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Friends, it’s true: the end of the decade approaches. It’s been a difficult, anxiety-provoking, morally compromised decade, but at least it’s been populated by some damn fine literature. We’ll take our silver linings where we can. So, as is our hallowed duty as a literary and culture website—though with full awareness of the potentially fruitless and endlessly contestable nature of the task—in the coming weeks, we’ll be taking a look at the best and most important (these being not always the same) books of the decade that was. We will do this, of course, by means of a variety of lists. We began with the best debut novels, the best short story collections, the best poetry collections, the best memoirs of the decade, and the best essay collections of the decade. But our sixth list was a little harder—we were looking at what we (perhaps foolishly) deemed “general” nonfiction: all the nonfiction excepting memoirs and essays (these being covered in their own lists) published in English between 2010 and 2019. Reader, we cheated. We picked a top 20. It only made sense, with such a large field. And 20 isn’t even enough, really. But so it goes, in the world of lists. The following books were finally chosen after much debate (and multiple meetings) by the Literary Hub staff. Tears were spilled, feelings were hurt, books were re-read. And as you’ll shortly see, we had a hard time choosing just ten—so we’ve also included a list of dissenting opinions, and an even longer list of also-rans. As ever, free to add any of your own favorites that we’ve missed in the comments below. *** Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow (2010) I read Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow when it first came out, and I remember its colossal impact so clearly—not just on the academic world (it is, technically, an academic book, and Alexander is an academic) but everywhere. It was published during the Obama Administration, an interval which many (white people) thought signaled a new dawn of race relations in America—of a kind of fantastic post-racialism. Though it’s hard to look back on this particular zeitgeist now (when, and I still can’t believe I’m writing this, Donald Trump is president of the United States) without decrying the ignorance and naiveté of this mindset, Alexander’s book called out this the insistence on a phenomenon of “colorblindness” in 2012, as a veneer, as a sham, or as, simply, another form of ignorance. “We have not ended racial caste in America,” she declares, “we have merely redesigned it.” Alexander’s meticulous research concerns the mass incarceration of black men principally through the War on Drugs, Alexander explains how the United States government itself (the justice system) carries out a significant racist pattern of injustice—which not only literally subordinates black men by jailing them, but also then removes them of their rights and turns them into second class citizens after the fact. Former convicts, she learns through working with the ACLU, will face discrimination (discrimination that is supported and justified by society) which includes restrictions from voting rights, juries, food stamps, public housing, student loans—and job opportunities. “Unlike in Jim Crow days, there were no ‘Whites Only’ signs.” Alexander explains. “This system is out of sight, out of mind.” Her book, which exposes this subtler but still horrible new mode of social control, is an essential, groundbreaking achievement which does more than call out the hypocrisy of our infrastructure, but provide it with obvious steps to change. –Olivia Rutigliano, CrimeReads Editorial Fellow Siddhartha Mukherjee, The Emperor of All Maladies (2010) In this riveting (despite its near 600 pages) and highly influential book, Mukherjee traces the known history of our most feared ailment, from its earliest appearances over five thousand years ago to the wars still being waged by contemporary doctors, and all the confusion, success stories, and failures in between—hence the subtitle “a biography of cancer,” though of course it is also a biography of humanity and of human ingenuity (and lack thereof). Mukherjee began to write the book after a striking interaction with a patient who had stomach cancer, he told The New York Times. “She said, ‘I’m willing to go on fighting, but I need to know what it is that I’m battling.’ It was an embarrassing moment. I couldn’t answer her, and I couldn’t point her to a book that would. Answering her question—that was the urgency that drove me, really. The book was written because it wasn’t there.” His work was certainly appreciated. The Emperor of All Maladies won the 2011 Pulitzer in General Nonfiction (the jury called it “An elegant inquiry, at once clinical and personal, into the long history of an insidious disease that, despite treatment breakthroughs, still bedevils medical science.”), the Guardian first book award, and the inaugural PEN/E. O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award; it was a New York Times bestseller. But most importantly, it was the first book many laypeople (read: not scientists, doctors, or those whose lives had already been acutely affected by cancer) had read about the most dreaded of all diseases, and though the science marches on, it is still widely read and referenced today. –Emily Temple, Senior Editor Rebecca Skloot, The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks (2010) As a strongly humanities-focused person, it’s difficult for me to connect with books about science. What can I say besides that public education and I failed each other. When I read The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, I found myself thinking that if all scientific knowledge were part of this kind of incredibly compelling and human narrative, I would probably be a doctor by now. (I mean, it’s possible.) Rebecca Skloot tells the story of Henrietta Lacks, a black woman who died of cervical cancer in 1951, and her cells (dubbed HeLa cells) which were cultured without her permission, and which were the first human cells to reproduce in a lab—making them immensely valuable to scientists in research labs all over the world. HeLa cells have been used for the development of vaccines and treatments as well as in drug treatments, gene mapping, and many, many other scientific pursuits. They were even sent to space so scientists could study the effects of zero gravity on human cells. Skloot set a wildly ambitious project for herself with this book. Not only does she write about the (immortal) life of the cells as well as the lives of Lacks and her (human, not just cellular) descendants, she also writes about the racism in the medical field and medical ethics as a whole. That the book feels cohesive as well as compelling is a great testament to Skloot’s skills as a writer. “Immortal Life reads like a novel,” writes Eric Roston in his Washington Post review. “The prose is unadorned, crisp and transparent.” For a book that encompasses so much, it never feels baggy. Nearly ten years later, it remains an urgent text, and one that is taught in high schools, universities, and medical schools across the country. It is both an incredible achievement and, simply, a really good read. –Jessie Gaynor, Social Media Editor Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands (2010) Timothy Snyder’s brilliant Bloodlands has changed World War II scholarship more, perhaps, than any work since Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem, an apt comparison given that Bloodlands includes within it a response to Arendt’s theory of the banality of evil (Snyder doesn’t buy it, and provides convincing proof that Eichmann was more of a run-of-the-mill hateful Nazi and less a colorless bureaucrat simply doing his job). Snyder reads in 10 languages, which is key to his ability to synthesize international scholarship and present new theories in an accessible way. But before I continue praising this book, I should probably let y’all know what it’s about—Bloodlands is a history of mass killings in the Double-Occupied Zone of Eastern Europe, where the Soviets showed up, killed everyone they wanted to, and then the Nazis showed up and killed everyone else. By focusing on mass killings, rather than genocide, Snyder is able to draw connections between totalitarian regimes and examine the mechanisms by which small nations can suddenly and horrifyingly become much smaller. –Molly Odintz, CrimeReads Associate Editor Isabel Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration (2010) Wilkerson’s history of the Great Migration is a revelation. When we talk about migration in the context of American history, we tend to focus on triumphalist stories of immigrants coming to America, but what about the vast migrations that have happened internally? Between 1920 and 1970, millions of African-Americans migrated North from the prejudice-ridden South, lured by relatively high-paying jobs and relatively less racism. It takes a whole lot to make someone leave their home, and Wilkerson does an excellent job at reminding us how awful life in the South was for Black people (and still is, in many ways). The Warmth of Other Suns is not only fascinating—it’s also thrilling, taking us into the lives of hard-scrabble folk who were equal parts refugees and adventurers, and truly epic, telling a great story on a grand scale. Don’t think that means there aren’t small moments of humanity seeded throughout the book—for every sentence about the conduct of millions, there’s a detail that reminds us that we’re reading about individuals, with their own hopes, wishes, dreams, and struggles. –Molly Odintz, CrimeReads Associate Editor Robert A. Caro, The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson (2012) While Robert Caro first came to prominence for The Powerbroker, his 1974 biography of divisive urban planner Robert Moses, it’s Caro’s ongoing multi-volume biography of LBJ, America’s most unjustly maligned president (fight me, Kennedy-heads!), that has cemented his legacy. It’s hard to pick one in particular to recommend, but The Passage of Power, which covers the years 1958-1964, captures the most tumultuous period of LBJ’s life in politics, as he went from feared senator, to side-lined VP, to suddenly becoming the post powerful figure in the world. There’s something profoundly moving about the vastness of these works—Caro is 83 now, and has dedicated an enormous part of his life to this singular project. His wife is his only approved research assistant, and together, they’ve upended half a century of LBJ criticism to reveal the complex, problematic, but always striving core of a sensitive soul. I had a teacher in high school who spent 20 years working on her dissertation on LBJ. She’d spend each weekend at the LBJ Library at UT Austin, while working full time as a public school teacher, and kicked ass at both. There’s something about LBJ that inspires people to dedicate their entire lives to trying to figure him out, and in the process, trying to understand the world that made him, and that he made. Thanks to Caro, we can all understand LBJ a little bit better. –Molly Odintz, CrimeReads Associate Editor Tom Reiss, The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo (2012) Tom Reiss opens his biography of Thomas Alexandre-Dumas, father of author Alexandre Dumas, with a scene that seems right out of an academic heist film. At a library in rural France, Reiss convinces a town official to blow open a safe whose combination was held only by the late librarian. What Reiss discovers are the rudiments of a grand and, until then, largely unknown story of the man who inspired some of his son’s most beloved tales. The Black Count is also a case study of complex racial politics during the age of revolutionary France. Dumas was born in 1762 in Saint-Domingue, the French Caribbean colony that would become Haiti. As the son of a French marquis and a freed black slave, Dumas was subject both to the privileges of the former and the kind of indignities suffered by the latter. His father, for instance, sells him into slavery when he is 12 only to purchase his freedom later and bring him to France, where the young man receives an aristocratic education. A final rift from his father prompts Dumas to join the military. Reiss creates a dynamic, if somewhat speculative portrait of Dumas based on letters, reports from battlefields, Dumas’ own writings, and more. By the time he is 30, Dumas has vaulted in the ranks from corporal to general and commands a division of more than 50,000 soldiers. It’s no accident that the thrilling militaristic feats Reiss describes sound like events out of The Count of Monte Cristo or The Three Musketeers. Though the general becomes a cavalry commander under Napoleon Bonaparte, Reiss suggests that it was Napoleon himself who ruined Dumas not only from a personal standpoint, but civilizational as well. Napoleon reintroduced slavery in Haiti, after all, in contradiction to the republican dreams of Dumas’ contemporary, Toussaint Louverture, another rare and successful 18th-century general of African descent. Reiss unearths the ultimately tragic story of a man who was infamous in his own time for enjoying social and professional advantages that would’ve been unheard of for a mixed-race man in the US, a nation which of course went through its own revolution one generation earlier. –Aaron Robertson, Assistant Editor Elizabeth Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction (2014) The premise of Elizabeth Kolbert’s Pulitzer-prize-winning book is a simple scientific fact: there have been five mass extinctions in the history of the planet, and soon there will be six. The difference, Kolbert explains, is that this one is caused by humans, who have drastically altered the earth in a short time. She points out on the first page that humans (which is to say, homo sapiens, humans like us) have only been around for two hundred thousand or so years—an incredibly short amount of time to do damage enough to destroy most of earthly life. Kolbert’s book is so unique, though, because she combines research from across disciplines (scientific and social-scientific) to prepare an extremely comprehensive, sweeping argument about how our oceans, air, animal populations, bacterial ecosystems, and other natural elements are dangerously adapting to (or dying from) human impact, while also tracing the history of both the approaches to these things (theories of evolution, extinction, and other principles). It’s a depressing and horrifying argument on the face of it, but it’s made so delicately, even poetically—Kolbert’s concerned, occasional first-person narration, and her many interviews with professionals capable of the pithiest, most perfect quotes (not to mention that she interviews these experts, sometimes, over pizza) make this book a conversation, more than a treatise. Kolbert talks us through the headiest, most complicated science, breaking down this mass disaster morsel by morsel. This might be The Sixth Extinction’s greatest achievement—it is so smart while also being so quotidian, so urgent while also being so present. And this fits the tone of her argument: our current mass extinction doesn’t feel like an asteroid hitting the planet. It’s amassed by the small ways in which we live our lives. We are crawling, she illuminates, towards the end of the world. –Olivia Rutigliano, CrimeReads Editorial Fellow Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me (2015) Ta-Nehisi Coates’ Between the World and Me 1) won the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 2015, 2) was a #1 New York Times bestseller, and 3) was deemed “required reading” by Toni Morrison. What else is there to say? To call it “timely” or “urgent” or even “a prime example of how the personal is, in fact, political” (as I am tempted to do) does not quite capture the unique, grounding, heartbreaking experience of reading this book. Framed as a letter to his teenage son, Between the World and Me is both a biting interrogation of American history and today’s society and an intimate look at the concerns and hopes a father passes down to his son. In just 152 pages, this book touches on the creation of race (“But race is the child of racism, not the father”), the countless acts of violence enacted on black bodies, gun control, and anecdotes from the writer’s own life. Ta-Nehisi Coates, a correspondent for The Atlantic, exercises a journalist’s concision and clarity and fuses it with the flourish of a novelist and the caring instinct of a father. It is a wonderful hybrid. The way the topics, the tones, bleed into one another reads so naturally: “I write you in your fifteenth year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, and that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store…” The list, of course, goes on. Between the World and Me brilliantly forces us to confront these tragedies again—to remember our own experiences watching the news coverage, to see them in the context of history filtered through Ta-Nehisi Coates’ unsurprised perspective, and to see them anew through the eyes of his disillusioned young son. There is an amazing generosity to these personal glimpses, the moments when the writer turns to his son (says “you”). They catch you off guard. (There are even photographs throughout, like a scrapbook you aren’t sure if you’re allowed to look through.) There have been many books about race, about violence and institutionalized injustice and identity, and there will be more, but none quite so beautifully shattering as this. –Katie Yee, Book Marks Assistant Editor Andrea Wulf, The Invention of Nature (2015) Andrea Wulf’s 2015 biography of 18th-century German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt—one of the most famous men of his time, for whom literally hundreds of towns, rivers, currents, glaciers, and more are named—is so much more than the story of a single life. Aside from chronicling a remarkably fertile moment in the history of European ideas (Von Humboldt was good buddies with his neighbor in Weimar, Goethe) Wulf reveals in Humboldt a true forebear of present-day ecology, a jack-of-all-trades scientist less concerned with the reduction of the natural world into its constituent specimens than with our place in a broader ecosystem. And while it doesn’t seem particularly radical now, Humboldt’s proto-environmentalist ideas about the wider world, much of which he mapped and explored, stood in stark contrast to prevailing notions of Christian dominion, that dubious theological position conjured up in aid of empire. Insofar as Humboldt was among the first to understand and articulate the complex systems of a living forest, he was also the first to sound the alarm about the impacts of deforestation (much of which he encountered on his epic journey across the northern reaches of South America). Part adventure yarn, part intellectual history, part ecological meditation, The Invention of Nature restores to prominence an exemplary life, and reminds us of the tectonic force of ideas paired to action. –Jonny Diamond, Editor in Chief Stacy Schiff, The Witches (2015) It’s surprising that with a topic as popular and recurring in American culture as the Salem witch trials there have not been more books of this kind. Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the bestselling Cleopatra, Stacy Schiff takes to the Salem witch trials with curiosity and a historian’s magnifying glass, setting out to uncover the mystery that has baffled, awed, and terrified generations since. She pokes at the spectacle that Salem has become in mainstream and artistic depictions—how it has blended with folklore and fiction and has hitherto become a sensationalized event in American history which nonetheless has never been fully understood. Schiff writes that despite the imagination surrounding the Salem witch trials, in reality, there is still a gap in their history of—to be exact—nine months; so the impetus of the book and the intent of Schiff is to penetrate the mass hysteria and panic that ripped through Salem at the time and led to the execution of fourteen women and five men. In her opening chapter, Schiff chillingly sets up the atmosphere of the book and asks key questions that will drive its ensuing narrative: “Who was conspiring against you? Might you be a witch and not know it? Can an innocent person be guilty? Could anyone, wondered a group of men late in the summer, consider themselves safe?” At the heart of Schiff’s historical investigation is the Puritan culture of New England—but part of her masterful synthesis is that she picks apart at each thread of Salem’s culture and evaluates the witch trials from every perspective. Praised for her research as well as her prose and narrative capabilities, Schiff’s The Witches has been described by The Times (London) as “An oppressive, forensic, psychological thriller”; Schiff herself, by the New York Review of Books as having “mastered the entire history of early New England.” A phrase that still haunts me for its resonance throughout human history, is: “Even at the time, it was clear to some that Salem was a story of one thing behind which was a story about something else altogether.” –Eleni Theodoropoulos, Editorial Fellow Svetlana Alexievich, tr. Bela Shayevich, Secondhand Time (2016) A landmark work of oral history, Svetlana Alexievich’s Second-hand Time chronicles the decline and fall of Soviet communism and the rise of oligarchic capitalism. Through a multitude of interviews conducted between 1991 and 2012 with ordinary citizens—doctors, soldiers, waitresses, Communist party secretaries, and writers—Alexievich’s account is as important to understanding the Soviet world as Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago. Second-hand Time first appeared in Russia in 2013 and was translated into English in 2016 by Bella Shayevich. As David Remnick wrote in The New Yorker, “There are many worthwhile books on the post-Soviet period and Putin’s ascent…But the nonfiction volume that has done the most to deepen the emotional understanding of Russia during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union of late is Svetlana Alexievich’s oral history…” It is shockingly intimate, Alexievich’s interviewees sharing their darkest traumas and deepest regrets. In their kitchens, at gravesites, each character tells the story of a nation abandoned by the Kremlin. Like much of Alexievich’s work, it is radical in its composition, challenging with its polyphony of distinctive, human voices the “official history” of a society that presented itself as homogeneous and monolithic—an achievement the Nobel committee recognized when it cited the Belorussian journalist for developing “a new kind of literary genre…a history of the soul.” Like her more recent The Unwomanly Face of War and Last Witnesses: An Oral History of the Children of World War II, Alexievich’s project is one of the most important accounts being produced today. –Emily Firetog, Deputy Editor Jane Mayer, Dark Money (2016) In addition to being an incredible work of reporting, Jane Mayer’s Dark Money is a historical document of what happened to America as a small group of plutocrats funded the rise of political candidates who espoused policies and beliefs that had been, until then, considered a part of the fringe right wing of the Republican Party. Mayer describes this group as “a small, rarefied group of hugely wealthy, archconservative families that for decades poured money, often with little public disclosure, into influencing how Americans thought and voted.” Mayer’s painstakingly reported work is a monumental achievement; she lays out, in as much detail as could possibly be available, the mechanisms that allowed this group to channel their wealth and power, with the help of federal law, to a set of institutions that aim to fight scientific advancement, justice-oriented movements, and climate change. In doing so, they have overhauled American politics. As Alan Ehrenhalt put it in a review of the book for The New York Times, she describes “a private political bank capable of bestowing unlimited amounts of money on favored candidates, and doing it with virtually no disclosure of its source.” The stakes here extend beyond American politics; Mayer points out that Koch money upholds some of the institutions most vigorously fighting climate activism and defending the fossil fuel industry. In 2017, she told the Los Angeles Times, “There are many things you can fix and you can bring back, and there are sort of cycles in American history and the pendulum swings back and forth, but there are things you can damage irreparably, and that’s what I’m worried about right this moment … And that’s why this particular book—because it’s about the money that is stopping this country from doing something useful on climate change.” –Corinne Segal, Senior Editor David France, How to Survive a Plague (2016) To call How to Survive a Plague extensive would be an understatement; France’s account of the epidemic’s earliest days is overwhelmingly generous, letting the reader experience those days, and everything that followed, from within the community that faced it first. France recounts the ways in which scientists and doctors first responded to the virus, tracing the evolution of that understanding from within a small circle to a broad cry for awareness and resources; meanwhile, he shows how a community of people fighting for their lives mobilized alternative systems of communication, education, and support while facing an almost inconceivable wall of barriers to that work. The importance of language in this fight is at the forefront here, from the scientific question of what to call the virus, to its reputation in popular culture as “gay cancer,” to the disagreements within activist groups about how to tell their stories to an unsympathetic world. This is an enraging history, one of various institutional failures, missed opportunities, hypocrisies, and acts of malice toward a community in crisis, motivated by hatred and horror of queer people and gay men in particular. But I felt equally enraged and in awe. This is a humbling history to read, especially if, like me, you come from a generation of queer people that has been accused of forgetting it. I’m grateful for France’s testimony; it won’t let any of us forget. –Corinne Segal, Senior Editor Andrés Reséndez, The Other Slavery (2016) Reséndez’s The Other Slavery is nothing short of an epic recalibration of American history, one that’s long overdue and badly needed in the present moment. The story of the assault on indigenous peoples in the Americas is perhaps well-known, but what’s less known is how many of those people were enslaved by colonizers, how that enslavement led to mass death, and how complicit the American legal system was in bringing that oppression about and sustaining it for years beyond the supposed emancipation in regions in which indigenous peoples were enslaved. This was not an isolated phenomenon. It extended from Caribbean plantations to Western mining interests. It was part and parcel of the European effort to settle the “new world” and was one of the driving motivations behind the earliest expeditions and colonies. Reséndez puts the number of indigenous enslaved between Columbus’s arrival and 1900 at somewhere between 2.5 and 5 million people. The institution took many forms, but reading through the legal obfuscation and drilling down into the archival record and first-hand accounts of the eras, Reséndez shows how slavery permeated the continents. Native tribes were not simply wiped out by disease, war, and brutal segregation. They were also worked—against their will, without pay, in mass numbers—to death. It was a sustained and organized enslavement. The Other Slavery also tells the story of uprising—communities that resisted, individuals who fought. It’s a complex and tragic story that required a skilled historian to bring into the contemporary consciousness. In addition to his skills as a historian and an investigator, Resendez is a skilled storyteller with a truly remarkable subject. This is historical nonfiction at its most important and most necessary. –Dwyer Murphy, CrimeReads Managing Editor Rebecca Traister, All the Single Ladies (2016) One night, facing a brief gap between plans with different people, I took Rebecca Traister’s All the Single Ladies to a bar. A few minutes after I ordered, deep in Traister’s incredible, extensive history of single women in America, a server came over to offer me another, more isolated seat at the end of the bar, “so you don’t feel embarrassed about being alone,” she said, quietly. I assured her I was okay, trying not to laugh. She was just so worried. I turned back to my book to find Traister describing this kind of cultural distress—a woman, alone, in public?!—at a new generation of unmarried adult women, who are more autonomous and numerous today than ever before. Far from marking a crisis in the social order, Traister writes, this shift “was in fact a new order … women’s paths were increasingly marked with options, off-ramps, variations on what had historically been a very constrained theme.” She examines the history of unmarried women as a social and political force, including the activists who devoted their lives to establishing a greater range of educational, familial, and economic choices for women, with particular attention to the ways in which that history is also one of racial and economic justice in the US. Traister also highlights the networks of social support that women have created in order to survive patriarchy and establish lifestyles that did not depend on it; intimacy and communication among unmarried women, she shows, were the backbone of activist and reform movements that successfully challenged the dominant order. The book draws on interviews from dozens of women of varying backgrounds, and their firsthand accounts are a portrait of life amid a historic shift toward female autonomy. Their stories, and Traister’s analysis, make it clear that even as options for many women are expanding, those options are not equally available or beneficial to all women. This is a stunning reckoning with the state of women’s independence and the policies that still seek to curtail it. –Corinne Segal, Senior Editor Caroline Fraser, Prairie Fires (2017) Prairie Fires, Caroline Fraser’s Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Critics Circle Award-winning biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder is not just a painstakingly researched and lyrically realized account of how the Little House on the Prairie author decanted the poverty and precarity of her homesteader family’s existence into narratives of self-reliance and perseverance—although it is that—it is also a meditation on the human need “to transform the raw materials of the past into art.” Full disclosure, I did not read the Little House on the Prairie books as a child and have no sentimental attachment to Laura, Pa or Ma. But in looking at the life behind the books, Wilder emerges as a tenacious, sometimes fragile figure, and as a literary operator of uncommon nous and self-awareness. Drawing on unpublished manuscripts, letters, diaries, and land and financial records, Prairie Fires has all the essentials of a great history book. Most importantly, Fraser’s great skill is in pulling back the veils of mythology that have enshrouded her subject and the era her works helped to define, enabling us to see both the real people and the myths themselves with fresh, critical eyes. There is no romanticizing of the Frontier, and a very real understanding of the sentimentality and bias of an overtly racist understanding of “westward expansion.” It is a remarkable book. –Emily Firetog, Deputy Editor David W. Blight, Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom (2018) In 2017, monuments commemorating heroes of the Confederacy were being debated, defaced and toppled throughout the United States. That same year, months before President Trump signed a law creating a commission to plan for the bicentennial of Frederick Douglass’ birth, he infamously seemed to suggest that Douglass was still around, doing an “amazing job” and “getting recognized more and more.” The irony was hard to miss: it was easy to eulogize a past that was not comprehensively, nor even fundamentally understood. One achievement of historian David Blight’s monumental study of the former slave turned abolitionist is the thoroughness with which it examines the man’s development across three autobiographies he produced in the span of ten years. The popular image of Douglass has long been that of a bushy-haired man affixed to Abraham Lincoln’s side, delivering rousing speeches on abolition and the sins of slavery. And while there is basic truth to that, Blight sets out to fill the gaps in public understanding, guiding readers from the Maryland slave plantation where Douglass was born to the many stops along his European speech circuit, when he established himself as one of the world’s most recognizable opponents of slavery. The vague circumstances of Douglass’ birth (he was born to an enslaved woman and a white man who may also have been his owner) later compelled him to create his own life narratives, a task that he accomplished both in writing and oratory. Blight’s engagement with Douglass’ writing also marks the biography as a triumph of public-facing textual criticism. For decades before Prophet of Freedom astonished critics and general readers, Blight had been making his name as one of the leading Douglass scholars in the US. Blight’s work was not historical revisionism, but rather a considered analysis of a man who relied on actions as much as words. Many may be surprised to learn, for example, what a vocal supporter Douglass was of the Civil War and violence as a necessary means to dismantle the system that had nearly destroyed him. Prophet of Freedom feels as definitive as a Robert Fagles translation of Homer—we hope it’s not the final word, though it will take quite the successor to produce a worthwhile follow-up. –Aaron Robertson, Assistant Editor Robert Macfarlane, Underland (2019) One hesitates to label any book by a living writer his “magnum opus” but Macfarlane’s Underland—a deeply ambitious work that somehow exceeds the boundaries it sets for itself—reads as offertory and elegy both, finding wonder in the world even as we mourn its destruction by our own hand. If you’re unfamiliar with its project, as the name would suggest, Underland is an exploration of the world beneath our feet, from the legendary catacombs of Paris to the ancient caveways of Somerset, from the hyperborean coasts of far Norway to the mephitic karst of the Slovenian-Italian borderlands. Macfarlane has always been a generous guide in his wanderings, the glint of his erudition softened as if through the welcoming haze of a fireside yarn down the pub. Even as he considers all we have wrought upon the earth, squeezing himself into the darker chambers of human creation—our mass graves, our toxic tombs—Macfarlane never succumbs to pessimism, finding instead in the contemplation of deep time a path to humility. This is an epochal work, as deep and resonant as its subject matter, and would represent for any writer the achievement of a lifetime. –Jonny Diamond, Editor in Chief Patrick Radden Keefe, Say Nothing: A True History of Memory and Murder in Northern Ireland (2019) Attempting, in a single volume, to cover the scale and complexity of the Northern Ireland Troubles—a bloody and protracted political and ethno-nationalist conflict that came to dominate Anglo-Irish relations for over three decades—while also conveying a sense of the tortured humanity and mercurial motivations of some of its most influential and emblematic individual players and investigating one of the most notorious unsolved atrocities of the period, is, well, a herculean task that most writers would never consider attempting. Thankfully, investigative journalist Patrick Radden Keefe (whose 2015 New Yorker article on Gerry Adams, “Where the Bodies Are Buried”, is a searing precursor to Say Nothing) is not most writers. His mesmerizing account, both panoramically sweeping and achingly intimate, uses the disappearance and murder of widowed mother of ten Jean McConville in Belfast in 1972 as a fulcrum, around which the labyrinthine wider narrative of the Troubles can turn. The book, while meticulously researched and reported (Radden Keefe interviewed over one hundred different sources, painstakingly sorting through conflicting and corroborating accounts), also employs a novelistic structure and flair that in less skilled hands could feel exploitative, but here serves only to deepen our understanding of both the historical events and the complex personalities of ultimately tragic figures like Dolours Price, Brendan Hughes, and McConville herself—players in an attritional drama who have all too often been reduced to the status of monster or martyr. Once you’ve caught your breath, what you’ll be left with by the close of this revelatory hybrid work is a deep and abiding feeling of sorrow, which is exactly as it should be. –Dan Sheehan, BookMarks Editor *** The following books were just barely nudged out of the top ten, but we (or at least one of us) couldn’t let them pass without comment. Maggie Nelson, The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning (2011) Maggie Nelson, if evaluated from a first glance at her authored works, may appear to be a paradox. That the author of Bluets, a moving lyric essay exploring personal suffering through the color blue, also wrote The Red Parts, an autobiographical account of the trial of her aunt’s murderer, may seem surprising. Not that any person cannot and does not contain multitudes but the two aesthetics may seem diametrically opposed until one looks at The Art of Cruelty and understands Nelson’s fascination with art on the one hand, and violence on the other. Nelson hashes out the intersection of the two across multiple essays. “One of this book’s charges,” she writes, “is to figure out how one might differentiate between works of art whose employment of cruelty seems to me worthwhile (for lack of a better word), and those that strike me as redundant, in bad faith, or simply despicable.” The Art of Cruelty is a self-proclaimed diagram of recent art and culture and does not promise to take sides, to deliver ethical or aesthetic claims masquerading as some declarative truth on the matter. So cruelty is very much approached from Nelson’s poetic sensibility, with a degree of nuance, and an attitude of reflection and curiosity but also one of a certain distance so that all the emotions—anger, disgust, discomfort, thrill etc.—can be viewed as part of a whole rather than in isolation. Cruelty, counterbalanced with compassion—especially with reference to Buddhism—is certainly not hailed by Nelson as a cause for celebration but worthy of rumination and analysis so that it is not employed tacitly and without recourse. No book could ever, I think, provide an exhaustive evaluation of this topic, nor is Nelson’s approach that of a philosopher or art-historian looking to propose a theory. Nevertheless, she dexterously, and creatively, manages to hold a mirror to our culture’s fascination with cruelty and invites us to reflect on our personal reasons for indulging it. –Eleni Theodoropoulos, Editorial Fellow Óscar Martínez, The Beast (2013) For over a decade, Martínez has been a witness and a chronicler of the ground-level effects of the war on drugs, reporting from across Latin America with a special focus on Central America and his home country of El Salvador, where more recently he’s been writing about the bloody culture of MS-13 and other narco-cliques that have expanded their power. Before that, he was charting the plight of migrants running the terrible gauntlet across borders and through narco-controlled territories. Martínez rode the dreaded train known as “The Beast” and collected the stories of those traveling north on this perilous journey. While crime isn’t strictly the focus of the book, Martínez looks at the direct effects of mass crime at a regional/global level, as well as the outlaw communities springing up to prey on the vulnerable. The subject matter is dark, but Martínez writes with the terrible, piercing clarity of a Cormac McCarthy. The Beast is a dispatch from a nearly lawless land, where families struggle and suffer, narcos get richer, violence spreads, the drugs head north, the guns head south, and so it goes on. Forget the rhetoric, the politics, and the propaganda. The Beast is the real story of the drug war. “Where can you steer clear of bandits?” Martínez asks. “Where do the drugs go over? Where can you avoid getting kidnapped by the narcos? Where is there a spot left with no wall, no robbers, and no narcos? Nobody has been able to answer this last question.” To call this book prescient disregards how long our problems have persisted, and how long we’ve managed to ignore the chaos our country’s policies have created. –Dwyer Murphy, CrimeReads Managing Editor Matthew Desmond, Evicted (2016) There are more evictions happening now, per capita, in the United States, than there were during the Great Depression. As it turns out, there’s a lot of money to be made from poverty—not, course, for those who need it, but for the landlords who orchestrate the kind of housing turnover that traps people in deeper and longer cycles of debt. Poverty in America has long been conflated with moral failure, but as Matthew Desmond’s Evicted illustrates in great detail, if there’s any moral failing happening, it’s with those who would take advantage of such systemic and generational iniquities. Desmond, a Princeton-trained sociologist and MacArthur fellow, went to see for himself in 2008, at the height (depths?) of the housing crisis, undertaking a year-long study of eight Milwaukee-area families, spending six months in a mobile home and another six months in a rooming house, creating much more than a journalist’s snapshot of life as an American renter. With Evicted, Desmond has widened our perspective on cyclical hardship and its disproportionate impact on people of color, illustrating (with neither the leering nor the condescension of so much reporting on the poor) that eviction is more often a cause of poverty than a symptom. –Jonny Diamond, Editor in Chief Yuri Slezkine, The House of Government (2017) I recommend this book to those who wish to demonstrate their physical strength in public and show off that they can read a giant Russian history book one-handed, but also I recommend this book to everyone, ever, in the world, because it’s so fantastic. At first glance, this is a lengthy tome inspired by a Tolstoyan approach to lyrical history, ostensibly concerned with the history of an apartment complex that was home to much of the early Soviet elite—and was subsequently depopulated by Stalinist purges. Within this apartment building, however, lay the central irony of the revolution—those who believed deeply enough in an idealistic system to embrace violent, repressive means of revolution, were soon enough subjected to those same mechanisms of repression. From this central irony, Slezkine, always concerned with how the micro fits into the macro, zooms out to look at the Soviets as just another bunch of millenarians (and to understand what an insult that is, you’ll have to pick up the book). –Molly Odintz, CrimeReads Associate Editor Richard Lloyd Parry, Ghosts of the Tsunami (2017) Richard Lloyd Parry, Tokyo bureau chief for The Times of London, begins his book by describing the way his office building in Tokyo shook in March 2011 when an earthquake hit the city. He called his family and checked that they were OK and then walked through the streets to see the damage. Used to quakes, this one seemed bad, but not the worst he had lived through. Less than an hour after the earthquake, though, a tsunami killed an estimated 18,500 Japanese men, women and children. In Ghosts, Parry focuses his story on Okawa, a tiny costal village where an entire school and 74 children washed away. In somewhat fragmentary threads, Parry explores the families that survived, the ghosts that follow them, and the landscape of a place that will never be the same. In localizing the story in one community, Parry is able to clearly define the painfully individual fallout of a national tragedy. It is emotionally draining to read, which is a warning I give everyone when I recommend the book (which I do constantly). But it is one of my favorite books and I would be remiss not to include in our list for best nonfiction of the decade. –Emily Firetog, Deputy Editor Jenny Odell, How to Do Nothing (2019) I grew up in a town named after a body of water—Rye Brook—and went to a high school also named after that body of water—Blind Brook—but growing up, no one seemed to actually know where the brook was, at least none of the kids. We didn’t talk about it, except to note its hiddenness—it’s behind the school, someone once told me, while another person said it was behind that hotel, behind the park, behind the airport. Recently, I decided to find it on a map and noticed, for the first time, that the brook, far from being a hidden thing, defines the majority of Rye Brook’s borders. Recognizing this foundational feature of my hometown for the first time, more than a decade after I left it, was disorienting, completely re-rendering my perception of the place I thought I knew best. My search that day came after I read Jenny Odell’s account of her similar awakening to the ecology of her hometown, Cupertino, and all the features in or around it: Calabazas Creek, nearby mountains, and the San Francisco Bay. “How could I have not noticed the shape of the place I lived?” she writes, and, later, describing her own disorientation in a way that resonates with my own, added, “Nothing is so simultaneously familiar and alien as that which has been present all along.” One way of describing the premise of this book is to say “that which has been present all along” is reality itself: each of us, from day to day, living our physical lives in a physical place. But in 2019, life doesn’t usually feel like that; it feels like an onslaught of forces that aim to turn our attention away from this reality and monetize it in a shapeless virtual space. In that environment, Odell writes, doing “nothing,” or finding any way to disrupt the capitalistic drive to monetize, is an act of political resistance, even as she recognizes that not everyone has the economic security or social capital to opt out. “Just because this right is denied to many people doesn’t make it any less of a right or any less important,” she writes. This book also draws on philosophy, utopian movements, and labor organizing to describe how various people have attempted to “do nothing” in their own way throughout history, with an outlook that is grounded in ecology. (And bird watching!) Ultimately, Odell writes, the act of doing nothing creates space for the kind of contemplation and reflection that is essential to activism and to sustaining life. I experienced this book as a space of sanity and as a beginning; I hope you do, too. –Corinne Segal, Senior Editor *** Honorable Mentions A selection of other books that we seriously considered for both lists—just to be extra about it (and because decisions are hard). Peter Hessler, Country Driving (2010) · Ron Chernow, Washington: A Life (2010) · Barbara Demick, Nothing to Envy (2010) · Marina Warner, Stranger Magic (2012) · Jon Meacham, Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power (2012) · Oscar Martinez, The Beast (2013) · Katherine Boo, Behind the Beautiful Forevers (2013) · Mary Ruefle, Madness, Rack, and Honey (2013) · David Epstein, The Sports Gene (2013) · Sheri Fink, Five Days at Memorial (2013) · David Finkel, Thank You for Your Service (2013) · George Packer, The Unwinding (2013) · Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything (2013) · Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, An Indigenous People’s History of the United States (2014) · Sarah Ruhl, 100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write (2014) · Olivia Laing, The Trip to Echo Spring (2014) · Hermione Lee, Penelope Fitzgerald (2014) · Mary Beard, SPQR (2015) · Sam Quinones, Dreamland (2015) · Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped From the Beginning (2016) · Ruth Franklin, Shirley Jackson (2016) · Arlie Russell

breaks and two central characters with the same name. But this Norwegian masterpiece, by the winner of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature, is the kind of soul-cleansing work that seems to silence the cacophony of the modern world — a pair of noise-canceling headphones in book form. The narrator, a painter named Asle, drives out to visit his doppelgänger, Asle, an ailing alcoholic. Then the narrator takes a boat ride to have Christmas dinner with some friends. That, more or less, is the plot. But throughout, Fosse's searching reflections on God, art and death are at once haunting and deeply comforting. 77 Tayari Jones 2018 Life changes in an instant for Celestial and Roy, the young Black newlyweds at the beating, uncomfortably realistic heart of Jones's fourth novel. On a mostly ordinary night, during a hotel stay near his Louisiana hometown, Roy is accused of rape. He is then swiftly and wrongfully convicted and sentenced to 12 years in prison. The couple's complicated future unfolds, often in letters, across two worlds. The stain of racism covers both places. 76 Gabrielle Zevin 2022 The title is Shakespeare; the terrain, more or less, is video games. Neither of those bare facts telegraphs the emotional and narrative breadth of Zevin's breakout novel, her fifth for adults. As the childhood friendship between two future game-makers blooms into a rich creative collaboration and, later, alienation, the book becomes a dazzling disquisition on art, ambition and the endurance of platonic love. 75 74 Elizabeth Strout 2008 When this novel-in-stories won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2009, it was a victory for crotchety, unapologetic women everywhere, especially ones who weren't, as Olive herself might have put it, spring chickens. The patron saint of plain-spokenness — and the titular character of Strout's 13 tales — is a long-married Mainer with regrets, hopes and a lobster boat's worth of quiet empathy. Her small-town travails instantly became stand-ins for something much bigger, even universal. 73 Robert Caro 2012 The fourth volume of Caro's epic chronicle of Lyndon Johnson's life and times is a political biography elevated to the level of great literature. His L.B.J. is a figure of Shakespearean magnitude, whose sudden ascension from the abject humiliations of the vice presidency to the summit of political power is a turn of fortune worthy of a Greek myth. Caro makes you feel the shock of J.F.K.'s assassination, and brings you inside Johnson's head on the blood-drenched day when his lifelong dream finally comes true. It's an astonishing and unforgettable book. — Tom Perrotta, author of "The Leftovers" 72 Svetlana Alexievich; translated by Bela Shayevich 2016 Of all the 20th century's grand failed experiments, few came to more inglorious ends than the aspiring empire known, for a scant seven decades, as the U.S.S.R. The death of the dream of Communism reverberates through the Nobel-winning Alexievich's oral history, and her unflinching portrait of the people who survived the Soviet state (or didn't) — ex-prisoners, Communist Party officials, ordinary citizens of all stripes — makes for an excoriating, eye-opening read. 71 Tove Ditlevsen; translated by Tiina Nunnally and Michael Favala Goldman 2021 Ditlevsen's memoirs were first published in Denmark in the 1960s and '70s, but most English-language readers didn't encounter them until they appeared in a single translated volume more than five decades later. The books detail Ditlevsen's hardscrabble childhood, her flourishing early career as a poet and her catastrophic addictions, which left her wedded to a psychotic doctor and hopelessly dependent on opioids by her 30s. But her writing, however dire her circumstances, projects a breathtaking clarity and candidness, and it nails what is so inexplicable about human nature. 70 Edward P. Jones 2006 Jones's follow-up to his Pulitzer-anointed historical novel, "The Known World," forsakes a single narrative for 14 interconnected stories, disparate in both direction and tone. His tales of 20th-century Black life in and around Washington, D.C., are haunted by cumulative loss and touched, at times, by dark magical realism — one character meets the Devil himself in a Safeway parking lot — but girded too by loveliness, and something like hope. 69 Michelle Alexander 2010 One year into Barack Obama's first presidential term, Alexander, a civil rights attorney and former Supreme Court clerk, peeled back the hopey-changey scrim of early-aughts America to reveal the systematic legal prejudice that still endures in a country whose biggest lie might be "with liberty and justice for all." In doing so, her book managed to do what the most urgent nonfiction aims for but rarely achieves: change hearts, minds and even public policy. 68 Sigrid Nunez 2018 After suffering the loss of an old friend and adopting his Great Dane, the book's heroine muses on death, friendship, and the gifts and burdens of a literary life. Out of these fragments a philosophy of grief springs like a rabbit out of a hat; Nunez is a magician. — Ada Calhoun, author of "Also a Poet: Frank O'Hara, My Father, and Me" 67 66 Justin Torres 2011 The hummingbird weight of this novella — it barely tops 130 pages — belies the cherry-bomb impact of its prose. Tracing the coming-of-age of three mixed-race brothers in a derelict upstate New York town, Torres writes in the incantatory royal we of a sort of sibling wolfpack, each boy buffeted by their parents' obscure grown-up traumas and their own enduring (if not quite unshakable) bonds. 65 Philip Roth 2004 What if, in the 1940 presidential election, Charles Lindbergh — aviation hero, America-firster and Nazi sympathizer — had defeated Franklin Roosevelt? Specifically, what would have happened to Philip Roth, the younger son of a middle-class Jewish family in Newark, N.J.? From those counterfactual questions, the adult Roth spun a tour de force of memory and history. Ever since the 2016 election his imaginary American past has pulled closer and closer to present-day reality. — A.O. Scott 64 Rebecca Makkai 2018 It's mid-1980s Chicago, and young men — beautiful, recalcitrant boys, full of promise and pure life force — are dying, felled by a strange virus. Makkai's recounting of a circle of friends who die one by one, interspersed with a circa-2015 Parisian subplot, is indubitably an AIDS story, but one that skirts po-faced solemnity and cliché at nearly every turn: a bighearted, deeply generous book whose resonance echoes across decades of loss and liberation. 63 Mary Gaitskill 2005 Set primarily in a 1980s New York crackling with brittle glamour and real menace, "Veronica" is, on the face of it, the story of two very different women — the fragile former model Alison and the older, harder Veronica, fueled by fury and frustrated intelligence. It's a fearless, lacerating book, scornful of pieties and with innate respect for the reader's intelligence and adult judgment. 62 Ben Lerner 2014 How closely does Ben Lerner, the very clever author of "10:04," overlap with its unnamed narrator, himself a poet-novelist who bears a remarkable resemblance to the man pictured on its biography page? Definitive answers are scant in this metaphysical turducken of a novel, which is nominally about the attempts of a Brooklyn author, burdened with a hefty publishing advance, to finish his second book. But the delights of Lerner's shimmering self-reflexive prose, lightly dusted with photographs and illustrations, are endless. 61 60 59 Jeffrey Eugenides 2002 Years before pronouns became the stuff of dinner-table debates and email signatures, "Middlesex" offered the singular gift of an intersex hero — "sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome!" — whose otherwise fairly ordinary Midwestern life becomes a radiant lens on recent history, from the burning of Smyrna to the plush suburbia of midcentury Grosse Pointe, Mich. When the teenage Calliope, born to doting Greek American parents, learns that she is not in fact a budding young lesbian but biologically male, it's less science than assiduously buried family secrets that tell the improbable, remarkable tale. 58 Hua Hsu 2022 An unlikely college friendship — Ken loves preppy polo shirts and Pearl Jam, Hua prefers Xeroxed zines and Pavement — blossoms in 1990s Berkeley, then is abruptly fissured by Ken's murder in a random carjacking. Around those bare facts, Hsu's understated memoir builds a glimmering fortress of memory in which youth and identity live alongside terrible, senseless loss. 57 Barbara Ehrenreich 2001 Waitress, hotel maid, cleaning woman, retail clerk: Ehrenreich didn't just report on these low-wage jobs; she actually worked them, trying to construct a life around merciless managers and wildly unpredictable schedules, while also getting paid a pittance for it. Through it all, Ehrenreich combined a profound sense of moral outrage with self-deprecating candor and bone-dry wit. — Jennifer Szalai, nonfiction book critic for The Times 56 Rachel Kushner 2013 Motorcycle racing across the arid salt flats of Utah; art-star posturing in the downtown demimonde of 1970s New York; anarchist punk collectives and dappled villas in Italy: It's all connected (if hardly contained) in Kushner's brash, elastic chronicle of a would-be artist nicknamed Reno whose lust for experience often outstrips both sense and sentiment. The book's ambitions rise to meet her, a churning bedazzlement of a novel whose unruly engine thrums and roars. 55 Lawrence Wright 2006 What happened in New York City one incongruously sunny morning in September was never, of course, the product of some spontaneous plan. Wright's meticulous history operates as a sort of panopticon on the events leading up to that fateful day, spanning more than five decades and a geopolitical guest list that includes everyone from the counterterrorism chief of the F.B.I. to the anonymous foot soldiers of Al Qaeda. 54 George Saunders 2013 For all of their linguistic invention and anarchic glee, Saunders's stories are held together by a strict understanding of the form and its requirements. Take plot: In "Tenth of December," his fourth and best collection, readers will encounter an abduction, a rape, a chemically induced suicide, the suppressed rage of a milquetoast or two, a veteran's post-traumatic impulse to burn down his mother's house — all of it buffeted by gusts of such merriment and tender regard and daffy good cheer that you realize only in retrospect how dark these morality tales really are. 53 52 51 Kate Atkinson 2013 Can we get life "right"? Are there choices that would lead, finally, to justice or happiness or save us from pain? Atkinson wrestles with these questions in her brilliant "Life After Life" — a historical novel, a speculative novel, a tale of time travel, a moving portrait of life before, during and in the aftermath of war. It gobbles up genres and blends them together until they become a single, seamless work of art. I love this goddamn book. — Victor LaValle, author of "Lone Women" 50 49 48 Marjane Satrapi 2003 Drawn in stark black-and-white panels, Satrapi's graphic novel is a moving account of her early life in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and her formative years abroad in Europe. The first of its two parts details the impacts of war and theocracy on both her family and her community: torture, death on the battlefield, constant raids, supply shortages and a growing black market. Part 2 chronicles her rebellious, traumatic years as a teenager in Vienna, as well as her return to a depressingly restrictive Tehran. Devastating — but also formally inventive, inspiring and often funny — "Persepolis" is a model of visual storytelling and personal narrative. 47 46 Donna Tartt 2013 For a time, it seemed as if Tartt's vaunted 1992 debut, "The Secret History," might be her only legacy, a once-in-a-career comet zinging across the literary sky. Then, more than a decade after the coolish reception to her 2002 follow-up, "The Little Friend," came "The Goldfinch" — a coming-of-age novel as narratively rich and riveting as the little bird in the Dutch painting it takes its title from is small and humble. That 13-year-old Theo Decker survives the museum bombing that kills his mother is a minor miracle; the tiny, priceless souvenir he inadvertently grabs from the rubble becomes both a talisman and an albatross in this heady, haunted symphony of a novel. 45 Maggie Nelson 2015 Call it a memoir if you must, but this is a book about the necessity — and also the thrill, the terror, the risk and reward — of defying categories. Nelson is a poet and critic, well versed in pop culture and cultural theory. The text she interprets here is her own body. An account of her pregnancy, her relationship with the artist Harry Dodge and the early stages of motherhood, "The Argonauts" explores queer identity, gender politics and the meaning of family. What makes Nelson such a valuable writer is her willingness to follow the sometimes contradictory rhythms of her own thinking in prose that is sharp, supple and disarmingly heartfelt. — A.O. Scott 44 N.K. Jemisin 2015 "The Fifth Season" weaves its story in polyphonic voice, utilizing a clever story structure to move deftly through generational time. Jemisin delivers this bit of high craft in a fresh, unstuffy voice — something rare in high fantasy, which can take its Tolkien roots too seriously. From its heartbreaking opening (a mother's murdered child) to its shattering conclusion, Jemisin shows the power of what good fantasy fiction can do. "The Fifth Season" explores loss, grief and personhood on an intimate level. But it also takes on themes of discrimination, human breeding and ecological collapse with an unflinching eye and a particular nuance. Jemisin weaves a world both horrifyingly familiar and unsettlingly alien. — Rebecca Roanhorse, author of "Mirrored Heavens" 43 Tony Judt 2005 By the time this book was published in 2005, there had already been innumerable volumes covering Europe's history since the end of World War II. Yet none of them were quite like Judt's: commanding and capacious, yet also attentive to those stubborn details that are so resistant to abstract theories and seductive myths. The writing, like the thinking, is clear, direct and vivid. And even as Judt was ruthless when reflecting on Europe's past, he maintained a sense of contingency throughout, never succumbing to the comfortable certainty of despair. — Jennifer Szalai 42 Marlon James 2014 "Brief"? For a work spanning nearly 700 pages, that word is, at best, a winky misdirection. To skip even a paragraph, though, would be to forgo the vertiginous pleasures of James's semi-historical novel, in which the attempted assassination of an unnamed reggae superstar who strongly resembles Bob Marley collides with C.I.A. conspiracy, international drug cartels and the vibrant, violent Technicolor of post-independence Jamaica. 41 40 39 Jennifer Egan 2010 In the good old pre-digital days, artists used to cram 15 or 20 two-and-a-half-minute songs onto a single vinyl LP. Egan accomplished a similar feat of compression in this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, a compact, chronologically splintered rock opera with (as they say nowadays) no skips. The 13 linked stories jump from past to present to future while reshuffling a handful of vivid characters. The themes are mighty but the mood is funny, wistful and intimate, as startling and familiar as your favorite pop album. — A.O. Scott 38 Roberto Bolaño; translated by Natasha Wimmer 2007 "The Savage Detectives" is brash, hilarious, beautiful, moving. It's also over 600 pages long, which is why I know that my memory of reading it in a single sitting is definitely not true. Still, the fact that it feels that way is telling. I was not the same writer I'd been before reading it, not the same person. Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, the wayward poets whose youth is chronicled in "Detectives," became personal heroes, and everything I've written since has been shaped by Bolaño's masterpiece. — Daniel Alarcón, author of "At Night We Walk in Circles" 37 Annie Ernaux; translated by Alison L. Strayer 2018 Spanning decades, this is an outlier in Ernaux's oeuvre; unlike her other books, with their tight close-ups on moments in her life, here such intimacies are embedded in the larger sweep of social history. She moves between the chorus of conventional wisdom and the specifics of her own experiences, showing how even an artist with such a singular vision could recognize herself as a creature of her cohort and her culture. Most moving to me is how she begins and ends by listing images she can still recall — a merry-go-round in the park; graffiti in a restroom — that have been inscribed into her memory, yet are ultimately ephemeral. — Jennifer Szalai 36 Ta-Nehisi Coates 2015 Framed, like James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," as both instruction and warning to a young relative on "how one should live within a Black body," Coates's book-length letter to his 15-year-old son lands like forked lightning. In pages suffused with both fury and tenderness, his memoir-manifesto delineates a world in which the political remains mortally, maddeningly inseparable from the personal. 35 34 Claudia Rankine 2014 "I, too, am America," Langston Hughes wrote, and with "Citizen" Rankine stakes the same claim, as ambivalently and as defiantly as Hughes did. This collection — which appeared two years after Trayvon Martin's death, and pointedly displays a hoodie on its cover like the one Martin wore when he was killed — lays out a damning indictment of American racism through a mix of free verse, essayistic prose poems and visual art; a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist in both poetry and criticism (the first book ever nominated in two categories), it took home the prize in poetry in a deserving recognition of Rankine's subtle, supple literary gifts. 33 Jesmyn Ward 2011 As Hurricane Katrina bears down on the already battered bayou town of Bois Sauvage, Miss., a motherless 15-year-old girl named Esch, newly pregnant with a baby of her own, stands in the eye of numerous storms she can't control: her father's drinking, her brothers' restlessness, an older boy's easy dismissal of her love. There's a biblical force to Ward's prose, so swirling and heady it feels like a summoning. 32 Alan Hollinghurst 2004 Oh, to be the live-in houseguest of a wealthy friend! And to find, as Hollinghurst's young middle-class hero does in early-1980s London, that a whole intoxicating world of heedless privilege and sexual awakening awaits. As the timeline implies, though, the specter of AIDS looms not far behind, perched like a gargoyle amid glittering evocations of cocaine and Henry James. Lust, money, literature, power: Rarely has a novel made it all seem so gorgeous, and so annihilating. 31 Zadie Smith 2000 "Full stories are as rare as honesty," one character confides in "White Teeth," though Smith's debut novel, in all its chaotic, prismatic glory, does its level best to try. As her bravura book unfurls, its central narrative of a friendship between a white Londoner and a Bengali Muslim seems to divide and regenerate like starfish limbs; and so, in one stroke, a literary supernova was born. 30 29 Helen DeWitt 2000 Sibylla, an American expat in Britain, is a brilliant scholar: omnivore, polyglot, interdisciplinary theorist — all of it. Her young son, Ludo, is a hothouse prodigy, mastering the "Odyssey" and Japanese grammar, fixated on the films of Akira Kurosawa. Two questions arise: 1) Who is the real genius? 2) Who is Ludo's father? Ludo's search for the answer to No. 2 propels the plot of this funny, cruel, compassionate, typographically bananas novel. I won't spoil anything, except to say that the answer to No. 1 is Helen DeWitt. — A.O. Scott 28 David Mitchell 2004 Mitchell's almost comically ambitious novel is indeed a kind of cumulus: a wild and woolly condensation of ideas, styles and far-flung milieus whose only true commonality is the reincarnated soul at its center. The book's six nesting narratives — from 1850s New Zealand through 1930s Belgium, groovy California, recent-ish England, dystopian Korea and Hawaii — also often feel like a postmodern puzzle-box that whirls and clicks as its great world(s) spin, throwing off sparks of pulp, philosophy and fervid humanism. 27 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie 2013 This is a love story — but what a love story! Crisscrossing continents, families and recent decades, "Americanah" centers on a Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who discovers what it means to be Black by immigrating to the United States, and acquires boutique celebrity blogging about it. (In the sequel, she'd have a Substack.) Ifemelu's entanglements with various men undergird a rich and rough tapestry of life in Barack Obama's America and beyond. And Adichie's sustained examination of absurd social rituals — like the painful relaxation of professionally "unacceptable" hair, for example — is revolutionary. — Alexandra Jacobs 26 25 Adrian Nicole LeBlanc 2003 More than 20 years after it was published, "Random Family" still remains unmatched in depth and power and grace. A profound, achingly beautiful work of narrative nonfiction, it is the standard-bearer of embedded reportage. LeBlanc gave her all to this book, writing about people experiencing deep hardship in their full, lush humanity. — Matthew Desmond, author of "Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City" 24 Richard Powers 2018 We may never see a poem as lovely as a tree, but a novel about trees — they are both the stealth protagonists and the beating, fine-grained heart of this strange, marvelous book — becomes its own kind of poetry, biology lesson and impassioned environmental polemic in Powers's hands. To know that our botanical friends are capable of communication and sacrifice, sex and memory, is mind-altering. It is also, you might say, credit overdue: Without wood pulp, after all, what would the books we love be made of? 23 Alice Munro 2001 Munro's stories apply pointillistic detail and scrupulous psychological insight to render their characters' lives in full, at lengths that test the boundaries of the term "short fiction." (Only one story in this book is below 30 pages, and the longest is over 50.) The collection touches on many of Munro's lifelong themes — family secrets, sudden reversals of fortune, sexual tensions and the unreliability of memory — culminating in a standout story about a man confronting his senile wife's attachment to a fellow resident at her nursing home. 22 Katherine Boo 2012 If the smash movie "Slumdog Millionaire" gave the world a feel-good story of transcending caste in India via pluck and sheer improbable luck, Boo's nonfiction exploration of several interconnected lives on the squalid outskirts of Mumbai is its sobering, necessary corrective. The casual violence and perfidy she finds there is staggering; the poverty and disease, beyond bleak. In place of triumph-of-the-human-spirit bromides, though, what the book delivers is its own kind of cinema, harsh and true. 21 Matthew Desmond 2016 Like Barbara Ehrenreich or Michelle Alexander, Desmond has a knack for crystallizing the ills of a patently unequal America — here it's the housing crisis, as told through eight Milwaukee families — in clear, imperative terms. If reading his nightmarish exposé of a system in which race and poverty are shamelessly weaponized and eviction costs less than accountability feels like outrage fuel, it's prescriptive, too; to look away would be its own kind of crime. 20 19 Patrick Radden Keefe 2019 "Say Nothing" is an amazing accomplishment — a definitive, impeccably researched history of the Troubles, a grim, gripping thriller, an illuminating portrait of extraordinary people who did unspeakable things, driven by what they saw as the justness of their cause. Those of us who lived in the U.K. in the last three decades of the 20th century know the names and the events — we were all affected, in some way or another, by the bombs, the bomb threats, the assassinations and attempted assassinations. What we didn't know was what it felt like to be on the inside of a particularly bleak period of history. This book is, I think, unquestionably one of the greatest literary achievements of the 21st century. — Nick Hornby, author of "High Fidelity" 18 George Saunders 2017 A father mourns his young son, dead of typhoid; a president mourns his country riven by civil war. In Saunders's indelible portrait, set in a graveyard populated by garrulous spirits, these images collide and coalesce, transforming Lincoln's private grief — his 11-year-old boy, Willie, died in the White House in 1862 — into a nation's, a polyphony of voices and stories. The only novel to date by a writer revered for his satirical short stories, this book marks less a change of course than a foregrounding of what has distinguished his work all along — a generosity of spirit, an ear acutely tuned to human suffering. 17 Paul Beatty 2015 Part of this wild satire on matters racial, post-racial, maybe-racial and Definitely Not Racial in American life concerns a group known as the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. One of them has produced an expurgated edition of an American classic titled "The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protégé, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit." Beatty's method is the exact opposite: In his hands, everything sacred is profaned, from the Supreme Court to the Little Rascals. "The Sellout" is explosively funny and not a little bit dangerous: an incendiary device disguised as a whoopee cushion, or maybe vice versa. — A.O. Scott 16 Michael Chabon 2000 Set during the first heyday of the American comic book industry, from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, Chabon's exuberant epic centers on the Brooklyn-raised Sammy Clay and his Czech immigrant cousin, Joe Kavalier, who together pour their hopes and fears into a successful comic series even as life delivers them some nearly unbearable tragedies. Besotted with language and brimming with pop culture, political relevance and bravura storytelling, the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2001. 15 Min Jin Lee 2017 "History has failed us, but no matter." So begins Lee's novel, the rich and roiling chronicle of a Korean family passing through four generations of war, colonization and personal strife. There are slick mobsters and disabled fishermen, forbidden loves and secret losses. And of course, pachinko, the pinball-ish game whose popularity often supplies a financial lifeline for the book's characters — gamblers at life like all of us, if hardly guaranteed a win. 14 Rachel Cusk 2015 This novel is the first and best in Cusk's philosophical, unsettling and semi-autobiographical Outline trilogy, which also includes the novels "Transit" and "Kudos." In this one an English writer flies to Athens to teach at a workshop. Along the way, and once there, she falls into intense and resonant conversations about art, intimacy, life and love. Cusk deals, brilliantly, in uncomfortable truths. — Dwight Garner 13 12 Joan Didion 2005 Having for decades cast a famously cool and implacable eye on everything from the Manson family to El Salvador, Didion suddenly found herself in a hellscape much closer to home: the abrupt death of her partner in life and art, John Gregory Dunne, even as their only child lay unconscious in a nearby hospital room. (That daughter, Quintana Roo, would be gone soon too, though her passing does not fall within these pages.) Dismantled by shock and grief, the patron saint of ruthless clarity did the only thing she could do: She wrote her way through it. 11 Junot Díaz 2007 Díaz's first novel landed like a meteorite in 2007, dazzling critics and prize juries with its mix of Dominican history, coming-of-age tale, comic-book tropes, Tolkien geekery and Spanglish slang. The central plotline follows the nerdy, overweight Oscar de León through childhood, college and a stint in the Dominican Republic, where he falls disastrously in love. Sharply rendered set pieces abound, but the real draw is the author's voice: brainy yet inviting, mordantly funny, sui generis. 10 Marilynne Robinson 2004 The first installment in what is so far a tetralogy — followed by "Home," "Lila" and "Jack" — "Gilead" takes its title from the fictional town in Iowa where the Boughton and Ames families reside. And also from the Book of Jeremiah, which names a place where healing may or may not be found: "Is there no balm in Gilead?" For John Ames, who narrates this novel, the answer seems to be yes. An elderly Congregationalist minister who has recently become a husband and father, he finds fulfillment in both vocation and family. Robinson allows him, and us, the full measure of his hard-earned joy, but she also has an acute sense of the reality of sin. If this book is a celebration of the quiet decency of small-town life (and mainline Protestantism) in the 1950s, it is equally an unsparing critique of how the moral fervor and religious vision of the abolitionist movement curdled, a century later, into complacency. — A.O. Scott 9 Kazuo Ishiguro 2005 Kathy, Ruth and Tommy are boarders at an elite English school called Hailsham. Supervised by a group of "guardians," the friends share music and rumors while navigating the shifting loyalties and heartbreaks of growing up. It's all achingly familiar — at times, even funny. But things begin to feel first off, then sinister and, ultimately, tragic. As in so much of the best dystopian fiction, the power of "Never Let Me Go" to move and disturb arises from the persistence of human warmth in a chilly universe — and in its ability to make us see ourselves through its uncanny mirror. Is Ishiguro commenting on biotechnology, reproductive science, the cognitive dissonance necessary for life under late-stage capitalism? He'd never be so didactic as to tell you. What lies at the heart of this beautiful book is not social satire, but deep compassion. 8 W.G. Sebald; translated by Anthea Bell 2001 Sebald scarcely lived long enough to see the publication of his final novel; within weeks of its release, he died from a congenital heart condition at 57. But what a swan song it is: the discursive, dreamlike recollections of Jacques Austerlitz, a man who was once a small refugee of the kindertransport in wartime Prague, raised by strangers in Wales. Like the namesake Paris train station of its protagonist, the book is a marvel of elegant construction, haunted by memory and motion. 7 Colson Whitehead 2016 "The Underground Railroad" is a profound revelation of the intricate aspects of slavery and nebulous shapes of freedom featuring an indomitable female protagonist: Cora from Georgia. The novel seamlessly combines history, horror and fantasy with philosophical speculation and cultural criticism to tell a compulsively readable, terror-laden narrative of a girl with a fierce inner spark who follows the mysterious path of her mother, Mabel, the only person ever known to have escaped from the Randall plantations.I could hardly make it through this plaintively brutal novel. Neither could I put it down. "The Underground Railroad" bleeds truth in a way that few treatments of slavery can, fiction or nonfiction. Whitehead's portrayals of human motivation, interaction and emotional range astonish in their complexity. Here brutality is bone deep and vulnerability is ocean wide, yet bravery and hope shine through in Cora's insistence on escape. I rooted for Cora in a way that I never had for a character, my heart breaking with each violation of her spirit. Just as Cora inherits her mother's symbolic victory garden, we readers of Whitehead's imaginary world can inherit Cora's courage. — Tiya Miles, author of "All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake" 6 Roberto Bolaño; translated by Natasha Wimmer 2008 Bolaño's feverish, vertiginous novel opens with an epigraph from Baudelaire — "An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom" — and then proceeds, over the course of some 900 pages, to call into being an entire world governed in equal parts by boredom and the deepest horror. The book (published posthumously) is divided into five loosely conjoined sections, following characters who are drawn for varying reasons to the fictional Mexican city of Santa Teresa: a group of academics obsessed with an obscure novelist, a doddering philosophy professor, a lovelorn police officer and an American reporter investigating the serial murders of women in a case with echoes of the real-life femicide that has plagued Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. In Natasha Wimmer's spotless translation, Bolaño's novel is profound, mysterious, teeming and giddy: Reading it, you go from feeling like a tornado watcher to feeling swept up in the vortex, and finally suspect you might be the tornado yourself. 5 Jonathan Franzen 2001 With its satirical take on mental health, self-improvement and instant gratification, Franzen's comic novel of family disintegration is as scathingly entertaining today as it was when it was published at the turn of the millennium. The story, about a Midwestern matron named Enid Lambert who is determined to bring her three adult children home for what might be their father's last Christmas, touches on everything from yuppie excess to foodie culture to Eastern Europe's unbridled economy after the fall of communism — but it is held together, always, by family ties. The novel jumps deftly from character to character, and the reader's sympathies jump with it; in a novel as alert to human failings as this one is, it is to Franzen's enduring credit that his genuine affection for all of the characters shines through. 4 Edward P. Jones 2003 This novel, about a Black farmer, bootmaker and former slave named Henry Townsend, is a humane epic and a staggering feat of wily American storytelling. Set in Virginia during the antebellum era, the milieu — politics, moods, manners — is starkly and intensely realized. When Henry becomes the proprietor of a plantation, with slaves of his own, the moral sands shift under the reader's feet. Grief piles upon grief. But there is a glowing humanity at work here as well. Moments of humor and unlikely good will bubble up organically. Jones is a confident storyteller, and in "The Known World" that confidence casts a spell. This is a large novel that moves nimbly, and stays with the reader for a long time. — Dwight Garner 3 Hilary Mantel 2009 It was hard choosing the books for my list, but the first and easiest choice I made was "Wolf Hall." ("The Mirror and the Light," the third book in Mantel's trilogy, was the second easiest.)We see the past the way we see the stars, dimly, through a dull blurry scrim of atmosphere, but Mantel was like an orbital telescope: She saw history with cold, hard, absolute clarity. In "Wolf Hall" she took a starchy historical personage, Thomas Cromwell, and saw the vivid, relentless, blind-spotted, memory-haunted, grandly alive human being he must have been. Then she used him as a lens to show us the age he lived in, the vast, intricate spider web of power and money and love and need — right up until the moment the spider got him. — Lev Grossman, author of "The Bright Sword" 2 Isabel Wilkerson 2010 Wilkerson's intimate, stirring, meticulously researched and myth-dispelling book, which details the Great Migration of Black Americans from South to North and West from 1915 to 1970, is the most vital and compulsively readable work of history in recent memory. This migration, she writes, "would become perhaps the biggest underreported story of the 20th century. It was vast. It was leaderless. It crept along so many thousands of currents over so long a stretch of time as to be difficult for the press truly to capture while it was under way." Wilkerson blends the stories of individual men and women with a masterful grasp of the big picture, and a great deal of literary finesse. "The Warmth of Other Suns" reads like a novel. It bears down on the reader like a locomotive. — Dwight Garner 1 Elena Ferrante; translated by Ann Goldstein 2012 The first volume of what would become Ferrante's riveting four-book series of Neapolitan novels introduced readers to two girls growing up in a poor, violent neighborhood in Naples, Italy: the diligent, dutiful Elena and her charismatic, wilder friend Lila, who despite her fierce intelligence is seemingly constrained by her family's meager means. From there the book (like the series as a whole) expands as propulsively as the early universe, encompassing ideas about art and politics, class and gender, philosophy and fate, all through a dedicated focus on the conflicted, competitive friendship between Elena and Lila as they grow into complicated adults. It's impossible to say how closely the series tracks the author's life — Ferrante writes under a pseudonym — but no matter: "My Brilliant Friend" is entrenched as one of the premier examples of so-called autofiction, a category that has dominated the literature of the 21st century. Reading this uncompromising, unforgettable novel is like riding a bike on gravel: It's gritty and slippery and nerve-racking, all at the same time. If you've read a book on the list, be sure to check the box under its entry, and your final count will appear here. (We'll save your progress.) ... but I'm sure there's something for me. Keep track of the books you want to read by checking the box under their entries. Methodology In collaboration with the Upshot — the department at The Times focused on data and analytical journalism — the Book Review sent a survey to hundreds of novelists, nonfiction writers, academics, book editors, journalists, critics, publishers, poets, translators, booksellers, librarians and other literary luminaries, asking them to pick their 10 best books of the 21st century.We let them each define "best" in their own way. For some, this simply meant "favorite." For others, it meant books that would endure for generations.The only rules: Any book chosen had to be published in the United States, in English, on or after Jan. 1, 2000. (Yes, translations counted!)After casting their ballots, respondents were given the option to answer a series of prompts where they chose their preferred book between two randomly selected titles. We combined data from these prompts with the vote tallies to create the list of the top 100 books.