

Books

The best books of year

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From treats for two-year-olds to a history of toms, from the court of Henry VIII to the letters of Samuel Beckett, 2011 has produced plenty of absorbing reading

Sarah Sands
Christopher Hitchens has dominated this year intellectually, even as he becomes more physically frail. Arguably (Atlantic, £30) is a collection of his best essays of the decade. We thought he was an entertaining journalist but he turns out to have been one of the great thinkers of our times. I keep returning to his phrases and ideas in this book. Kwasi Kwarteng's Ghosts of Empire (Bloomsbury, £25) is a fresh and wonderfully written examination of the men behind the British Empire. Rather than looking at it as a group of countries united by a flag, Kwarteng suggests that it was formed patchily by individual characters. A generation of similarly educated men were sent out and they ran countries in the manner of idiosyncratic headmasters. The humanity of history is engrossing.

James Fenton
The stocking-filler for the real poetry-lover: Who is Ozymandias? and other Puzzles in Poetry, by John Fuller (Chatto, £12.99). Add Pebble & I, the latest collection of poems by the same author (also Chatto, £10) and Christopher Reid's Selected Poems (Faber, £14.99) and you have a gift that can't go wrong. Joan Didion's Blue Nights (4th Estate, £14.99) - the sequel to The Year of Magical Thinking - is terrific.

Nick Clegg
The Hare With Amber Eyes (Vintage, £8.99) by Edmund de Waal: tracing the whereabouts of small Japanese sculptures as they were passed from one branch of a family to the next through wealth, conflict, destitution in Europe and back to post-war Japan is a brilliantly original window onto some big historical events. My two-year-old absolutely loves the Highway Rat (Alison Green, £10.99) by Julia Donaldson. I don't think he understands the rhymes but like thousands of toddlers who've gurgled with pleasure at the Gruffalo, the look and sound just seems to do the trick.

AN Wilson
Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower (Atlantic, £17.99). His first novel, The White Tiger won the Man Booker, but this deserved to win it too. A richly Balzacian story of modern Mumbai, hilarious, alarming, real - this writer has real fire in his belly. Nicola Shulman's Graven With Diamonds (Short Books, £20) is an analysis of Thomas Wyatt through his poems, and a masterly vignette of the court of Henry VIII and the literally cloak and dagger world of early 16th-century diplomacy and espionage. Crisply written and full of good jokes, this gets my prize as the best work of history this year.

Dominic Sandbrook
Jonathan Wilson's Brian Clough: Nobody Ever Says Thank You (Orion, £20) is not just the definitive word on one of British sport's great characters, it's a brilliantly meticulous and incisive biography, bringing alive the vanished world of the post-war years. Books on Clough are ten a penny; this is better, though, than almost all the others put together. And in a fine year for history books, I thoroughly enjoyed Peter Sarris's Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam (OUP, £35), an epic, sweeping and ferociously clever history of the age of Justinian and Mohammed.

Andrew Roberts
Janine di Giovanni's memoir Ghosts by Daylight (Bloomsbury, £16.99) is a tautly written and haunting account of her life in war zones, but especially in Bosnia, and how her war correspondent job impacted on her marriage and motherhood. Art (Glitterati Incorporated, £49) by Edwina Sandys is a beautiful compilation of all the works of art she has produced in her highly productive life so far, and is by turns witty, thoughtful and provocative.

Melanie McDonagh
IT may not be everyone's idea of a good read, but The Empire of Death, Paul Koudounaris's Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses (Thames and Hudson, £29.95) from the Middle Ages to the present, is the most fascinating account of how our treatment of dead bodies has changed over time. It's illustrated with fabulous pictures of skeletons in every possible dress. A reflection on life as well as death. For children, the publication in affordable paperback of a couple of the brilliant Nicholas books by René Goscinny (as in Asterix), illustrated with diabolic humour by Jean Jacques Sempé, will usefully extend the readership of a series of subversive stories about a little French boy which has captivated readers since the Sixties. Nicholas and Nicholas and the Gang (Penguin, £5.95).

Andrew Neather
With his memoir of three years of crisis management at No 11, Back from the Brink (Atlantic, £19.99) former chancellor Alistair Darling has written what is surely the political memoir of the year. It's both illuminating and engagingly written - even if its title now looks cruelly over-optimistic. Jennifer Egan constructs A Visit from the Goon Squad (Corgi, £7.99) from a series of interwoven stories set in the recent American past and an imagined post-apocalyptic future: the writing is compelling, some of the most oddly haunting fiction I've read this year.

Geordie Greig
Sharp, dangerous and exhilarating was life in Henry VIII's court and Nicola Shulman's study of the poet Sir Thomas Wyatt and his times, Graven with Diamonds (Short Books, £20), is bursting with drama as well as being scholarly and full of surprises. My novel of the year is Edward St Aubyn's At Last (Picador, £16.99), the concluding volume of his Melrose series that slices and dices morality with prose so chiselled and a narrative so intense that the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.

Juliet Nicolson
Olivia Laing's To the River (Canongate, £16.99) is a romantic, meditative and beautifully written account of Laing's journey along the tiny River Ouse in Sussex, in which history, nature and love all play their part. Jeanette Winterson's profoundly honest story of her adoption and upbringing in Accrington near Manchester moved me deeply. Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? (Cape, £14.99) celebrates the redeeming power of the written word and is undercut with an irresistible humour born of residence in hardship.

Katie Law
For anyone interested in knowing why the upper classes can be so complicated and so ghastly, Edward St Aubyn's At Last has all the answers. The conclusion to his brilliant sequence of novels about the Melrose family, it purports to be fiction but, as he has revealed in interviews, is barely concealed autobiography. Another fine memoir masquerading as a novel has Francisco's Goldman's Say Her Name (Atlantic, £14.99), an absolute tearjerker about how fifty-something Goldman finally met the love of his life, Aura Estrada, only to lose her a few years later in a horrific swimming accident.

Brian Sewell
Hans Fallada's Alone in Berlin (Penguin, £9.99) is a chilling account of conscience and its inevitable consequences for non-Nazis during the Second World War which I read, engrossed and suitably chilled, on the District line; Alexander Baron's From the City, From the Plough (Black Spring, £9.99), about a Jewish soldier's tapestry of small events in the D-Day invasion of France, brought me too often and too deeply to tears to read it in such a public place. Both are fiercely touching, fiercely memorable.

Rachel Johnson
One can't use a phrase like "triumphant climax" to describe At Last by Edward St Aubyn, as it's neither triumphant nor climactic but so additively dark, funny and elegantly written, I'm surprised more (literary, male) novelists haven't simply hung up their pens in shame. Whistlebark Mum in Custard Shortage ... and Other World Exclusives from Britain's Finest Local Newspapers (Penguin, £12.99) is a heavenly collection of cuts and headlines from the regional press that reminds us of the utter bliss that is local news. I trained in Hastings and had to find and write news stories such as "Lord Mayor's trousers fall down at children's event" and "Trapped Seagull Saved by Firefighters".

Richard Godwin
I began the year determined to cure my ignorance about economics - and fell gratefully upon Ha-Joon Chang's 23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism (Allen Lane, £9.99). A Korean-born Cambridge economist, Chang dispels conventional orthodoxies with patient explanation and counter-intuitive insights. His first "thing" - there is no such thing as a free market - was an excellent place to start an education. I thought I'd had my fill of the French controversialist Michel Houellebecq - but The Map and the Territory (Heinemann, £17.99) surprised and amused me. There is less porn and racism than usual - which may make you question the point. However, the tale of contemporary art, authenticity and charcuterie marks Houellebecq as one of the most cruelly incisive writers around.

John Gray
Anna Funder's All That I Am (Viking, £16.99) is a novel based in real events about resistance to Nazism and what it cost the resisters. Moving from Germany to Bloomsbury, it follows the fortunes of a group of friends who flee to Britain only to find that their lives are still at risk from Nazi agents. With all the excitement of a thriller, this is also an absorbing study of exile, courage and memory.

David Sexton
My book of the year, the one I had to read straight through as soon as I had it in my hands, was The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol 2: 1941-1956 (Cambridge, £30). Of the novels that didn't make the Man Booker shortlist, I liked best At Last by Edward St Aubyn; of those that did, The Sisters Brothers (Granta, £12.99) by Patrick DeWitt. I loved Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad and Michel Houellebecq's The Map and the Territory too. But the book I have been consulting most keenly, the book most likely actually to influence my future behaviour, is the sequel to Pour un jardin sans arrosage, by the great pioneer of dry gardening, Olivier Filippi: Alternatives au gazon (Actes Sud, €39).

Hermione Eyre
Westwood (Vintage, £7.99) by Stella Gibbons. A wartime masterpiece unaccountably out of print since the 1980s. It's marvellous characters include one beautiful girl who has no feeling for art. "Honestly, I don't know how you can bear to have that fat pan looking at you," she remarks of a poster of the Mona Lisa. And Jerusalem: The Biography (Weidenfeld, £25) by Simon Sebag Montefiore - a vast, vigorous history with entertaining Gibbonian footnotes. I also loved A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan (traces of my American gods, Tama Janowitz and John Kennedy Toole) and the book I coveted most this year was the exquisite The Paper Garden: Mrs Delany Begins Her Life's Work at 72 (Bloomsbury, £25) by Molly Peacock, who manages to imbue 18th-century decoupage flowers with surprisingly radical significance.

George Walden
Science has its fashions. Entropy was a metaphor for a dying universe, but not to worry: neuroscience, we are implausibly informed by white-coated Simon Baron-Cohen, will help dispense with evil. Who better to debunk its pretensions while instructing us in its uses than wise, literate Raymond Tallis, a neuroscientist himself, in his entertaining Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity (Acumen, £25). Nikolaus Pevsner, a German Jew in exile and "benign spider", busied his brain by crawling over our buildings to explain to us the Englishness of English architecture. Biographies don't come better than Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life by Susie Harries (Chatto, £30).

Claire Harman
Frances Wilson's How to Survive the Titanic: The Sinking of J Bruce Ismay (Bloomsbury, £18.99) is a terrific study of class, guilt and the public pillorying of 1912's "Most Talked of Man in all the World", the owner of the White Star Line, who managed to find a place on one of his own lifeboats. It's by far the most elegant and thought-provoking biography of the year. And in fiction, I loved Patrick McGuinness's Booker shortlisted debut novel, a satiric thriller, if you can imagine that, set in Bucharest in 1969, The Last Hundred Days (Seren, £8.99). He can describe anything and is really interested in story-telling - quite a combination.

Henry Hitchens
Chad Harbach, The Art of Fielding I read the US edition, published in September; it will be published by 4th Estate in January, £16.99). The best debut novel I've read this year - assured, funny, poignant and deeply satisfying, even if you don't give a fig about baseball. Craig Taylor's Londoners (Granta, £25) is a haunting snapshot of contemporary London, by a Canadian whose intimate interviews with the city's inhabitants are both charming and revealing.

Sam Leith
Alexander Masters's biography of the eccentric mathematician Simon Norton - The Genius In My Basement (4th Estate, £16.99) - was superb: droll, original, sympathetic and studded with brilliant turns of phrase. It also gave the best account I've yet read of what it actually is that mathematicians do, and why they do it. I hugely enjoyed Craig Brown's daisy-chained book of celebrity encounters, One On One (4th Estate, £16.99), too. Funny, yes, but also very poignant.

Chris Mullin
Having been a judge of the Man Booker Prize, I have been spoiled for choice. Snowdrops (Atlantic, £7.99) by AD Miller was one of my favourites. A very superior thriller set in Moscow, brilliantly evoking the mafia state that was Yeltsin's Russia. I also liked The Testament of Jessie Lamb (Sandstone press, £7.99) by Jane Rogers, which, although it didn't make the shortlist, was by far the most moving of all the 138 entries.

Frances Osborne
Stasiland author Anna Funder's All That I Am is a delicate historical weave of longing that novelises the true story of an exiled German resistance group in 1930s London. Funder says as much with her deliberate narrative gaps as she does with words themselves. Few cities, if any, have been the place of so much bloody conflict as Jerusalem. Simon Sebag Montefiore's synonymous biography of the city Jerusalem: The Biography offers this justice, and I was utterly engrossed in its history of murder and religion.

Francis Spufford
The astonishingly idea-rich Great Works (Frances Lincoln, £18.99), a collection of the late, lamented Tom Lubbock's Independent columns about individual paintings: in every one of which a brilliant new contraption of language is assembled before your eyes to make you see a work of art in a way you'd never expected. It does this 50 times over, seemingly without effort, and confirms Lubbock as one of the greatest and wittiest educators of our vision. Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad, praised to the skies and rightly so for its bravura embodiment of time doing its impersonal work on a kin of people in and out of the New York music business. A lot of attention has been paid to its inventive structure, but the best thing about it is the demonstration that inventiveness can serve a rich human intelligence.

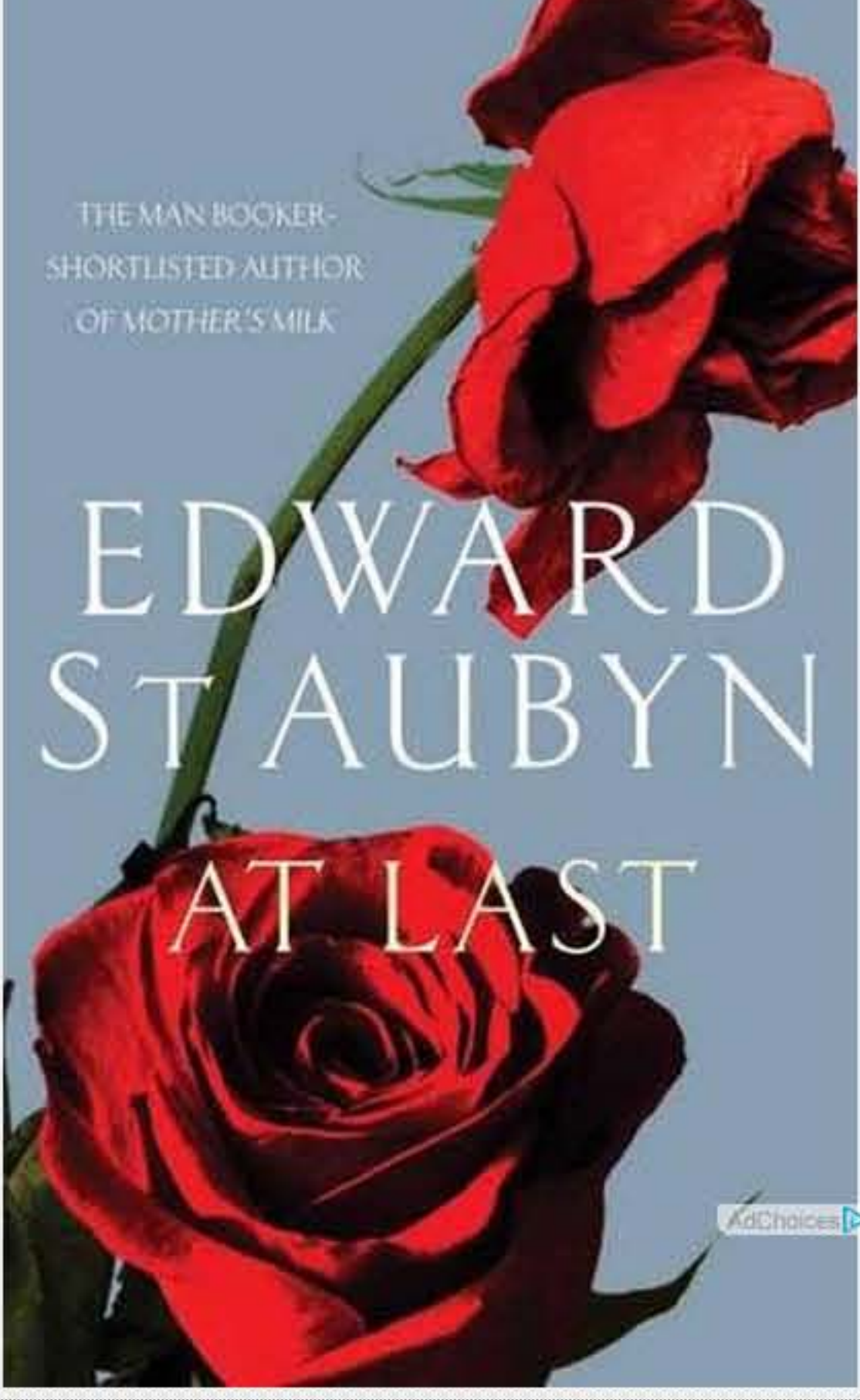
Rosamund Urwin
I predicted in January that I wouldn't read a better new novel all year than We Had It So Good (Virago, £12.99). I was right: Linda Grant's tale of the baby-boomers boasts a cast of well-drawn characters, is beautifully crafted and was foolishly overlooked by awards judges. Caitlin Moran's feminist manifesto, How To Be a Woman (Ebury, £11.99) deserves a mention for getting Jeremy Paxman to discuss vajazzling and clown porn on Newsnight alone. It is also both hilarious and moving and should be placed in all teenage girls' bedrooms, in the same way that they leave the Bible in hotel rooms.

Jane Shilling
Once in a while you open a book and know at once that nothing will go wrong. Philip Hensher's King of the Badgers (4th Estate, £18.99) is like that. From its opening vignette of a Devon ferryman, discussing Thomas Hardy with his impatient passenger, Hensher's novel draws you into its world of small-town secrets and holds you there, captivated. Irene Némirovsky's The View of Solitude (Chatto £14.99) is one of the best of her early novels: the story of a young girl growing up at the turn of the last century in an unhappy family of wealthy Ukrainian bourgeoisie, it is written with luminous intensity.

William Leith
This year, I enjoyed The Genius In My Basement by Alexander Masters, an unorthodox biography of a brilliant mathematician; Masters tells us that the mathematician's flat is a disaster area because his mind is so neat and tidy. I was fascinated by Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde's Sleights of Mind (Profile, £8.99) in which the two neuroscientists, a married couple, explore the way illusionists work. I loved Kiss Me, Chudleigh (Coronet, £8.99), a collection of Auberon Waugh's writing, edited by William Cook to resemble a sort of biography.

Liz Jones
Not a pleasure, this one, but essential reading. The Cafo Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Animal Factories (University of California Press, £15.95) by Daniel Imhoff tells the story behind Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. You know, the things that used to be called farms. It details, with almost unbearable use of images and facts, how farm animals are denied the most basic rights as living beings. Why Be Happy when You Could Be Normal? by Jeanette Winterson. Isn't it so much more honest and insightful to write a memoir than a "semi-autobiographical" novel? Her fear in the shadow of a woman, her mother, who probably suffered bi-polar disorder (I've never trusted women who bake cakes and clean all the time) struck so many chords.

Robert Fox
Two of the year's outstanding books treat of areas where Britain under Blair made troublesome interventions. Rodric Braithwaite's Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89 (Profile, £25) recounts the painful experiences of Soviet veterans in their decade of intervention in Afghanistan, with rare insight and humanity. Jack Fairweather's A War of Choice: The British in Iraq 2003-2009 (Cape, £20) describes how the British Army blundered into Iraq at Blair's mercurial whim and then had to beat a less than elegant retreat, after he left UK politics for higher and more lucrative things. It does what the Chilcot Inquiry should do, but probably won't.



Brilliant conclusion: Edward St Aubyn's At Last slices and dices morality in the final part of his Melrose series



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