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Twelve Months of Reading

We asked 50 of our friends to tell us what they enjoyed reading in 2011—from Mike Allen's taste for Tebow-ing to Adam Zagajewski's love of Scottish poetry.

Mike Allen

The year's most vivid lessons in life, leadership and parenting come from autobiographies by a pair of hot-shot NFL quarterbacks who just two years ago were opposing finalists for college's Heisman Trophy.

Tim Tebow's "Through My Eyes" (with Nathan Whitaker) recounts his first week of Pop Warner football practice, when he got sick with headaches, dizziness and nausea. "My dad always tells us that faith is like a muscle," writes Mr. Tebow, 24. "You trust God for the small things and when He comes through, your muscle grows." The book's title plays off the game-day eye-blacking that Mr. Tebow used to brandish references to Bible verses when he was a Florida Gator. "Timmy's" first high-school football coach insisted that he play linebacker, arguing that he was "too athletic" for QB. The family quietly switched high schools after being rejected by coaches who "weren't interested in taking a homeschool player." Labor on a chicken ranch, forced by his dad, made him "farmer strong," even though he and his brothers "joked that we were getting ready to dial Child Services."

Colt McCoy of the Cleveland Browns co-authored "Growing Up Colt" with his father, Bad McCoy (with Mike Yorkey). Mr. McCoy, 25, also emphasizes parental lessons—his dad's, taught with the occasional help of the belt; his mom's, with encouraging Bible verses left on the bathroom mirror before a big test. "On Saturday mornings," Mr. McCoy adds, "Mom's notes would be a list of the chores we needed to get done that day."

—Mr. Allen writes the "Playbook" column for Politico.

José María Aznar

As it happens, I've had the privilege of knowing the authors of the books I would recommend this year. I met Fred Kempe when he was the managing editor for The Wall Street Journal Europe and Condoleezza Rice during her time in the administration of George W. Bush; and I've known Paul Johnson for more than 20 years.

History, as Brent Scowcroft writes in the foreword to Mr. Kempe's "Berlin 1961," does not portray alternatives. We can only attempt to imagine what would have happened if political leaders had made decisions other than the ones they did. It is for this reason that "Berlin 1961"—focusing on the events surrounding the building of the Berlin Wall—is so revealing: It describes the range of options available to the politicians of the time. The West struggled with Berlin's painful division, but important lessons were learned from it and, in the end, the battle was won with the collapse of the Wall in 1989. It was the triumph of the Freedom Revolution. Mr. Kempe's book draws a lesson for today: We must defend free and open societies before their enemies, and for this task the strength of the Atlantic bond continues to be essential.

There's a Persian proverb that says: "Humility is an attribute of greatness." With becoming modesty, Condoleezza Rise outlines her years in Washington at the highest levels of power in "No Higher Honor." She speaks fondly of her years as national security adviser and as secretary of state, giving accounts of her interactions with world leaders, journalists and military commanders. She portrays often complicated geopolitical matters, and the policy debates surrounding them, in a clear and straightforward way. "Today's headlines and history's judgment," she notes, "are rarely the same." Above all, "No Higher Honor" displays Ms. Rice's commitment to America's foundational democratic values and her respect for the politicians who honor them.

Finally, "Humorists," by the renowned journalist and historian Paul Johnson, reveals the lighter side of famous figures. As he makes clear, Benjamin Franklin, Charles Dickens, G.K. Chesterton and many others, whatever their differences, shared an ability to laugh and to make fun of themselves. Mr. Johnson implicitly argues that, however serious life may be, a sense of

humor—intelligent wit—is essential.

—Mr. Aznar, a former prime minister of Spain, is executive president of the Foundation for Social Studies and Analysis.

Antony Beevor

"Jerusalem" by Simon Sebag Montefiore is an astonishing achievement. Jew, Christian and Muslim alike feel compelled to rewrite the city's history to sustain their own myths. This holy place produces such a frenzy of emotion that it has even produced its own form of madness, known as "Jerusalem syndrome." Mr. Sebag Montefiore has nevertheless written the story of the past 3,000 years with admirable objectivity. His book, packed with fascinating and often grisly detail, is a gripping account of war, betrayal, looting, rape, massacre, sadistic torture, fanaticism, feuds, persecution, corruption, hypocrisy and spirituality. Anna Reid's "Leningrad" is an account of the most terrible siege in modern times, with a population often reduced to cannibalism. Communist obstinacy and corruption were to a large degree responsible for the almost unbelievable suffering. Ms. Reid, a former correspondent in Russia, has produced a well-researched and beautifully written account that will not be popular in certain quarters in Russia.

—Mr. Beevor is the author of "D-Day: The Battle for Normandy."

Louis Begley

In "Iphigenia in Forest Hills: Anatomy of a Murder Trial," Janet Malcolm turns her X-ray gaze on two microcosms: the ingrown Forest Hills, N.Y., community of Bukharan Jews riven by the fallout from what the police believed was the contract murder of a father before his 4-year-old daughter by a hit man hired by the mother deprived of her custody; and the failure-ridden Dickensian world of New York courts and agencies charged with protecting our most vulnerable children. This is shrewd and quirky crime reporting at its irresistible and disabused best.

The canvas of Joseph Lelyveld's brilliant and deeply humane biography "Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India" is vast. It encompasses Gandhi's turbulent formative years in South Africa, with the Second Boer War as a backdrop—from his arrival in 1893 until his definitive departure for India on the eve of World War I—and his epic struggle for Indian independence, for the inclusion of untouchables in Indian society, and for peaceful relations between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Few figures that changed the world are as complex as Gandhi, and no one has understood him or written about him better than Mr. Lelyveld.

—Mr. Begley is the author of the forthcoming "Schmidt Steps Back."

Max Boot

To research a history of guerrilla warfare, I read a lot of memoirs. Two of the best were by Brits who served in wartime Yugoslavia.

In "Eastern Approaches" (1949), Fitzroy Maclean tells the story of his extraordinary journey from serving as a British diplomat in Moscow (1937-39) to joining the fledgling SAS to fight Rommel in the North African desert, before parachuting into Yugoslavia in 1943 as Winston Churchill's personal representative to Tito. It tells you something of this Bertie Wooster-in-uniform that when the Foreign Office would not let him join the army, he found a way out by winning a seat in Parliament, which he held throughout his wartime adventures.

Just as enthralling, if less stylishly written, is "The Embattled Mountain" (1971). Its author is F.W.D. "Bill" Deakin, an Oxford don and former literary assistant to Churchill who parachuted into Yugoslavia ahead of Maclean, in the middle of a German offensive, to link up with Tito's headquarters. The first part of the book gives the best account I have read of how harrowing partisan warfare could be. It is hard to imagine how Deakin managed to go back to the dull pace of academia after the war.

A more recent book I've been reading is Eliot A. Cohen's "Conquered Into Liberty," which tells the story of the battles fought from the late 1600s to the early 1800s in the upper Hudson Valley between Albany and Montreal. The Indians called this 200-mile area the "Great Warpath," and it was a crucial battleground pitting American settlers against first the French and then the British in Canada. In this well-crafted narrative, Mr. Cohen argues that the "Great Warpath" did much to shape the American approach to warfare.

For a change of pace I read "John O'Hara's Hollywood" (2006), a collection of short stories by this now all-but-forgotten mid-20th-century American novelist who is best known for "Appointment in Samarra" and "Butterfield 8." Like many of his peers, from Raymond Chandler to F. Scott Fitzgerald, he also worked as a screenwriter—which gave him inside exposure to the movie industry. He loved Hollywood money but hated its mores. Out of these conflicting emotions came these entertaining stories with a kick, which were originally published between the 1930s and 1960s.

—Mr. Boot is a senior fellow in national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Ian Bostridge

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Brian Cox is the television superhero of science and cosmology in England, fascinating my 11-year-old son with tales of the heat death of the universe on the BBC. His brilliant "The Quantum Universe" explained the "wave function" of quantum mechanics in a way which suddenly made sense of it. No tricks, no fuss: something magical conveyed in the language of reason. Makes me wish I'd stuck with physics aged 16.

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's "Becoming Dickens" looks at Dickens's roots, the choices before him, the choices he made, making the familiar unfamiliar and showing us how the novelist was constructed out of sheer willpower and bits of this and that. How did a law clerk cum journalist cum parliamentary reporter with a rackety background become the literary colossus who embodied the Victorian era and invented Christmas?

—Mr. Bostridge, an internationally acclaimed opera singer, is the author of "A Singer's Notebook."

William Boyd

My biography of the year is Claire Tomalin's "Charles Dickens: A Life." Written with immense knowledge and literary poise, it presents a portrait of the novelist unrivaled in its complex humanity. Dickens lives and breathes in these pages—Ms. Tomalin's sympathetic yet honest grasp of the man himself is completely engrossing. The novel I most enjoyed was Alan Hollinghurst's beguiling "The Stranger's Child." Droll, intellectually adroit and expertly constructed, it shows our greatest English prose stylist at the height of his sophisticated powers.

—Mr. Boyd is the author of "Waiting for Sunrise: A Novel."

Susan Cheever

Phone ringing, dog whining and me half-reading Andrew Doerr's review of Denis Johnson's "Train Dreams." A few taps on the iPad and I am in the Idaho panhandle in 1917. Robert Grainier is dragging a man uphill. He is falling in love. He is losing everything. Two hours later, when I read the last line and look up, New York seems garish, shallow, beautiful, safe. My children are more precious, my friends closer.

A book that you can read in a single sitting has a transformative kind of power. (Julian Barnes's "The Sense of an Ending" is another great one like that this year.) Nothing interrupts the continuous shimmering dream of the story, and when you finally get around to feeding the dog and answering the phone, you are a little wiser, a little more grateful and a little more light-hearted.

—Ms. Cheever is the author of "Louisa May Alcott: A Personal Biography."

Lee Child

This was a pretty good year for fiction, partly because of books like "Before I Go to Sleep" by S.J. Watson: fresh ideas, new concepts, different angles, which together both respect and revitalize the suspense genre by giving us something unusual—but convincing—to be mystified about, in this case a woman who wakes up every day with absolutely no memories of the past. I'll be interested to see what Mr. Watson does next—if it's as good as this, we have a big new name on our hands.

"The Art of Fielding" by Chad Harbach is about a college baseball star who develops a throwing problem. Again, this is literary fiction both respected and reinvented, mostly by giving us a real story to chew on for a change, with the kind of plot and character that's usually AWOL in this field. And for anyone who remembers the Yankees' Chuck Knoblauch, it has a nonfiction tinge, too.

As for "In the Garden of Beasts" by Erik Larson: It's a cliché to say that this is nonfiction that reads like a thriller, but I grabbed this at an airport thinking it was fiction, and it reads like a dark psychological nightmare—an American diplomatic family in Berlin during the rise of Nazism. That it's nonfiction, and true, just makes it more compelling.

—Mr. Child is the author of "The Affair" and 15 other Jack Reacher novels.

Alan Dershowitz

My three favorite recent books all have a connection to one extraordinary married couple—Steven Pinker and Rebecca Goldstein. Mr. Pinker's new book, "The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined," is nothing short of world-changing. If he is right that violence is abating throughout the world, then there is real cause for optimism. Anyone looking at

today's headlines or the history of the last century would be skeptical. Violence abounds in the Middle East, in Africa and in other parts of the world. The 20th century, with its genocides and two world wars, seems to most historians to be an escalation of prior violence. But Mr. Pinker's data seem unassailable, not so much because he minimizes recent violence but because he shows how much more violence there was in earlier centuries. We may not be moving from good to better to best, but we certainly seem to be moving from worst to worser to bad. This is progress.

To what does Mr. Pinker attribute secular change? Certainly not to God. Mr. Pinker is a well-known skeptic and humanist, as is his wife, Rebecca Goldstein, who has written a brilliant book called "36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction." Ms. Goldstein's novel is part philosophy, theology, history and all good literature and great fun. She mocks religious excess while treating devotion respectfully. If all religious extremists were as nonviolent as Ms. Goldstein's Hasidic characters, then her husband's optimism would have even a stronger basis in reality.

The third of my recommended books was written by neither Mr. Pinker nor Ms. Goldstein but recently received a glowing review from Ms. Goldstein, which led me to put it on my Kindle. "The Prague Cemetery," Umberto Eco's phantasmagorical revisiting of the anti-Semitic forgery "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," is a literary tour de force.

What these books have in common is that you don't just read them: You engage with them, you argue with their premises and you participate in a virtual Socratic dialogue. That is what great teachers do, and Mr. Pinker, Ms. Goldstein and Mr. Eco are among the greatest of our contemporary teachers.

—Mr. Dershowitz, a Harvard professor, is the author of "Trials of Zion."

Nathan Englander

This year, my reading has been a lot more 1911 than 2011, so for a last-century roundup I'd check out Dalton Trumbo's "Johnny Got His Gun"; it'll just make your 1939! Or try George Orwell's "Down and Out in Paris and London" for a firsthand account of the social issues of 1933 (better preparing you to grasp why you're having such a terrible 1939).

As for some of my favorite hot-off-the-presses books of 2011 (which, I'm happy to say, still come off actual presses), I want to point you to the brilliant and wildly underrated "Great Night" by Chris Adrian. It's a modern, homeless, dendrological, gay, pediatric-oncological "Midsummer Night's Dream" set in San Francisco's Buena Vista Park.

I'm also a huge fan of Julie Otsuka's perfect poems disguised as novels. So after you've finished "When the Emperor Was Divine" (2003), I'd grab this year's "The Buddha in the Attic." Finally, if you're into zombies and want yourself some literature, or you're all literary but want to dip your toes into zombies (which, with zombies, you can), there's Colson Whitehead's "Zone One," a lovely meditation on apocalyptic New York.

—Mr. Englander's short-story collection "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank" will be published in February.

Jeffrey Eugenides

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My favorite book of 2011 is Colm Tóibín's latest collection of stories, "The Empty Family." I attended a reading of Mr. Tóibín's in Princeton, and when I mentioned that I was going to give the stories to my mother, he warned me not to: too much explicit gay sex, apparently. Well, that's true about a couple of stories here, but I think my mother could have handled it, if only because she is a good reader, knows what art is, and would have enjoyed the range of subjects and lives treated here. Mr. Tóibín doesn't make the mistake of yoking his groundbreaking material to an outlandish style. He works in a more traditional Irish mode, or traditional-seeming, so that what you get is the best of both worlds: the embrace of an old-fashioned storyteller telling the newest of tales.

—Mr. Eugenides is the author of , most recently, "The Marriage Plot."

Amanda Foreman

Three remarkable histories published this year show that despite the terrible pressures on modern publishing, the three pillars of

nonfiction writing are still intact: breadth, scholarship and literary skill.

Emma Rothschild's "The Inner Life of Empires" follows the 100-year history of the Johnsons, "a large and disorderly family" from Scotland, whose adventures in commerce, politics and social reform offer a fascinating window into the Enlightenment. Across the Atlantic, in revolutionary America, Maya Jasanoff's "Liberty's Exiles" tells the story of the people who were on the

wrong side of history. The far-flung diaspora of the Loyalists is finally told in this thoroughly researched and highly original book. Finally, Sylvia Nasar's "Grand Pursuit" is an epic narrative excursion into the history of economic ideas and their proponents, from Marx to Milton Friedman. Timely and entertaining, this book deserves as wide a readership as possible.

—Ms. Foreman is the author of "World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in America's Civil War."

Drew Gilpin Faust

A 2011 favorite in the detective genre, to which I am addicted, was Henning Mankell's "The Troubled Man," a heart-rending conclusion to the exceptional Kurt Wallander series. Amid a spate of books marking the Civil War sesquicentennial, the Library of America's "The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It" delivers the textured and nuanced portrait that only contemporary accounts can offer. John Lithgow's memoir, "Drama," reminded me that the world is indeed all a stage and that professionals have some great ideas about how to perform on it. "Maximum City" (2004), Suketu Mehta's portrait of sprawling, variegated Mumbai is at once depressing and exhilarating and provides an informative backdrop for my first trip to India, planned for early in the new year.

—Ms. Faust is the president of Harvard University and the author of "This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War."

Richard W. Fisher

standing right behind and towering over Deng Xiaoping. It was taken in 1979 in Beijing, shortly before my 30th birthday, when I accompanied Treasury Secretary Michael Blumenthal during negotiations intended to open commercial relations with China.

Deng was perhaps the most intriguing leader that I met while traveling with Mr. Blumenthal and President Jimmy Carter. I had to wait another 30 years, however, before a definitive biography would be written about Deng, arguably the most globally transformational leader of the 20th century. This year Ezra Vogel delivered it with "Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China." To better understand Deng's achievements in the context of the history of Chinese diplomacy, read it alongside Henry Kissinger's "On China."

My other favorite historical work read this year is S.C. Gwynne's "Empire of the Summer Moon" (2010). Skillfully researched and brilliantly written, the book chronicles the past 40 years of the 170-year-long Comanche nation. I recommend it not just for insight into the challenge (and brutality) of the taming of the West but for an understanding of the ethos that to this day underpins Texas.

As to the subject of financial crises and the capacity of policy makers to fumble the ball, I read enough briefing papers to keep me awake at night. I haven't found one that surpasses Liaquat Ahamed's masterpiece from 2009, "Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke the World." It is worth reading and re-reading both as relevant financial history and as a lesson in humility for central bankers.

—Mr. Fisher is president and chief executive officer of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

Sam Fuld

In 'The Extra 2%,' Jonah Keri shows how the Tampa Bay Rays management team uses their Wall Street backgrounds to overachieve in the highly competitive American League East. The book is filled with entertaining stories of the club's original ownership and sheds light on just how improbable the Rays' recent run of success has been. Although I am a biased reader (Mr. Keri, who lives in my hometown of Durham, N.H., chronicles my employer, the Tampa Bay Rays), even the casual sports fan can appreciate the inspiring tale of these perennial underdogs.

Sam Fuld

As a ballplayer who prides himself on his defense, I was immediately hooked by the title of "The Art of Fielding" by Chad Harbach. I quickly associated myself with Henry, the skinny, good-field, no-hit shortstop, as well as with the quaint college campus that serves as the novel's setting (my father was a college professor). But I soon realized that this is not really a book about baseball. The main characters, in their own flawed ways, all deal with varying levels of adversity. It is this that I found most captivating and identifiable.

Michael Lewis writes so well that if he were to write a book on staining furniture, I would read it. "Boomerang" is more storytelling than in-depth analysis, but that's why it's fun. I'll reserve my complex financial reading for the Journal, but I would recommend this book if you're looking for an entertaining read about the debt crisis here in the U.S. and in Europe.

—Mr. Fuld is an outfielder for the Tampa Bay Rays.

Michael Gazzaniga

My favorites this year all debunked common beliefs. For example, you wouldn't believe it listening to the news, but there has been a dramatic decline in violence over the past 2,000 years. Steven Pinker in "The Better Angels of Our Nature" writes brilliantly about the problem of violence and probes why we humans are engaged in less of it.

Other happy ideas also were challenged. In "The Net Delusion," Evgeny Morozov, in a sassy and enlightening way, takes on the idea that the Internet and social media are going to march the world's people to democracy and peace.

And for those that believe evil, when it occurs, is unfathomable, Simon Baron-Cohen shakes things up with "The Science of Evil." His analysis of empathetic mechanisms and what happens when brains go awry is compelling and will help shape our ideas on human cruelty for a long time to come.

—Mr. Gazzaniga is director of the SAGE Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Newt Gingrich

One of the best books of 2011 is Craig Shirley's "December 1941: 31 Days That Changed America and Saved the World." I have written two novels about Dec. 7, 1941, and the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor that Sunday morning. I wish I had read Mr. Shirley's book beforehand. He does a remarkable job of shifting back and forth from the tiny to the historic. Mr. Shirley somehow has an eye for the informative and the startling (a trait he perfected in his two extraordinary books on Ronald Reagan's 1976 and 1980 campaigns). You will have a much deeper and richer understanding of America and the roots of the modern country when you read "December 1941."

—Mr. Gingrich is a former speaker of the House.

Malcolm Gladwell

For some reason 2011 was a year of reading lots of biographies and autobiographies—which I generally don't read much at all. Three stand out: Walter Isaacson on Steve Jobs and the autobiographies of Andre Agassi and Keith Richards. The latter two books were heavily ghostwritten, which I suspect accounts for a good deal of their charm. They are as much by Mr. Agassi and Mr. Richards (with all the authenticity that entails) as they are about them (with all the insight that entails). This is particularly useful in Mr. Richards's case, since the best parts of the book are his memories of the kinds of experiences that, by definition, cannot usually be remembered.

—Mr. Gladwell is the author of, most recently, "Outliers."

Howard Gordon

My two favorite books this year explore what happens when ordinary people are compelled to take extraordinary measures in order to confront evil. In "Full Dark, No Stars," Stephen King offers up a quartet of tightly told tales; nightmares, really, from which his characters can only awaken after they've accessed some dark part of themselves. "A Good Marriage" is an especially excruciating story of a woman who discovers that her husband of 20 years has maintained a secret identity beyond—and behind—the daily mask he wears as a mild-mannered numismatist. Although Maile Meloy's "The Apothecary" is written for children older than 10, this irresistible novel contains some fairly adult ideas, including the specter of nuclear warfare. When her father is blacklisted in 1952 Hollywood, Janie Scott moves with her family to London, where she meets Benjamin Burrows. Together they find themselves on a magical journey during which they discover (among the many other surprises that left me breathless) an elixir that can re-create a man from a pile of salt and the sweetness of first love.

—Mr. Gordon is executive producer of "Homeland" and author of the novels "Gideon's War" and "Hard Target."

Jerome Groopman

An acclaimed novelist in Europe, Norman Manea is little known to American readers. As a Jewish child in Bukovina, he was deported by the Nazis to the Transnistra camp and nearly starved to death. Raised in postwar Romania to be a committed communist, he pursued a career as a hydroelectric engineer to help build the workers' paradise. But he could not ignore its deliberate injustices and began to express his dissent. Mr. Manea was soon labeled by the regime a "hooligan." Undaunted, he was expelled, ultimately settling in New York. His deeply engaging memoir, "The Hooligan's Return" (2003), vividly weaves dream and the memory of this past with his struggle to find a place in current American culture. Mr. Manea is a professor of literature at Bard College, one of the few in academia to call to account present-day apologists for totalitarian regimes.

—Mr. Groopman is the author of "Your Medical Mind."

Gabrielle Hamilton

'The Tiger's Wife' is a thick, dense and complex story, but it flowed like warm honey when it so easily—in less skilled hands—could have congealed and


Gabrielle Hamilton

become indigestible. Téa Obreht has, hands-down, written the most salient and wise description of the contrast between the degradation of fighting for nothing and the dignity of fighting for something. Ms. Obreht somehow made the very sad and often violent story of death upon death upon death as beautiful as any. Equally poignant, she evokes and honors village culture—its superstitions, myths, habits, rituals—in a current world where "village," for better or for worse, is virtually extinct. This talent belies her apparent youth (or do we all just keep habitually underestimating youth?).

—Ms. Hamilton is the author of "Blood, Bones and Butter."

Aleksandar Hemon

For my money, Michael Ondaatje is the greatest living writer in the English language. I'm tempted to say that "The Cat's Table" is among his best books, but his work is of such consistent brilliance that that would not be saying much. The wide-eyed love of the world and its wonders, the kindness he offers to his characters and readers, the elegant lyricism of his sentences, the joy of storytelling—all that is great in his other books is fully present in "The Cat's Table." Yet the book turns in unpredictable directions, surprising in ways that even a fanatically devout reader of Mr. Ondaatje's works (say, I) could not anticipate. Mr. Ondaatje restores belief in the beauty and power of literature and, by extension, of humanity. In this dark, terrible world, "The Cat's Table" has healing powers.

—Mr. Hemon is the author of the short story collection "Love and Obstacles."

Richard Holmes

Here in London I have just been chairing the judging panel for the Royal Society's Science Book Prize 2011 (with no less than 134 entries) and have emerged convinced that we are in a golden age of popular science writing on both sides of the Atlantic. From the American end of our short list, I would enthusiastically recommend the constantly surprising and witty, anecdotal approach to the Periodic Table in Sam Kean's "The Disappearing Spoon" (2010).

Our eventual winner, "The Wavewatcher's Companion" (2010), by Gavin Pretor-Pinney, is a delightful visionary account of every kind of ripple, from the Mexican wave to the electromagnetic one. Meanwhile, just published is Richard Hamblyn's "The Art of Science: A Natural History of Ideas," a truly astonishing world anthology of accessible science writing from the Babylonians with their "oyster" cosmology to the search for the Higgs Boson, or "God particle." Each short section is brilliantly introduced by Mr. Hamblyn, who won the 2002 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for "The Invention of Clouds."

Wearing my literary hat, I would choose Matthew Hollis's "Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas." It's an exceptional biography largely focused on the historic meetings in 1913-14 between the young Robert Frost and the then-unknown English poet Edward Thomas, shortly before Thomas marched off to war and death and Frost went home to American fame. Mr. Hollis is himself a young English poet to watch (see his "Ground Water"), and this is his remarkable first prose work. Finally, a book for our troubled times is Frances Wilson's "How to Survive the Titanic, or the Sinking of J. Bruce Ismay." This is a gripping retrospective on the Titanic disaster seen through the eyes of the wealthy ship's owner, including the two agonizing inquiries that Ismay had to attend in New York and London, his demolition by the popular press, and an inspired interweaving of the moral themes of guilt and responsibility from Joseph Conrad's sea-going novel "Lord Jim."

—Mr. Holmes is the author of "Shelley: The Pursuit" and "Age of Wonder."

Michael Holroyd

I enjoyed Alan Hollinghurst's "The Stranger's Child," which impressed me as being a modern version of the novel E.M. Forster would have wished to write. As he tracks the changes taking place in Britain during the 20th century, Mr. Hollinghurst uses his versatile wit to play with influential figures from the past and to tease his readers until, drawn into the story, they almost become additional characters in it themselves. Among nonfiction books, I admired Sarah Bakewell's "How to Live, or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer." This series of "conversations" encircling Montaigne's charming, 16th-century essays about anything and everything brings a long dead writer very much alive in our contemporary world.

—Mr. Holroyd is the author of "A Book of Secrets: Illegitimate Daughters, Absent Fathers."

John Howard

"Citizens of London" (2010), by Lynne Olson, tells the story of a group of Americans—diplomats and others—who either represented the United States or were resident in London between the outbreak of war between Germany and Britain in September 1939 and American entry into the war. They included the Ambassador John Gilbert Winant, Averell Harriman and Ed Murrow, the broadcaster. They were all Anglophiles in different ways, particularly through their links with the Churchill family, and tried hard to accelerate America joining Britain's side against Nazi Germany. It is a beautifully written account of a pivotal moment in our history, with graphic descriptions of wartime London and interesting accounts of colorful liaisons.

Henry Kissinger's "On China" radiates authority and realism. His account of China's rise displays a pragmatic understanding of the way in which China's economic growth has liberated hundreds of millions of people from poverty in just over 30 years. His account is neither starry-eyed nor patronizing.

To complete my trilogy I would nominate John le Carré's "Our Kind of Traitor" (2010). I think it is his first narrative of an obscenely wealthy, thoroughly unattractive and perpetually insecure Russian oligarch. The oligarch, Dima, meets his end in a plane crash, presumably not due to pilot error. The plot, typical of Mr. le Carré, is complicated but written in a way that is easy to follow.

—Mr. Howard is a former prime minister of Australia.

Michael Ignatieff

"The Memory Chalet," Tony Judt's memoir of growing up in London in the 1950s, is spare and unsparing and yet full of passion and love for life. He wrote it after a stupendously argumentative and productive life as a scholar and writer and as that cruel disease, ALS, was closing in upon him. His description of what it is to live with a disease that immobilizes your limbs and your capacity for speech, but leaves you able to feel and remember, is pitiless and unpitying, but it is among the most touching vindications of the power of language that I have read.

—Mr. Ignatieff, the former leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, teaches at the University of Toronto.

Garry Kasparov

Times of crisis often produce great works of literature, of both fiction and nonfiction. Perhaps the global financial meltdown of 2008 that is still running its course will eventually produce masterly narratives like Winston Churchill's histories of the world wars or John Steinbeck's novels on the Great Depression. But most recent books that attempt to address the financial crisis are more interested in pushing well-known viewpoints and justifying shopworn ideologies and policies.

Interventionist economists like Paul Krugman ("The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008") and Nouriel Roubini ("Crisis Economics") say that we haven't borrowed enough to get out of a crisis brought on by too much borrowing. Bill Clinton ("Back to Work") and Thomas Friedman ("That Used to Be Us") invite us to return to the glory days of the 1990s—by which time things had already gone badly wrong but the check had yet to arrive at the table. Only a politician of Mr. Clinton's rare talent could describe a political cataclysm and almost convince you that the solution is more government!

If economists, pundits and politicians cannot explain how we got into this mess, why not neuroscientists and psychologists? While waiting for our catastrophe's Boswell, I found more enlightenment in reading about the way our brains do and do not work and how we decide what we decide. Of course, this has long been my main area of interest; each of the tens of thousands of chess moves I made during my career was a unique and analyzable decision. And as much as I believe in intuition, I understand that it is a natural synthesis of experience, talent and knowledge. The anecdotes and analysis in Jonah Lehrer's fascinating book, "How We Decide" (2009), complemented some of my own ideas and introduced me to several new ones. We approach the problem of how people can upgrade their mental software from different but harmonious angles.

An honorable mention in this category goes to Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking, Fast and Slow." He exposes and explains the human mind's myriad weaknesses in a profound and illuminating way. I very much concur with both authors in the belief that no matter how good you are at something, or how right you think you are, it is better to think than to blink.

—Mr. Kasparov is the leader of the Russian pro-democracy organization the United Civil Front. He is the author of "How Life Imitates Chess."

Christopher Kimball

Let's start with a warning: Read my words carefully before you rush out to buy "The Big Fat Duck Cookbook" (2008), by Heston Blumenthal, at a price somewhere between $150 and $250. Doing so would be somewhat like purchasing an elephant's-foot umbrella stand—just the thing for an eccentric friend but perhaps over-the-top as a run-of-the-mill housewarming gift. I love books. I love finely crafted books with thick paper that squeaks between the


Chris Kimball

fingers, books that give off a perfume sweeter than any ripe peach, that are larger than life, making me think that each volume was hand-crafted at a hole-in-the-wall atelier. "The Big Fat Duck Cookbook" is one of those books. It also reminds me of Book Day at elementary school, when the shiny new books were put on display and the fifth-graders were unleashed to peruse a lavishly illustrated "Wonderful Wizard of Oz" or "The Arabian Nights" with gold stars against an India-ink night sky. As for the food, well, you are unlikely to ever make any of it, unless achieving the perfect Flaming Sorbet is your thing.

But then again, a book about opera or modern dance is not a how-to work either. This book just makes one happy to be in the kitchen, to know that there are folks out there as nutty and talented as Mr. Blumenthal, folks who know no bounds in their enthusiasm for all things edible. Snail Porridge? Beet/Grapefruit Lollipops? Why not?—unless, of course, you just want to put dinner on the table.

—Mr. Kimball is the publisher of Cook's Illustrated and the author of "Fannie's Last Supper."

Alex Kozinski

I commute two hours a day at the wheel of my new Leaf, so I do most of my leisure reading by listening. Audio books aren't always released with the printed version, so I may be a bit behind the times, but here are some books I've enjoyed in the past year.

"The White Tiger" (2008) by Aravind Adiga. An unsquinting look at India today, sometimes loving, sometimes bemused, often brutal. Narrated with a convincing Indian accent by actor John Lee, it paints a panorama of a society bursting with vitality yet hobbled by corruption, vast disparities in wealth and invidious class distinctions.

"The Emperor of All Maladies" by Siddhartha Mukherjee. Dr. Mukherjee, an oncologist and cancer researcher, tells us more than we ever hoped to know about cancer. We learn about the history of cancer, going back to the time of the pharaohs, the evolution of cancer research and cancer treatment, carcinogens (you'll never light up another cigarette), cancer genetics and why it is unlikely that we'll find a cure any time soon. Interspersed are stories of Dr. Mukherjee's own patients and the harrowing, often heart-breaking tales of heir struggle with the disease.

"Land of Lincoln" (2007) by Andrew Ferguson. This book is about our national obsession with Lincoln. We meet Lincoln admirers, Lincoln haters, Lincoln impersonators (known professionally as Lincoln Presenters), collectors of Lincoln memorabilia and kitsch, Lincoln monuments, Lincoln museums, Lincoln-style management conferences, and the now-defunct Lincoln Heritage trail. Funny and light-hearted, the book tells us a bit about who we are as seen through the lens of our national Lincoln-mania.

—Mr. Kozinski is chief judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

Jimmy Lai

Like so many who admire Liu Xiaobo—a Chinese author and critic who was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize for his human rights work—until I read "No Enemies, No Hatred," I was so awed by his nobility as a fighter that I had overlooked his depth as a thinker. If, as Mr. Liu believes, a society's morality is its backbone, the book raises difficult questions about China's future as a superpower. He wonders, for example, what will happen as the Internet ultimately forces China's authoritarian ruling class to confront the ugly truth about its rule. Yet even as he walks the reader through China's dark side, Mr. Liu's optimism shines through—and it's hard not to come away believing, as he does, that history is on his side.

—Mr. Lai is the founder and chairman of Next Media.

Joseph Lieberman

"Unaccustomed Earth" (2008) by Jhumpa Lahiri is a series of short stories offering interconnected vignettes from the immigrant experience in contemporary America but more broadly a series of rich portraits of the complexity and hidden crevices of our closest relationships. It is brilliantly written and stunningly insightful.

"The Spy" by Clive Cussler and Justin Scott is a wonderfully written and historically fascinating espionage novel set in pre-World War I America, in which our hero, Isaac Bell (a characteristically brilliant and strong Yale man), stops a slew of Japanese, German and English spies who are trying to break America's secret program to build the most powerful dreadnought battleships and control the world's waters.

This book gave me the surprising and thrilling twists and turns of a great spy novel, but it also made me feel as if I was

transported back to the first decade of the last century, as the international balance of power began to change.

"Covenant and Conversation" (2009) by Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks of the United Kingdom is a collection of commentaries on the Book of Genesis. I have read Genesis and countless commentaries on it over and over, but I still found Rabbi Sacks's work to be original, eloquent and inspirational.

And, oh yes, there was a fourth extraordinary book I read this year. In fact, I wrote it. "The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath" is my love song to the Sabbath day and my appeal to people of all religions or no religion to put some Sabbath into their busy lives.

—Mr. Lieberman is the senior senator from the state of Connecticut.

Charles Mann

I spent much of the year finishing a book about colonial history, so I mostly read for business, not pleasure. One of the most enjoyable "business" books I read this year was not, strictly speaking, published in 2011. J.R. McNeill's "Mosquito Empires"—a dryly witty account of the amazing history of malaria and yellow fever in the Americas—came out in 2010, but I read the paperback, which was published this year.

Hands-down, the novel I liked most was "The World as I Found It" by Bruce Duffy. After I finished my book, I was sick of the subject, so I asked one of our local booksellers what I should read that had nothing to do with what I had been writing about. "The World as I Found It" was published in 1987 but reissued last year by the New York Review of Books. It is a fictional telling of the interactions between the philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore. That makes it sound terrible, doesn't it? All I can say is that it plunged me into an intensely realized other world populated by characters who seemed as alive in my mind as any fictional characters I can remember. The battle sequences (Wittgenstein served in World War I) are as gripping as the scenes of domestic combat between Russell and his multiple wives and lovers.

Finally, let me sing the praises of a book that actually appeared for the first time in 2011: "The Anatomy of a Moment" by the Spanish fiction writer Javier Cercas. A nonfiction novel, "The Anatomy of a Moment" brilliantly re-creates the 35-minute episode in 1981 when an army force burst into Spain's Parliament and tried to seize power—only to be stood down by the politicians. A mix of character and action in a confined space, the event would make a fine play. Mr. Cercas does even better, using the novelist's privilege to invade the minds of the protagonists in a book that manages to be both ruminative and suspenseful.

—Mr. Mann is the author of "1493: Discovering the World That Columbus Made."

Michael Milken

Three very different books on my shelf share the lesson that those best prepared for the future have studied and understood the past.

"This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly" (2009) by Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff shows that recent financial problems could have been predicted and largely avoided if our leaders had a better grasp of history, especially the oft-repeated overvaluation of sovereign debt and real-estate loans. Richard Beeman's "Plain, Honest Men" (2009)—a fascinating analysis of the 1787 Constitutional Convention—reminds us that informed political compromise, so absent today in Washington, can produce lasting benefits across generations. And Matt Ridley's "The Rational Optimist" (2010) is a definitive response to the declinists who forget that we all live longer, richer, less violent lives filled with comforts and pleasures that the royalty of past centuries could not have imagined.

—Mr. Milken is chairman of the Milken Institute in Santa Monica, Calif.

Simon Sebag Montefiore

My books of the year are Andrew Roberts's "The Storm of War," the best full history of World War II yet written; "The Shah" by Abbas Milani, a brilliantly compelling portrait of Iran's last monarch; and "Jerusalem in World War I," the gripping flamboyant diary of Count Ballobar, the Spanish consul there (edited by Roberto Mazza). Jonathan Steinberg's "Bismarck" is the best biography of the Iron Chancellor to date. My favorite fiction consists of two classics. First, Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy of novels set in Egypt in the first half of the 20th century—Mahfouz is truly the Arab Tolstoy. Second, Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Manor" (1967) and "The Estate" (1969), both masterpieces.

—Mr. Sebag Montefiore is the author of "Jerusalem: A Biography."

Ferdinand Mount

John Bew's "Castlereagh" is the most brilliant and wise political biography I have read in a long while. It resurrects both the

personality and the reputation of the man who made the peace in Europe after Waterloo, a warmer-hearted Henry Kissinger of his time. "My Father's Fortune" by the playwright Michael Frayn is a subtle and enchanting account of his boyhood in the South London suburbs.

For those who missed Elaine Dundy's "The Dud Avocado" (1958) the first time round, I recommend the recent reissue from New York Review Books. The adventures of Sally Jay Gorce in postwar Paris have lost none of their zany zap after 50 years.

—Mr. Mount, a former editor of the Times Literary Supplement, is the author of "Full Circle: How the Classical World Came Back to Us."

Daniel Okrent

"Train Dreams," a novella by Denis Johnson, both riveted me and warmed me, its glistening prose capturing the old west at the turn of the last century as it might be rendered in an exquisitely detailed painting. The best nonfiction I read was "To End All Wars," by Adam Hochschild. Mr. Hochschild's account of antiwar passion in the U.K.—and on the battlefield—during World I explodes nearly a century of received wisdom. In a category of its own, I'd cite Stephen Sondheim's "Finishing the Hat" (2010). You don't have to love Mr. Sondheim to be bowled over by this idiosyncratic, at times cranky, dissection of song lyrics, both his own and those of others; deep down, the book is really about the mysterious (and sometimes prosaic) process of artistic creation.

—Mr. Okrent is the author of "Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition."

Helen Oyeyemi

Jesse Ball's "The Curfew," a spare, peculiar and wholly engrossing novel about a dangerous few days in the life of an epitaph writer and his daughter. Also Anita Rau Badami's "Tell It to the Trees," which is about family secrets and the things you do in order to keep both secrets and family. The intensity of the narrative ebbs and flows and creeps—it would be a perfect psychological thriller if it wasn't so very sad. Then there's Marina Endicott's "The Little Shadows," which follows the lives of a family trying to make a living on the early 20th-century Canadian vaudeville circuit—all the quiet tragedies and comedies of the characters' daily lives are captured in an effortless (seeming) fashion; Ms. Endicott's people make me like people in general. Two more: Kate Beaton's "Hark! A Vagrant," because I went through it with a plan to turn over the corner of the absolute funniest page and ended up marking almost every page, and Alina Bronsky's calmly brutal "The Hottest Dishes of the Tartar Cuisine."

—Ms. Oyeyemi's fourth novel, "Mr. Fox," has just been published.

David Petraeus

David Petraeus

I very much enjoyed Douglas Waller's "Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage." Mr. Waller includes new sources and anecdotes not covered in the three previous biographies of Donovan, and the author carefully examines the power struggles Donovan faced in championing a postwar, centralized intelligence structure. To me, Donovan's life and accomplishments serve as a daily inspiration. In fact, a bronze statue of the general stands guard in the lobby of the Central Intelligence Agency, and a small version is in my office. Each day,

the man who routed the Fourth Imperial Prussian Foot Guards with a battalion of Irish-Americans from New York City—and was awarded the Medal of Honor—keeps an eye on how we're doing. In truth, I'd feel his presence even without his likeness, because Wild Bill's spirit is very much alive and well at the CIA. As a soldier turned spymaster myself, I can tell you there is no better job in the world than being director of this agency.

—Mr. Petraeus is the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Ahmed Rashid

Stalin-era Russian author Vasily Grossman, a journalist, a Jew and a humanitarian who was the first to record the horrors of Stalin's purges, the Gulag and the man-made famine in the Ukraine in the 1930s that in all killed millions of Russians. His book "Everything Flows" is a masterpiece of suffering, showing how Stalin laid the seeds for Hitler. The New York Review of Books has done sterling service by publishing Grossman's books again in English after they had been out of print for many years. They include his masterpiece, "Life and Fate," an 800-page tome of World War II and the siege of Stalingrad. All his books were banned by Stalin.

Another unique book is "The Convert" by Deborah Baker. Chronicling America's first confrontation with Islam in Pakistan in the 1950s, "The Convert" is a beautifully written story told through the eyes of a white American convert.

Finally, "Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba," by Stephen Tankel, is one of those rare books that come out before their time is ripe. This militant Islamic group based in Pakistan and Afghanistan is the most dangerous in the world, and you will be hearing much more of it in the years to come. Mr. Tankel is ahead of his time.

—Mr. Rashid is the author of "Taliban" and "Descent Into Chaos."

David Reynolds

sesquicentennial of the outbreak of the Civil War and the bicentennial of the birth of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose antislavery best seller, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," created such a stir that Lincoln reportedly called Stowe "the little lady who made this great war." Having spent the past few years writing a book on Stowe, I was deeply moved by "The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It," published this year by the Library of America. This fascinating anthology of documents—letters, diary entries, speeches, poems, political manifestoes—by both famous Americans (including Lincoln, Whitman, Frederick Douglass, Robert E. Lee) and forgotten ones moves chronologically through 1861, providing many firsthand accounts of that fateful, chaotic year. The volume is a strong reminder that of all the factors behind the war—economic, political, social—the most important was slavery. The book features firm statements by Northerners who stood morally opposed to slavery. It also includes strident proslavery pronouncements by Southerners like the Georgia politician Alexander H. Stephens, who described the newly formed Confederacy as a glorious nation whose cornerstone was "the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man." "The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It" registers the early rumblings and astonishing eruption of the war that led to the emancipation of the nation's four million enslaved blacks. The book allows us to feel on our nerve endings the warring passions of one of history's most tumultuous times.

—Mr. Reynolds is the author of "Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America."

Marilynne Robinson

At present I am reading essays and notes in the "Jewish Annotated New Testament," edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler and published by Oxford. It is an admirable piece of scholarship. It provides a wealth of highly relevant context, enriching the cultural and literary as well as the theological and historical terms in which these writings of first-century Jews should be approached. The contributors are tactful and sophisticated in their treatment of antiquity and respectful of its mysteries. Much contemporary writing on Scripture is faddish or tendentious. This book is a disciplined work of clarification and illumination.

—Ms. Robinson is the author of the forthcoming essay collection "When I Was a Child, I Read Books."

Karl Rove

How about an Anglophile Christmas book list? In the past two years, Paul Johnson has written short biographies of Churchill, Jesus and Socrates, each spectacular and a delight to read. Andrew Roberts writes with verve and brilliant insight: His magisterial "The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War" is terrific. I picked up the British edition of Niall Ferguson's "Civilization: The West and the Rest" in London, months before it was issued in the U.S., and so briefly looked smarter to my friends. N.T. Phillipson has written a fresh and deeply informed biography with "Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life." Finally, browsing in a used bookstore, I came upon a near-pristine copy of T.E. Lawrence's 1935 "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," long a personal favorite. On its first page, Lawrence of Arabia writes: "We were a self-centered army without parade or gesture, devoted to freedom, the second of man's creeds, a purpose so ravenous that it devoured all our strength, a hope so transcendent that our earlier ambitions faded in its glare." What a start. What a book.

—Mr. Rove is the author of "Courage and Consequence: My Life as a Conservative in the Fight."

Lionel Shriver

I was quite struck by a new voice this year, that of Deborah Kay Davies in "True Things About Me." It's a short, riveting, and perversely funny novel about a woman's descent into sexual obsession. Told in brief, appalling little chapters, this debut has some of the same edgy, almost frightening eroticism of Jenefer Shute's memorable "Sex Crimes" (1996). "True Things About Me" is genuinely about sex, in all its irrationality and dreamlike delusion, as opposed to most erotic novels that merely pretend to be about sex. Like watching a slow-motion train wreck, reading this novel is not only horrifying but exhilarating, for there's something marvelous about watching anyone so flagrantly defy social convention even to the point of utter self-destruction. And this first novel passes my simple, crucial test: really, really fun to read.

—Ms. Shriver's 11th novel, "The New Republic," will be published in March.

Gary Shteyngart

My favorite book of last year was "Matterhorn," by some guy I had never heard of before—Karl Marlantes. Thirty years in the making and entirely unpretentious, it made me understand the war in Vietnam better than any other fictional portrayal between

the covers or on the screen. The men of Bravo Company are still in my mind a year later.

Mr. Shteyngart's most-recent novel is "Super Sad True Love Story."

Alexandra Styron

This year, my tottering bedside stack (Santa, bring me more reading hours!) has yielded some arresting reflections on vanished youth. I was, appropriately enough, swept away by "The Cat's Table." Like the ocean liner on which he sets his tale, Michael Ondaatje propels the reader on a strange and enchanting journey, all banked in the fog of boyhood memory. I was also astonished by the sharp beauty of Justin Torres's debut novel, "We the Animals." Another story about a boy, it hews as close to the bone of truth as any novel I've ever read, both visceral and affectingly raw. Finally, speaking of raw truth, there is "Blue Nights," Joan Didion's exquisite elegy for her daughter—and for life itself. Cheerful endings are for wimps. Prepare to be undone.

Ms. Styron is the author of "Reading My Father: A Memoir."

Alvaro Uribe

In his brilliantly written book "Redeemers," Enrique Krauze explores the intellectual legacy of political figures like José Martí, Rodó, Vasconcelos and Octavio Paz. He also evaluates the roots of populist movements and its negative consequences in Argentina, while denouncing the false promises and propaganda apparatus behind the Chavista regime and the grave mistakes committed by the Cuban Revolution demythologizing the figure of Che Guevara. It is a marvelous testimony on how social causes have inspired profound ideological movements, but have also been manipulated by some leaders, calling themselves Redeemers, who seek power to impose their ideologies.

Anyone willing to understand the evolution of capitalism and the causes that created the 2008-2009 world financial meltdown will find "Capitalism 4.0" by Anatole Kaletsky inspiring. Its main contribution consists in describing how capitalism needs to learn the lessons from the last financial crisis to improve its values and remain being the force behind innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and social progress. A great presidential memoir, written with passion, honesty and humbleness, "Decision Points" by George W. Bush shows the reader the real challenges behind complex choices and the true challenges in the exercise of power.

Mr. Uribe is a former president of Colombia.

Alexander Waugh

Books that pitch into live quarrels are always fun, and I expect at least one good potboiler on the Shakespeare authorship question to be published every year. In 2010 I was convinced by James Shapiro's "Contested Will," which argued that anti-Stratfordians were all barmy romantics. This year A.J. Pointon, in his clearly articulated counter-treatise, "The Man Who Was Never Shakespeare," convinces me that Mr. Shapiro and his fellow Stratfordians are the ones who are really off their heads.

Mr. Pointon's book sets out to prove that "William Shakspere" (an illiterate player and tradesman from Stratford) never wrote the poems and plays credited to the pseudonym "William Shakespeare." The book's strength is that it doesn't attempt to peddle any of Mr. Pointon's own theories as to who actually did write them. His evidence is clear and compelling. So I am currently on Mr. Pointon's side against the Stratfordians, enjoying my gullibility and looking forward to re-reversing my views many more times in the coming years. The two books that I think have given me the most straightforward pleasure this year are "P.G. Wodehouse: A Life in Letters" (edited by Sophie Ratcliffe) and Tim Bonyhady's rich and enthralling "Good Living Street: Portrait of a Patron Family, Vienna 1900." Of both one could say: "They needed to be written."

Mr. Waugh is the author of "The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War."

Cyrus Vance

Before a recent business trip to Israel, someone handed me a copy of "Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle," a book by Dan Senor and Saul Singer about Israel's culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism. I had finished the book on the overnight flight to Tel Aviv. When I returned home a week later, based on what I had seen in Israel, I purchased multiple copies and handed them out to senior staff who work with me.

"Start-Up Nation" recounts and dissects how Israel, in just 60 years, has thrived as an economy, creating an environment where talent and technology have attracted more venture-capital dollars per person than any other country in the world.

In a nutshell, and admittedly oversimplifying, the authors boil Israel's success down to a few, core themes. First, Israel was born into and exists in an adverse political environment. Surrounded by hostile neighbors, Israelis survived—and thrived—by

adapting quickly, making the most out of limited resources and taking on outsize challenges without fear or undue regard for authority. The latter quality might be called chutzpah. Second, Israelis all participate in military service, before university. The skills they learn in the military, and the maturity they gain from military service, make their work force better skilled and more capable of better teamwork at the entry level on up.

If my recent visit provides any evidence of national characteristics, Israelis question authority, openly and all the time. At any given meal, whether it included ordinary citizens, generals, government officials or business executives, deference was in short supply. No quarter is given. But debate and disagreement create a climate of self-awareness. That in turns helps to create a culture of achievement.

So why did I give copies of the book to my senior staff? I believe in a bottom-up organizational culture, where problems are identified, raised and solved by the line employees
who make the enterprise run. Our American system—and especially our legal and government cultures—frequently operates with a top-down style, which can discourage creativity and individualism.

The one thing that I am not planning to do is give copies of "Start-Up Nation" to my children until they graduate from college and have left the house. They have questioned my authority enough already.

"Matterhorn" (2010) is a novel by Karl Marlantes about the Vietnam War. It apparently took the author, himself a decorated Vietnam veteran, more than 30 years to put the story to paper. I can see why. It clearly was not easy to live, let alone write.

The story concerns a platoon in Bravo Company fighting near the North Vietnamese border, told largely through the eyes of a rookie lieutenant, Mellas, who has replaced a more seasoned and popular platoon commander. Mellas is untested, not much into his 20s, and doubts his own leadership abilities. But like his fellow soldiers, he grows up immediately in a cruel and foreign environment where, if you want to survive your first jungle patrol, there is no margin for error, or mercy.

The novel provides an emotional portrait of the Vietnam War, which has largely been written about from a political perspective. Mr. Marlantes puts you in the heads of scared young men walking blindly in column through head-high grass in terror of trip-wires and ambush by enemies fighting on their home turf, or hacking their way through impenetrable bush overwhelmed by fatigue, jungle rot, fear, sickness, tigers and leeches.

You cannot but love the platoon and hate its commanders, who frequently send it into harm's way to achieve irrational objectives, without adequate provisions. At the end, Bravo Company is ordered to make a brutal, and suicidal, assault to retake a mountaintop that it had recently held but then surrendered to the North. The burden then falls on young platoon leaders in the field to make hard choices. As his company lies incapacitated by dehydration, as weather and geography prevent resupply from helicopters while the company is pinned down by North Vietnamese troops, the captain orders the medics—called "squids"—to pull the IVs from the wounded in order to hydrate the "effectives"—functioning soldiers—so that they can survive the next assault by the enemy and continue the mission. "Imagine dying of thirst in a monsoon," says Mellas. This is a story about loyalty—no Marine leaves a fallen Marine on the battlefield—but some betray each other as racial tension infects the company. And this is a story about irony—the soldiers fight heroically but the missions seem completely pointless.

Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr. a

At the end of "Matterhorn," you are awed at the resilience and strength of the men and women who serve our country and aware of the cost. And one thing is sure: You will never want to experience what Mellas and his platoon did in the jungles of Southeast Asia, or anywhere else.

—Mr. Vance is the New York County district attorney.

Toby Young

I enjoyed "Carte Blanche," Jeffery Deaver's James Bond novel. Some of the nuances of the English class system are lost on Mr. Deaver, but the book is full of well-executed action set pieces and the story rattles along at breakneck speed. If Ian Fleming was the Sean Connery of Bond authors and Sebastian Faulks was the Timothy Dalton, then Mr. Deaver is Pierce Brosnan. My book of the year is Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs. For an authorized biography, it's remarkably candid. Mr. Isaacson painstakingly documents all the Apple founder's failings as a human being, yet the overall tone remains respectful. What he captures very well is the fundamental eccentricity of Jobs, an eccentricity that was inextricably bound up with all his remarkable achievements.

—Mr. Young is the author of "The Sound of No Hands Clapping."

Adam Zagajewski

I'm one of those readers who love old and sometimes half-forgotten books and who do a lot of rereading, one of those who shun best sellers and can't understand their fellow travelers opening shiny volumes that they bought 10 minutes earlier in an airport bookstore.

Among new books I've found gripping during the past 12 months is a slim collection of poems written by John Burnside, a Scottish poet: "Black Cat Bone." Mr. Burnside creates a world in which dreams and realities mix up, and yet we recognize in his verses our thoughts, aspirations and reveries, as in the beautiful poem "Loved and Lost":

Give me a childhood again and

I will live

as owls do, in the moss

and curvature

of nightfall

—glimpsed

but never really seen. . . .

—Mr. Zagajewski, a poet, is the author of "Unseen Hand."