

Books of the year 2008

Published 13 November 2008

The New Statesman's round up of the best books of 2008 as suggested by critics and contributors including David Marquand, Tahmima Anam, Fatima Bhutto and Anthony Howard



TIM ADAMS

Julian Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (Cape, £16.99) is a nice corrective to the one-note atheism of Dawkins and the rest. It is human, clever and full of doubt: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him . . ." Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke* (Simon & Schuster, £20) makes you challenge all you thought you knew about Churchill, and about war. The book I have carried with me all year, though, is Mick Imlah's *The Lost Leader* (Faber & Faber, £9.99). Imlah's poetry is that rare combination of erudition and conversation: perfectly crafted lines from the heart. The collection dwells on the idea of Scotland, of how where we come from shapes where we end up; it contains memorable meditations on a nation's heroes, never forgetting that it is the local and particular which stays with us. Imlah's voice holds all the histories together, easy as a ballad, forever crackling with one-liners.

FATEMA AHMED

How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read by Pierre Bayard (Granta, £12) is not a self-help book for lazy book reviewers, but an entertaining essay on literature, anxiety and the canon, and the eighth instalment in the author's "Paradoxes" series. Bayard is the kind of French academic who is more interested in how we can change Proust than in how Proust can change us. He also knows who killed Agatha Christie's Roger Ackroyd and who was really killed in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Someone should translate and publish the whole series in time for next Christmas. *Beautiful Image* by Marcel Aymé (Pushkin Press, £12) is a novel about a man who finds one day that he has a different face. It is less unsettling than Kafka, but its combination of charm and creepiness is pleasantly disorientating.

ROGER ALTON

The Booker panel ran true to form this year by inexplicably ignoring Zoë Heller's wonderful new novel *The Believers* (Fig Tree, £16.99). This is a really big book, dealing with massive themes - love (sexual, family, adulterous, parental, sibling, etc), and hate (ditto) - set against an epic background of political activism in New York, and told in 300 taut pages. Immaculate. My great discovery this year has been the crackling, brilliant, and funny thrillers of Don Winslow, a former private eye from New York, whose books are set against the surfing beaches and desert highways of southern California. His characters are hugely believable, complex, human and loveable. Winslow is the true heir to Chandler. Kick off with *The Winter of Frankie Machine* (Arrow Books, £7.99), or *The Death and Life of Bobby Z* (Arrow Books). Utterly brilliant stuff.

TAHMIMA ANAM

is a gorgeous collection of sheet-music, illustrated by Annabel Wright of the enduringly enchanting Glaswegian band The Pastels that is as delightful to gaze at as, accompanied by a 61-song CD, it is to hear.

ZIAUDDIN SARDAR

Bhikhu Parekh's *A New Politics of Identity* (Palgrave, £19.99) sums up the thoughts of a political philosopher who has devoted his life to thinking about multiculturalism. Lord Parekh explores the changing nature of different kinds of identities and develops new political principles that should guide human relations between and within societies. It is a profound meditation on how to be truly human in an increasingly dehumanised and globalised world. The end results of unbridled modernity are well described by Christopher Davidson in his eye-opening portrait of *Dubai* (Hurst & Co, £25). Dubai's remarkable transformation from a sleepy fishing community to the foremost shopping complex and property market of the Arabian Gulf is not without serious consequence. It is now the best global example of the city of the living dead.

ALEXEI SAYLE

I haven't read much fiction this year as other's authors styles seem to seep into my own writing - there's one short story I've been working on for years that suffers from a particularly persistent Saul Bellow infection - but one book I enjoyed was Andrew Miller's *One Morning Like a Bird* (Sceptre). I don't usually like books with the sort of meticulous research he's employed but here it really works. Apart from that I'm half way through Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (Heinemann). I can't wait to find out how it ends.

FRANCES STONOR SAUNDERS

Mark Thompson's *The White War* (Faber, £25) is a brilliant account of the "lost front" of the First World War, which opened with the unprovoked Italian assault on Austria in May 1915. He describes in harrowing detail a war measured out in vertical inches ("Flanders, tilted at 30 to 40 degrees"), and reveals the deceit and incompetence of the military and political class that committed Italy to this insane adventure. My other choice is a literary Christmas stocking: a film script by Patrick Marber, an insider account of the Adolf Eichmann diaries, a guide to the cemeteries of Europe, and the culmination of one of the century's great elegiac sequences by Christopher Reid, all wrapped up in the new issue of *Areté* magazine. John Updike has described *Areté*, edited by Craig Raine and now in its tenth year, as "a journal as exquisite in its execution as in its intentions".

JOHN SWEENEY

Stepping on to Oleg's gin tug this summer I would have felt outclassed, but thankfully I had a copy of *The Age of Assassins: the Rise and Rise of Vladimir Putin* (Gibson Square, £16.99) by Yuri Felshtinsky and Vladimir Pribylovsky. The front cover has a nice snap of Vlad looking like a really scary small bouncer outside a nightclub. The text is a chaotic muddle of dodgy deals and horrible murders, but you end up wondering why quite so many of Vlad's critics have ended up dead. History for me jumps straight from 1066 to Henry VIII to Hitler with virtually nothing in between. so E H Gombrich's *A Little History of the World* (Yale, £6.99) joined the dots of global history - the naming of China, Therms, the Huns, the Visigoths - brilliant scholarship, worn lightly and no donnish tomfoolery.

HEATHER THOMPSON

Poor old London - its modern-day, money-grabbing grubbiness has rarely been exposed as eloquently as it is in Emily Perkins's *Novel About My Wife* (Bloomsbury, £12.99). Tom is a screenwriter, grimly trying to balance an ever-more overdrawn bank account with the stubborn remains of his artistic integrity. He and his sexily eccentric artist wife Ann are too poor to live in a really nice neighbourhood, but too middle class not to fear hooded youths. Perkins describes their downward spiral with empathy, wit and skewering insight. Equally skilful, but worlds apart in style and substance, *Sea of Poppies* (John Murray, £7.99) deserved its Booker nomination. Amitav Ghosh manages to combine a sharp look at the grievous effects of the Indian opium trade with humour, adventure and a vivid cast of (nearly) hundreds.

MARINA WARNER