

The New York Times

Wednesday, November 30, 2011 Last Update: 12:05 PM ET

The 10 Best Books of 2011



Todd St. John

FICTION

THE ART OF FIELDING

By Chad Harbach. Little, Brown & Company, \$25.99.

At a small college on the Wisconsin side of Lake Michigan, the baseball team sees its fortunes rise and then rise some more with the arrival of a supremely gifted shortstop. Harbach's expansive, allusive first novel combines the pleasures of an old-fashioned baseball story with a stately, self-reflective meditation on talent and the limits of ambition, played out on a field where every hesitation is amplified and every error judged by an exacting, bloodthirsty audience.

11/22/63

By Stephen King. Scribner, \$35.

Throughout his career, King has explored fresh ways to blend the ordinary and the supernatural. His new novel imagines a time portal in a Maine diner that lets an English teacher go back to 1958 in an effort to stop Lee Harvey Oswald and — rewardingly for readers — also allows King to reflect on questions of memory, fate and free will as he richly evokes midcentury America. The past guards its secrets, this novel reminds us, and the horror behind the quotidian is time itself.

SWAMPLANDIA!

By Karen Russell. Alfred A. Knopf, cloth, \$24.95; Vintage Contemporaries, paper, \$14.95.

An alligator theme park, a ghost lover, a Styx-like journey through an Everglades mangrove jungle: Russell's first novel, about a girl's bold effort to preserve her grieving family's way of life, is suffused with humor and gothic whimsy. But the real wonders here are the author's exuberantly inventive language and her vivid portrait of a heroine who is wise beyond her years.

TEN THOUSAND SAINTS

By Eleanor Henderson. Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers, \$26.99.

Henderson's fierce, elegiac novel, her first, follows a group of friends, lovers, parents and children through the straight-edge music scene and the early days of the AIDS epidemic. By delving deeply into the lives of her characters, tracing their long relationships not only to one another but also to various substances, Henderson catches something of the dark, apocalyptic quality of the '80s.

THE TIGER'S WIFE

By Téa Obreht. Random House, cloth, \$25; paper, \$15.

As war returns to the Balkans, a young doctor inflects her grandfather's folk tales with stories of her own coming of age, creating a vibrant collage of historical testimony that has neither date nor dateline. Obreht, who was born in Belgrade in 1985 but left at the age of 7, has recreated, with startling immediacy and presence, a conflict she herself did not experience.

NONFICTION

ARGUABLY

Essays.

By Christopher Hitchens. Twelve, \$30.

Our intellectual omnivore's latest collection could be his last (he's dying of esophageal cancer). The book is almost 800 pages, contains more than 100 essays and addresses a ridiculously wide range of topics, including Afghanistan, Harry Potter, Thomas Jefferson, waterboarding, Henry VIII, Saul Bellow and the Ten Commandments, which Hitchens helpfully revises.

THE BOY IN THE MOON

A Father's Journey to Understand His Extraordinary Son.

By Ian Brown. St. Martin's Press, \$24.99.

A feature writer at The Globe and Mail in Toronto, Brown combines a reporter's curiosity with a novelist's instinctive feel for the unknowable in this exquisite book, an account — at once tender, pained and unexpectedly funny — of his son, Walker, who was born with a rare genetic mutation that has deprived him of even the most rudimentary capacities.

MALCOLM X

A Life of Reinvention.

By Manning Marable. Viking, \$30.

From petty criminal to drug user to prisoner to minister to separatist to humanist to martyr. Marable, who worked for more than a decade on the book and died earlier this year, offers a more complete and unvarnished portrait of Malcolm X than the one found in his autobiography. The story remains inspiring.

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

By Daniel Kahneman. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$30.

We overestimate the importance of whatever it is we're thinking about. We misremember the past and misjudge what will make us happy. In this comprehensive presentation of a life's work, the world's most influential psychologist demonstrates that irrationality is in our bones, and we are not necessarily the worse for it.

A WORLD ON FIRE

Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War.

By Amanda Foreman. Random House, \$35.

Which side would Great Britain support during the Civil War? Foreman gives us an enormous cast of characters and a wealth of vivid description in her lavish examination of a second battle between North and South, the trans-Atlantic one waged for British hearts and minds.