the late Michael Donaghy, is a heartbreaking triumph of feeling and intelligence; the poems on divorce and fatherhood are small masterpieces of near-unbearable lyric truthfulness. To read this book is to have the privilige of seeing a world-class talent assert itself, as Seamus Heaney did with *North*.

Geoff Dyer

What a year! So many great things came out that I'll limit myself to a single genre: short stories. For sheer pleasure, Wells Tower's debut collection, *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* (Granta) is hard to beat. We're always hearing about authentic new voices (they often sound incredibly like other, older voices) but Tower's is exactly that. David Eagleman's Calvinoesque *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives* (Canongate) was mind-blowingly clever, funny and profound (quite a lot to have managed in just over

100 pages). Working in more traditional (albeit transatlantic) William Trevorish vein, James Lasdun proved himself to be a master of the form with the enthralling psychological subtleties of *It's Beginning to Hurt* (Cape).

James Ellroy

I've long been impressed by Don Winslow's novels and can't quite understand why he's not a household name. Wake up people – he's the real deal, and *The Gentlemen's Hour* (William Heinemann) is yet another sensational foray into the underbelly of San Diego with laidback PI Boone Daniels. 2009 has very much been the year of the accomplished debut. *Beat the Reaper* by Josh Bazell (Little, Brown) is a firecracker of a novel. Fast and ferocious, it tells the tale of a former Mafia hit man turned doctor who has to use every trick in the book when his past catches up with him and the shit hits the fan. Cool, savage and inventive. And watch out for Stuart Neville. His first novel, *The Twelve* (Harvill Secker), sees a haunted former hit man exacting bloody revenge. It'll knock you sideways. This guy can write.

Joshua Ferris

One of my favourite books of the year was Geoff Dyer's *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* (Canongate). It's as enjoyable as it is formally inventive, and everything about it – the art, the drugs, the sex, the bananas, and finally the oblique and moving spiritual renunciation – was compelling and ingenious. It's a rare book that takes its comedy as seriously as its philosophy – or vice versa – but in Dyer's best novel yet, he has done just that.

Richard Ford

Simply "writings" is how Ian Jack describes *The Country Formerly Known as Great Britain*, his wonderful collection of memoirs, essays, investigative articles, novelties, anecdotes, family mini-sagas, and a sweet trifle or two. And fair enough, since Jack is a superb and diverse writer, with a mind and eyes and a nose for virtually everything – and particularly for things "British", a word, a concept and a spirit he musingly and amusedly seeks to anatomise, and to the passing of which he pays bittersweet but knowing tribute. Football, Thatcherism, old movie houses, trains, train wrecks, his Scottish parents and English brothers, chimneys, mass culture, mass disaster, the working man's plight, the slow collapse of Christianity – for all this and a lot more, Jack is a remarkably readable and acute cultural critic and historian. He's smart, proportionate, discerning and (rarest of rarities) decent. To me, this book is indispensable.

Jonathan Franzen

Alongside very satisfying rereadings of *Anna Karenina* and Primo Levi's three great memoirs, my best book experiences of 2009 were with a pair of new American novels about money. *How to Sell* (Harvill Secker), by the young philosopher Clancy Martin, is a strange, dirty, inside look at the jewellery business which reads like a manic buying spree or a cocaine jag and ends so wrenchingly I still feel scarred by it. Jonathan Dee's *The Privileges* (Constable), which will be published in January, is a deliciously sophisticated engine of literary darkness, seducing the reader into sympathy with a young Manhattan couple whose ascent to megawealth then takes them beyond the reach of anybody's sympathy. Strong novels for a deep recession.

Antonia Fraser

The most brilliant literary biography I came across this year was unquestionably *The*

Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham by Selina Hastings (John Murray). Although long, it is in no sense too long – after all, we are looking at 90 thrill-packed (and occasionally horror-filled) years – and it is in any case a vivid, compelling narrative. The extraordinary range of Maugham's life, both literary and personal, is amply demonstrated. I used to gobble up my parents' copies of Maugham's plays, novels and, above all, short stories when I was in my teens: Hastings is sending me back to them, which is surely the ultimate test of such a work. At the same time I no longer regret that I never tasted life at the Villa Mauresqe in the south of France. The chilling account of Maugham's marriage to Syrie, and the subsequent events in which the ageing writer was induced to question his daughter's paternity (quite erroneously) are better on the page, I feel, than in real life. I am much looking forward to reading *The Letters of TS Eliot*, edited by Hugh Haughton and Valerie Eliot (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). It seems an appropriate choice given that Eliot wrote the finest poem on the subject of Christmas, "The Journey of the Magi", with the second line being "Just the worst time of year".

John Gray

The most important book for me this year was James Lovelock's *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: a Final Warning* (Allen Lane). Despite the book's subtitle, Lovelock isn't delivering any kind of ultimatum to humankind. He's simply presenting the current global climate situation and its most likely development as he – the most prescient of scientists – sees it. It's too late to stop global warming, but the planet is not going to die – it will save itself by reverting to a hotter state, without any regard for humans. The task for humans is to save themselves, and Lovelock has given us a handbook of human survival. Can we summon the will – and the clarity of thinking – that's needed?

My other choice is a collection by one of the world's most exciting living poets, Frederick Seidel's *Poems, 1959-2009* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Seidel writes as JG Ballard might have done had he written verse, with a kind of reckless yet deeply premeditated verve: "The twentieth century made it possible / For us more and more fictional characters to see / Real human beings being killed / And leave the theatre and live." These lines from Seidel's "Life After Death" give a taste of this astonishingly bold and gifted poet; the collection should be read in its entirety.

David Hare

There hasn't been a better book about theatre for years than *Free For All* (Doubleday), Kenneth Turan's unvarnished oral history of the disputatious working-class American theatre producer, Joe Papp. In the current climate of sullen formalism on both sides of the Atlantic, this collection of idealistic interviews with colleagues such as George C Scott and Meryl Streep reminds you of everything that's vital and inspiring about the medium. In sharp contrast, Selina Hastings's *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham* (John Murray) addresses the most filmed writer of all time. There have been 98 adaptations from Maugham's work against Shakespeare's mere 94. Maugham maintained a personal staff of 13, but his contradictions were crudely summarised by Harold Acton: "For those who seek a moral one stands clear: / Don't marry if you happen to be queer." Hastings is the cream of biographers and she can make profound things out of shallow ones.

Zoë Heller

I thought I knew everything I needed or wanted to know about Sarah Palin, but *Going Rouge* (OR Books), a collection of critical essays about the former vice-presidential nominee, turned out to be enormously entertaining and instructive. The book (timed to

coincide with Palin's memoir, *Going Rogue*) is published by a tiny, print-on-demand outfit, and it's a great example of the sort of rapid-response, guerrilla publishing at which smaller houses excel. I also loved – and wept copiously over – Colm Tóibín's quiet masterpiece, *Brooklyn* (Viking). This novel contains, among other things, the most compelling and moving portrait of a young woman I have read in a long time.

Alan Hollinghurst

I've been intrigued by what seems a new development in that slightly dreaded form, "the long poem" – three really vital books that wed the momentum of prose fiction to the imagistic concision of poetry. After Adam Foulds's gripping re-creation of the Mau Mau rising, *The Broken Word* (Cape), have come two books from the excellent new CB Editions: JO Morgan's *Natural Mechanical*, the 70-page biography of an adventurous boy from Skye whose feats of improvisation are related in easy but apt free verse, and Christopher Reid's riveting *The Song of Lunch*, a tiny narrative disproportionately rich in exact observation, sorry comedy and controlled pathos. After reading Reid you start to wonder why fiction-writers bother with all the padding and padding about of prose.

Michael Holroyd

In a year of mostly reading fiction my great discovery has been *Gold* by Dan Rhodes (Canongate). It is mainly set in The Anchor, a Welsh pub resembling purgatory. The regulars hang out there in calm and agonising tedium avoiding the perils of life outside. This is an original novel, funny, dark, pitched somewhere between the pub novels of Patrick Hamilton and the early fiction of Beryl Bainbridge. It's hilarious and heartbreaking.

Bahaa Taher's novel *Sunset Oasis* (Sceptre) takes place in the Egyptian desert and traces with wonderful subtlety the cultural, historical and gender incompatibilities that inevitably lead to tragedy. It is a haunting but never despairing narrative.

I also much admired Michael Foss's adventurous *The Road Taken* (Michael O'Mara). The plot follows an international road through drug-smuggling, prison and individual isolation, a journey guided by chance and instinct in search of "what life has to offer". It's a realistic rather than romantic story and very enjoyable.

Ian Jack

David Kynaston's *Family Britain, 1951-57* (Bloomsbury) is a bright and intricate tapestry woven from personal testimony and the official record, which deepened and enriched my understanding of my own childhood. Mark Thompson's *The White War* (Faber) brilliantly narrates one of the cruellest and most neglected episodes in recent European history, when in 1915 Italy had a patriotic fit and went needlessly to war with Austria; more than a million lives were wasted for even less reason than usual. Roland Chambers's *The Last Englishman: the Double Life of Arthur Ransome* (Faber) deftly examines a murky career that produced – amazingly – the clear, simple skies of *Swallows and Amazons*. In fiction, I found *The Collected Stories of John Cheever* (Vintage) completely unputdownable, though by the end I felt woozy and hung over with so much human frailty and booze.

AL Kennedy

Richard Bausch's book *Peace* (Tuskar Rock) is a beautiful bit of writing: lean, compact and layered, darkly humorous. Bausch is lauded in the US but isn't known well enough over here – he's a hugely experienced author with an interest in human conflicts and complications of all kinds and this may be the book of his career. In *Peace* a straggling

and increasingly divided party of soldiers wander in a freezing and barren landscape, wounded and ultimately hunted, lost in the midst of the second world war. The writing is lyrical and unflinching when it comes to acts of violence and betrayal and the moral ambiguity of everything a war touches. His sense of the main character's interior life is startlingly complex and troubling, detailing moments of doubt, joy, self-deception and disgust. The narrative is infused with a deft grasp of metaphor and a kind of aching rage. A timely novel for the US and the UK.

Ian Kershaw

Three works by well-known historians have impressed me greatly. Antony Beevor's *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (Viking) has all the qualities that have made his earlier works so successful: an eye for telling and unusual detail, an ability to make complex events understandable, and a wonderfully graphic style of writing. Andrew Roberts achieves a marvel of concision in producing a splendidly written, comprehensive new history of the greatest conflict in history, *The Storm of War* (Allen Lane) – particularly good in its insights into Axis strategy. And just when you think there is nothing to add to our knowledge of Churchill as a war leader, Max Hastings makes you think again in his *Finest Years: Churchill as Warlord 1940-45* (HarperPress). I enormously enjoyed his beautifully painted "warts-and-all" portrait of Churchill as seen by contemporary observers.

Naomi Klein

The Book of Negroes by Lawrence Hill (Black Swan). Here in my city of Toronto, I see its yellow cover everywhere – perched on laps in doctors' offices, propped up on tables in cafés, dissolving the minutes on street cars and in airport lounges. More than once I have seen it start a shy conversation. "What page are you on?" "Don't you love her?" "Her" is Aminata Diallo, the gorgeously drawn protagonist of Lawrence Hill's masterpiece. Diallo's extraordinary life story as a midwife and teacher encompasses the sweep of the transatlantic slave trade, from capture through emancipation to resettlement on two continents. While never once feeling like a history lesson, Hill goes after not just the cruel traders and owners but also some of the supposed liberators, challenging myths cherished in both Canada and Britain. In Canada, where Hill is from, this stunning novel has already sparked a rare national conversation. In Britain it could stand a visit to a few more doctors' offices.

Hari Kunzru

One of the most moving pieces of non-fiction I read this year was Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* (Scribner), his memoir of growing up in Kashmir during the insurgency. Hindu nationalists would like to use the ethnic cleansing of the Pandits as a casus belli for renewed hostilities with Pakistan, and most Indians won't confront the serious human rights abuses committed by the army. Peer humanises the geopolitical issues and reminds us why peace in Kashmir is important, not just to India and Pakistan, but to the world.

In fiction, I was pleased to see the recognition given to Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (Fourth Estate), which effortlessly solves the considerable technical problems in writing a historical novel.

David Kynaston

Bobby Robson's death was a stark reminder of lost values, but *Football Nation: Sixty Years of the Beautiful Game* (Bloomsbury) by Andrew Ward and John Williams refuses

the easy, hand-wringing, "declinist" route. Instead, it shows a game still capable of knitting together communities and offering hope and a sense of identity in otherwise often bleak, unyielding environments. The product of hundreds of interviews across all parts of the game, and years of intensive research and reflection, this is a warm, humane, genuinely pioneering slice of social history.

John Lanchester

My favourite new novels of the year were *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel (Fourth Estate), *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* by Geoff Dyer (Canongate), and *Brooklyn* (Viking) by Colm Tóibín. The enormous differences between these books is proof, if it were needed, that there is no such thing as "the novel", only the novels that novelists write – proof too that there's life in that old dog yet.

Jonathan Lethem

For me, impossible not to vote for JG Ballard's *Complete Stories* (WW Norton) – I agreed to write about it for my hometown newspaper, thinking I could bat something out on my teenage recollection of Ballard's greatness, but decided to crack the book open and soon found myself swallowed inside. Reading the entire volume in sequence, as I did, two or three stories a night for most of July and August, became a kind of mind-meld, and Ballard's complete tales revealed themselves to me not only as a great, obsessive fictional voyage, but an epic covert autobiography of the writer behind them.

Hilary Mantel

Mysteriously underrated among this year's novels was MJ Hyland's *This Is How* (Canongate); but then, Hyland's talent in itself is mysterious. How does she, while fixing our attention on external events, make us so complicit in her characters' internal worlds: so stickily enthralled, so nervously guilty? Patrick Oxtoby, the main character here, is a young criminal who claims to have very few emotions, yet his violent, dislocated story arouses strong emotion in the reader. Maria Hyland is like no one else writing today; her work is spare, ungiving, a challenge. At the same time, it is deeply humane.

Brian Dillon's case-study *Tormented Hope: Nine Hypochondriac Lives* (Penguin Ireland) deals with invalid artists and thinkers, from James Boswell to Glenn Gould. Some of them limped around being geniuses, complaining the while; some of them, like Proust, simply operated from their beds. It's so good that, after reading it, I needed a lie-down.

David Mitchell

A Nobel prize is no guarantee of gripping, don't-notice-the-page-numbers-fly-by writing, but Orhan Pamuk's first novel since his trip to Stockholm, *The Museum of Innocence* (Faber), is a compelling, aching, heavy-hitting and beautiful thing. I'm a year late (quite punctual, for me) in recommending John Burnside's austerely poetic novel *Glister* (Jonathan Cape), set in a town as alien-yet-familiar as someone else's dream, and months after finishing the book I am still under the spell of its strange ending. Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* is one of the best ghost stories of the decade, let alone 2009, which plays upon, and bends, (and electrocutes!) the reader's expectations. A favourite science book of the year is Lewis Wolpert's *How We Live and Why We Die: The Secret Lives of Cells* (Faber), a crisply-written and thoughtful layman's guide to the extraordinary stuff we – and all life – are made of.

Andrew Motion

There a vogue at the moment for books describing personal and "well-written" encounters with the natural world – for all kinds of good and understandable reasons. Tim Dee's *The Running Sky* (Jonathan Cape), which contains the record of his "birdwatching life" is one such – but so much better than most, it seems in a class of its own. This is largely because it combines the necessary sensitivity with deep expertise, which acts as a kind of anchor. The effect is to place the human in a web which involving all other creatures, and birds especially. It is a chastening as well as an enchanting book. *Weeds and Wild Flowers* (Faber), one of two books of poetry published this year by Alice Oswald, has much the same effect, and for similar reasons: the work integrates sympathy with knowledge, often (in the poem "Snowdrop", for instance) with an affect of amazing beauty.

Audrey Niffenegger

My favourite book this year was *The Little Stranger*, by Sarah Waters. A middle-aged doctor gradually insinuates himself into the life of the Ayres family; they are the owners of a once stately, now crumbling but beautiful house, Hundreds Hall. Waters writes with great restraint and precision of how the house begins to turn on the family with poltergeistian aggression. It's a terrific consideration of the ravages of class in post-war Britain, and a ripping ghost story, too. Two other excellent books are *On Monsters* (OUP), by Stephen Asma, a very readable and surprising history of every sort of monster, from the Biblical to the biotechnical, and *Generosity* (Atlantic), by Richard Powers. Powers is one of the best writers working now, and *Generosity* is full of agile sentences and odd characters. It features a young woman who is always simply happy; this strikes all the other characters as being so unusual that she soon comes under the scrutiny of scientists and the media.

Joyce Carol Oates

In the realm of spectacular literary scholarship and criticism there has been nothing to approach Elaine Showalter's magisterial *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (Virago). Showalter is the ideal guide through this maze-like landscape: she is sympathetic, informed, canny and at times very funny – as in her commentary on Gertrude Stein. This is the most imaginative and brilliantly executed book of Showalter's fearless career.

Charles Gross's *A Hole in the Head: More Tales in the History of Neuroscience* (MIT Press) is a fascinating compendium of medical and science history wonderfully written, entertaining and informative, with striking, at times rather lurid photographs testifying to our enthrallment, over the centuries, with the mysteries residing within our own mostly unknowable brains.

Sheila Kohler's *Becoming Jane Eyre* (Penguin) is an ingeniously imagined, meticulously researched and beautifully composed novel that immerses us in the seemingly fragile, secretly iron-willed character of the remarkable Charlotte Brontë.

It's heartrending to realise that John Updike will no longer be among us. Two of his posthumously published books – the story collection *My Father's Tears* and the poetry collection *Endpoint* (both Hamish Hamilton) – appeared shortly after his death in January. The stories are elegantly crafted in Updike's distinctive style, bittersweet, nostalgic and fearless in their confrontation with mortality; the poems include the utterly stunning sequence Updike wrote on his deathbed.

Andrew O'Hagan

Tom Leonard has been publishing poems since three years before I was born, and his volume *Outside the Narrative: Poems, 1965-2009* (Etruscan Press) is a masterpiece of political engagement and memorable speech. His poems written in Glaswegian are brilliant moral beauties, as perfect in every way as the lyrics of Hugh MacDiarmid or the best of William Carlos Williams. My prose book of the year is without a doubt *The Eitingons* by Mary-Kay Wilmers (Faber). A completely riveting story of the author's wider family – one man's role in the assassination of Trotsky, another one's involvement in the Freud Circle, and a third's in the New York fur business – it is a book that turns out to be shadowing the 20th century itself. And there are other shadows, not least the shadow of the author herself, who appears and disappears so stylishly and funnily in the pages of this book. Carefulness, patience, irony, indirection – all the great prose virtues are here. It's the kind of book that Joan Didion or Sybille Bedford might have written if the story of their family turned out to have bridged so many famous concealments.

Jeremy Paxman

I once got into a particularly pointless correspondence with the Royal Mail about why they were happy to issue sets of stamps to commemorate snooker-players or guinea-pig enthusiasts but wouldn't do something similar to mark great British intellectuals. It was a trick question: we don't really do "intellectual", unless it has the word "wanker" attached. Well, this year the Mail came up with a collection of "Eminent Britons". Inevitably three of them were sportsmen, but at least Samuel Johnson got his place in the sun. The bigger, more permanent, testament to the great man was *Samuel Johnson*, by Peter Martin (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £25), a highly compassionate piece of work which not only enjoys his wit but explains his manic energy and shares his anxieties.

David Peace

Twelve good books from one bad year: *Bad Vibes* by Luke Haines (Windmill); *Heartland* by Anthony Cartwright (Tindall Street); *When the Lights Went Out* by Andy Beckett (Faber); *Ice Cold* by Andrea Maria Schenkel (Quercus); *Still Midnight* by Denise Mina (Orion); *The Coming Insurrection* by the Invisible Committee (Semiotext); *The Death of Bunny Munro* by Nick Cave (Canongate); *Dirty Leeds* by Robert Endeacott (Tonto); *Looking for the Light through the Pouring Rain* by Kevin Cummins (Faber); *Blood's a Rover* by James Ellroy (Century); *Sex & Violence, Death & Silence* by Gordon Burn (Faber); *Bad Penny Blues* by Cathi Unsworth (Serpent's Tail).

Annie Proulx

Every decade or so I discover a book that makes me feel I've been waiting for it all my life. Elena Kostioukovitch's *Why Italians Love to Talk About Food* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) is one of these books. The Russian author is a translator who has lived in Italy for years. Her rich book is an omnium gatherum of historically significant food, the extraordinary diversity of Italian cuisine. She illuminates geography, trade routes, art, ethnicities, pleasures of the table, husbandry, archaeology, religion, etymology, pirates, feasts, architecture, monasteries, mosaics. We learn of the gangster's last pleasure and the Slow Food movement, the Mediterranean diet, the intricacies of pastas married to enhancing sauces. This fine book is a painting in words of the deepest bonds between local foods, ceremony and people.

Philip Pullman

The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Letters of Vincent Van Gogh, edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (Thames & Hudson) is publishing at its most creative and spectacular. Every single letter of this great letter-writer is here, together

with (and this is the point) every single drawing or sketch that van Gogh included, reproduced with beautiful clarity. But even more: since the story of his life is that of the development of a visual sensibility, every painting or print that he mentions as having seen is also reproduced, on the same page as his reference to it. Simply as a piece of book design, this takes the breath away; but to read the letters, and watch this passionate, clumsy, brilliant, earnest, suffering genius find his way towards the work he was going to be world-famous for, is to be – if you have a soul at all – wonderstruck. If this were 10 times the price, it would still be worth it.

The other magnificent work is the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (OUP). Instead of starting with a word and showing its history, as the great OED does, this starts with a meaning and – instead of just bunging a lot of synonyms together – shows how that meaning came to be expressed, every word that belongs in that category being shown with the date of its first appearance. You could spend years browsing in this wonderful pasture, and no one should even consider writing a historical novel without it there on the desk.

Simon Schama

The way things are, you either want to drink deep of the financial hemlock or brush it aside for something less creditcrunchy. Weirdly and wonderfully, Liaquat Ahamed's *Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke the World* (William Heinemann) about central bankers before the great depression, is so spellbindingly written, so humane in its understanding of the doomed protagonists and what they wrought that you can't get enough of the story. It's also a masterclass in historical narrative in everything that counts: the big picture, the critical event, the psychology of institutions, and is shot through with tragic irony without ever over-determining the awful outcome. I suppose a novel that starts, unforgettably with Nagasaki in 1945 doesnt exactly count as light relief. Nam Le's *The Boat* (Canongate) has (at least) three stories that will shake you through and through. Any writer who borrows a piece of a Capote book title is asking for it, but Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (Bloomsbury), set in worlds of rich and poor, east and west, has such razor sharpness and lyric tenderness that it gets away with it. Anyone writing "you only had to see her disjoint a chicken to know the depths and heights of her carnality" gets my vote.

Kamila Shamsie

Two books, entirely different save for their shared ability to use surface simplicity to mask (for a time) vast depths of emotional and psychological complexity, stood out – Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (Viking) and Tove Jansson's *The True Deceiver* (Sort of Books). Jansson's tale of two women, and a dog, in the cold Nordic winter deserves as wide a readership as her beloved children's books featuring the Moomins.

Of course, there's much to be said for books which present their dazzling effect from page one – Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (Bloomsbury) is a glorious, thumping tale of intersecting lives, told in language which all but sings.

Elaine Showalter

Two of my favourite novels this year were sequels. Jane Gardam's *The Man in the Wooden Hat* (Chatto & Windus) retold the story of the marriage of the Hong Kong ex-pats Sir Edward and Betty Feathers, first narrated from his point of view in her memorable *Old Filth* (2005), by making Betty the centre. Admirers of the first novel will find Betty's version, another stylish, Woolfian examination of a long marriage, enriches and complicates their understanding, but the book also stands on its own.

Maggie Gee's *My Driver* (Telegram), a follow-up to her novel *My Cleaner*, reverses the plot of the first book, taking its white British writer Vanessa Henman to Uganda where her former cleaner, Mary Tendo, has also become a writer. Like Gardam, Gee brilliantly negotiates the explosive racial territory of the British abroad with feeling, observation, humour and art.

Ali Smith

"Dying isn't as easy as some people think! Those nasty little gods of life are forever clapping me back into existence. Do you believe in fairies? Please just say no." This is a complete short story, "Tinkerbell", from *The Tiny Key* by Frances Gapper published beautifully by Sylph Editions. I very much like Gapper's precise, startlingly odd short stories.

Don Paterson's latest collection of poetry, *Rain* (Faber), written in memory of his friend and fellow poet Michael Donaghy, takes him further down into the underworld, even beyond his own and Rilke's Orpheus poems, to a place which pits wits against nothingness. It suggests a new poetic, one of resigned vivacity. It leaves its readers knowing why humans have the urge to make things rhyme. Its combination of throwaway and vital, and the hopeless honesty, the wryness and the conscious slightness with which he holds these poems against the dark, make *Rain* a piece of life.

Tom Stoppard

The first instalment of Beckett's letters – *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940* (CUP) – and the second of Isaiah Berlin's – *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960* (Chatto & Windus) were two essentials, one to be mined, the other sieved, and both annotated almost to excess, as they should be. But for sheer informative pleasure I recommend the reprint of the *Shell Country Alphabet* by Geoffrey Grigson (Particular Books), into which every dip is lucky.

Colm Tóibín

Mary-Kay Wilmers's *The Eitingons* (Faber) is a secret history of the 20th century in which members of her family played a crucial role – one in the fur trade after the Russian revolution; another as an early disciple of Freud's; and a third, an agent of Stalin's, who set up the assassination of Trotsky. The fact that this last one was the most fun, or at least the most fascinating, is an aspect of the book's originality. I found the book a riveting piece of story-telling.

The best novel I read this year was Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (Hamish Hamilton), which tells the story of an ungrateful immigrant, filled with angst and attitude, in a Montreal which could be Kafka's Prague. It is a dark book, narrated with verve and brilliance. It made me jump for joy.

Paul Durcan's *Life is a Dream* (Harvill Secker) is a generous selection of his poetry over the past 40 years, and displays his skill, his importance and his bravery, his willingness to tackle difficult public matters but also to explore with eloquence and fierce honesty the most private areas of the self.

Claire Tomalin

Keith Thomas's *The Ends of Life* (OUP) looks at the English from the 16th to 18th century, and asks what people thought of work, food, friendship, honour, gossip, whether they would be remembered after death, and other deep questions. It is full of surprises, packed with information that no one else could have found, and so witty and

absorbing that a pang of disappointment came over me when I turned over eagerly for another chapter and found myself in the notes. More to come, I hope.

Michael Braddick's *God's Fury, England's Fire* (Allen Lane) reached me this year in paperback, a history of the English civil wars that tells you what it was like for common people, soldiers, citizens, parish constables, women, to live through the debates and battles that tore their world apart. It's good on the king too, and is altogether an original and remarkable piece of historical writing, and should become a classic.

John Carey's *William Golding* (Faber), drawing on literally millions of words of unpublished journals and stories, brings that extraordinary novelist to startling life, frightened, brutal, brave, drunken, dissatisfied with success, and possessed of a rare imagination. Carey's masterly account makes one want to see *The Lord of the Flies* republished in its original form, with the religious bits that were cut out restored.

David Vann

Broken by the past, the characters in William Trevor's *Love and Summer* (Viking) know each other through signs both too small and too large, all perception out of proportion, which is the brilliance of Trevor's vision. It's an extremely tense read; I felt constantly afraid. But there's a generosity to his vision, and a surprising rightness. I also loved Penelope Lively's gorgeous *Family Album* (Fig Tree).

Sarah Waters

My most entertaining read this year was James Lever's *Me Cheeta* (Fourth Estate), a brilliant satire on the Hollywood memoir which manages to be funny, caustic and genuinely moving: I loved this book, and have been recommending it like mad.

I also very much enjoyed *Coventry* (Maia), by Canadian author Helen Humphreys: a short, spare, powerful novel, set during the single night in November 1940 when Coventry was devastated by Luftwaffe bombing.

Jeanette Winterson

Rain by Don Paterson (Faber). I love his work and this is just the best. Poetry for the gut and the mind by way of the heart. "I will know nothing of my life but its mysteries."

The Case For God by Karen Armstrong (Bodley Head). Forget Richard Dawkins – just read it with an open mind.

A Book of Silence by Sara Maitland (Granta). Against the noise and the trash comes this meditation on silence; what it is, what it means, why we need it. Beautiful.

The Secret History of Georgian London: How the Wages of Sin Shaped the Capital by Dan Cruickshank (Random House). Belle de Jour for the 18th century. Funny, fantastical, full of impossible facts and scandalous stories. Scholarly, but also the ideal stocking (and suspender) filler.

Wu Ming

Since 2000, Giuseppe Genna has written some of the most daring books in the New Italian Epic canon. While his early efforts were thrillers, his following books grew increasingly ambitious, eg *Dies Irae* (2006), a visionary tome set in the 1980s, dealing with the mysteries of Italy's First Republic. In 2009 he published two titles. *Le Teste* (Mondadori) is a chilling, creepy, post-thriller on decapitation and Milan's hopeless decadence. *Italia de Profundis* (Minimum Fax) blends faction and prophecy to explore

our nation's state of dismay: "Italy is a place I unlearned how to love."

Compiled by Ginny Hooker.