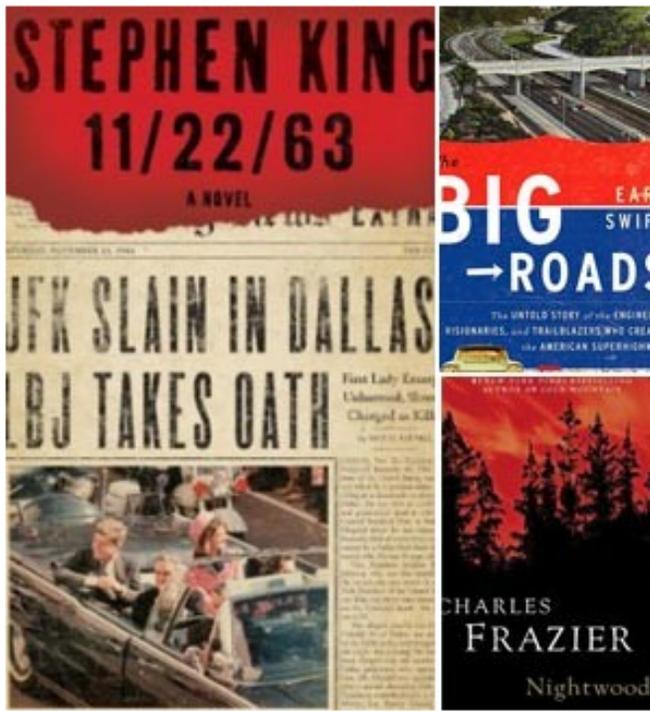


Post-Dispatch rounds up favorite books of 2011

BY JANE HENDERSON

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No single person can read the thousands of new books every year – let alone pick 10 best. Luckily, there are helpers who, like Santa's elves, divvy up the work.

Every December, the Post-Dispatch compiles a list of some of the best books of the year after quizzing freelance reviewers, polling a few book sellers and considering some of the books chosen by other publications or award committees.

This year, a look at other best-book lists reveals as diverse a selection as seen in a long time. Few books seem to show up on every list, unlike last year's endorsement of several heavy hitters, such as "Autobiography of Mark Twain," Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom" and Jennifer Egan's "A Visit From the Goon Squad."

And of this fall's widely reviewed novels, such as Haruki Murakami's "1Q84" and Chad Harbach's "The Art of Fielding," critics were wildly divided (our reviewers weren't wowed by either book).

In fact, Nikki Furrer, owner of Pudd'nhead Books in Webster Groves, says she was underwhelmed by fiction this year: "I call it the year of nonfiction because I was disappointed by some of the big novels and surprised by how well-written and well-told the nonfiction was. I'm not one for biographies, but I've got three on my 'Best of' list" (see sidebar).

Vicki Erwin of Main Street Books in St. Charles also says that "overall, not that much stood out." Still, even average years have plenty of appealing titles: Don't hesitate to ask the Big Elf for novels, poetry or whatever you'd like this holiday season. Next week, we'll feature big coffee-table titles and some children's books.

FICTION

We don't know why, but several fascinating novels seemed to take place outside of cities and deep inside dark woods.

Ozark writer Daniel Woodrell's first collection of short stories, "**The Outlaw Album**" (Little, Brown), is a stunner. Woodrell has the rare ability to tell compelling stories rooted in familiar soil that are simultaneously simple and complex, local and universal, funny and tragic.

Another riveting book set in the Ozarks is University of Missouri-St. Louis professor John Dalton's second novel, "**The Inverted Forest**" (Scribner). Dalton daringly sets his unusual, low-key story in a summer camp for mentally disabled adults.

Two children who were struck mute by the vicious murder of their mother are pursued by the killer — their stepfather — in Charles Frazier's gripping "**Nightwoods**" (Random House). Frazier masterfully evokes the interaction between man and nature as the taut but elegant novel of suspense unfolds in the Southern Appalachians.

In "**Once Upon a River**" (Norton), Bonnie Jo Campbell's heroine is a teenager who grows up quickly after her father is killed and she navigates the Michigan river landscape looking for her mother and modeling herself after self-sufficient sharpshooter Annie Oakley.

Not every good story involved scary woods, but a novel about a family that quotes Shakespeare does have an inherent risk: putting your prose next to the Bard's dialogue could just serve to remind the reader that you're no Shakespeare. Eleanor Brown, however, uses the device to great effect in "**The Weird Sisters**" (Putnam), a story of three daughters of a Shakespeare scholar who return home after their mother is diagnosed with cancer.

Also inspired by classic English literature is Jeffrey Eugenides' "**The Marriage Plot**" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), which follows a college love triangle a la Jane Austen or Henry James.

Eleanor Henderson was inspired by 1980s youths with her first novel, "**Ten Thousand Saints**" (Ecco), in which bored, drug-using Vermont teens dream of escaping to New York.

Irish writer Sebastian Barry tells an intimate story of a family through the memories of one woman in "**On Canaan's Side**" (Viking).

In the superb "**You Believers**" (Unbridled Books), Jane Bradley explores a mother's search for her missing daughter.

Steven Millhauser remains one of the best short-story stylists around, as demonstrated by his new collection, "**We Others**" (Knopf). Other good collections came from Don DeLillo with "**The Angel Esmeralda**" (Scribner) and St. Louis University's Richard Burgin in "**Shadow Traffic**" (John Hopkins).

Horror writer Stephen King outdid many literary writers with his brilliant alternative history, "**11/22/63**" (Scribner), which explores what would happen if a man could go back in time and stop John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Alice Hoffman reached far back into history with "**The Dovekeepers**" (Scribner), a historical novel of four strong Jewish women holding out against the Romans in the desert. A mix of mysticism, romance, deception and death makes it hard to put down.

Yet another important moment in history became a sober novel with "**Nanjing Requiem**" (Pantheon). Ha Jin fictionalizes the Japanese army's 1937 destruction of Nanjing in this story about several Chinese and American women who provide sanctuary for desperate women and children.

The real meets the unreal when Colson Whitehead offers a smart, funny, literary story with a zombie cast in "**Zone One**" (Doubleday).

"**The Night Circus**" by Erin Morgenstern (Doubleday) takes readers inside a circus without a seedy side — full of magic, moonlight and romance between two competing magicians.

Like "**Night Circus**," "**A Man of Parts**" (Viking) evokes Victorian England as part of its story. David Lodge portrays the real-life science fiction writer H.G. Wells, whose randy personal life was no prissy British stereotype.

NONFICTION

One of the most popular history books this year is "**In the Garden of Beasts**" by Erik Larson (Crown). An account of the first year of William Dodd's ambassadorship in Nazi Germany (1933-34) and a tale of his daughter Martha's coming of age in Berlin, it offers something for both serious students of the 1930s and for lovers of charming stories.

Candice Millard also weaves a fascinating history in "**Destiny of the Republic**" (Doubleday), the story of the assassination of President James Garfield, who might have survived a bullet if doctors had washed their hands and taken a few other precautions.

Many historians are examining the Civil War, marking its 150th anniversary. But with "**A World on Fire**" (Random House), Amanda Foreman focuses on a new angle: Britain's crucial role.

A prominent journalist and a leading foreign policy scholar team up to assert that contemporary America has lost its edge and needs to get it back quickly — and they show how in "**How We Can Come Back**" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) by Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum.

More fodder for worry is "**Retirement Heist: How Companies Plunder and Profit from the Nest Eggs of American Workers**" by Ellen E. Schultz (Portfolio).

James Carroll has applied his writer's skills and scholarly mind to the conundrum of one of the world's great metropolitan areas: Why does a 3,000-year-old city holy to the three Abrahamic religions have such a wretched, bloody history? He discusses the modern importance of an ancient city in "**Jerusalem, Jerusalem**" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

President Dwight D. Eisenhower gets most of the credit for America's system of interstate highways. But in "**The Big Roads**" (Mifflin Harcourt), author Earl Swift credits Franklin D. Roosevelt as first to propose the network.

Against all odds, writer Simon Garfield makes type fonts sound fascinating in "**Just My Type**" (Gotham Books). If you liked "**Eats, Shoots & Leaves**" back in 2003, you'll like "Just My Type."

Maureen Stanton also makes the common uncommonly interesting with her look into flea-market America in "**Killer Stuff and Tons of Money**" (Penguin Press).

BIOGRAPHY AND MEMOIR

"**Catherine the Great**" by Robert Massie (574 pages, Random House, \$35) is a logical successor to Massie's biography of Peter the Great, as the author seems to be working his way through the Romanov rulers of Russia, not all of whom were so great. In Catherine's case, the transformation of a nervous, relatively poor German girl into a confident, imperious empress was the marvel of the 18th century.

In "**The Oil Kings**," Andrew Scott Cooper deals with the kings of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the 1970s and our policy in that part of the world. Much, naturally, is relevant today.

Not all crises take place halfway around the world. "**The Wizard of Lies**" by Diana Henriques (Henry Holt) tells the fascinating story of the rise and fall of Bernie Madoff, crook extraordinary. The sums that he stole through what now seems rather transparent fraud are unequaled in our time.

The mercurial genius behind Apple died this fall, and, soon after, Walter Isaacson's intriguing "**Steve Jobs**" (Simon & Schuster) made it to the top of best-seller lists.

One best-selling memoir this year was by St. Louisan Eric Greitens, who has been both a humanitarian (as a volunteer abroad) and a warrior (as a Navy SEAL in Afghanistan and Iraq). He tells his two-sided story in "**The Heart and the Fist**" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

Edmund Morris wraps up his three-volume biography of Theodore Roosevelt with "**Colonel Roosevelt**" (Random House). This final episode recounts Roosevelt's busy life after handing the White House over to his successor.

After World War II, the State Department's George F. Kennan devised the containment strategy that held the Soviet Union within bounds. In "**George F. Kennan**" (Penguin), John Lewis Gaddis recounts the life of this undersung hero.

Boston professor Julie Winch delves deeply into an early St. Louis family with "**The Clamorgans**" (Hill & Wang), uncovering an interesting history of race and money.

In the elegantly written, extensively researched "**The Great Heart of the Republic**" (Harvard) Adam Arenson looks at Civil War St. Louis and tells how it was unable to set aside sectional differences to transform itself into a truly national city.

St. Louis hero Stan Musial gets a well-deserved biographical pat on the back in "**Stan Musial: An American Life**" (Ballantine). New York Times sportswriter George Vecsey says Musial deserves more retrospective glory than he has received.

Meanwhile, a St. Louis professor, Richard M. Cook of UMSL, burrows into a New York literary life by editing "**Alfred Kazin's Journals**" (Yale University Press).

Memories of her daughter's death haunt Joan Didion's "**Blue Nights**" (Knopf), the follow-up to her remarkable "**A Year of Magical Thinking**."

Annia Ciezadio's "**Day of Honey**" (Free Press) follows the author's life in Baghdad and Beirut as a lovely, unusual "memoir of food, love and war."

MILITARY

Military writers made the year interesting for history buffs. One of the best-selling books of the year was by a Vietnam War veteran. Karl Marlantes, author of the epic Vietnam novel "**Matterhorn**," tells of the complex reactions of men who go to war and how values are affected for the rest of their lives in "**What It Is Like to Go to War**" (Atlantic Monthly Press).

In "**Brute**" (Little, Brown), author Robert Coram draws a compelling portrait of Marine Gen. Victor Krulak, the man who stood up to Lyndon Johnson over Vietnam — and tells why Krulak got the nickname "Brute."

Writer Adam Hochschild uses "**To End All Wars**" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) to explain the antiwar movement in World War I Britain. He stresses the war's role as the key to all that followed in the 20th century.

Three key American generals in World War II — Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley and George Patton — get a close-up look from author Jonathan W. Jordan in "**Brothers, Rivals, Victors**" (NAL Caliber). They make for a fascinating triangle.

Although Travis Patriquin went to grade school in Bellefontaine Neighbors and graduated from high school in St. Charles in 1992, few St. Louisans have heard of him. In "**A Soldier's Dream**" (NAL Caliber), William Doyle tells how Patriquin came to be known as "America's Lawrence of Arabia."

The six months after Pearl Harbor are recalled by Ian W. Toll in "**Pacific Crucible**" (Norton). What started as a disaster on Oahu ended in triumph off Midway — a battle that gets too little attention. St. Louis University professor Timothy J. Lomperis arrived in Vietnam as an Army officer just in time for a major enemy assault in 1972. In "**The Vietnam War from the Rear Echelon**" (University Press of Kansas), Lomperis reflects on why his war ended as such a mess.

Behind much of the mess in Vietnam was Gen. William C. Westmoreland. In "**Westmoreland**" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), Lewis Sorley offers a highly critical biography of the photogenic general.

REGIONAL

Readers who like books with a local or regional flavor had some good choices this year. For the central character of the novel "**Dancing With Gravity**" (Blank Slate Press), Kirkwood writer Anene Tressler chooses a Catholic priest. He serves in St. Louis — and must come to grips with a personal crisis. Tressler makes it work.

In "**Make, Take, Murder**" (Midnight Ink), former Chesterfield resident Joanna Campbell Slan splashes a lot of local color into a murder tale that unwinds in Webster Groves and Richmond Heights.

In "**Time Guardians**" (AuthorHouse), novelist Jeff Quinn of St. Charles gives readers two time travelers — a woman born in England in 1910 and her chosen successor, a Kirkwood boy who's 16 in 1990. Their mission: Do good while leaving the actual course of history undisturbed.

You'd think this year's tornado was pain enough for Joplin. But now comes Joplin resident Larry Wood with "**Desperadoes of the Ozarks**" (Pelican). It's a retelling of long-ago criminal violence in the Ozarks, with a lot of the real-life action set in or around Joplin.

In "**Abolition and the Civil War in Southwestern Illinois**" (The History Press), Alton native John J. Dunphy takes readers through a troubled time. His book shines with anecdotal gems — for example, the founding of the Metro East sin city of Brooklyn by runaway slaves filled with idealism.

"**Founding St. Louis, First City of the New West**" (History Press) by J. Frederick Fausz begins with the aristocratic upbringing of St. Louis' founder, Pierre de Laclede, in southern France and goes on to explain the establishment of St. Louis in 1764 and the village's growth through the introduction of American authority and attitudes after the Louisiana Purchase.

East St. Louis celebrated its first 150 years this year, and 15 essays explore various issues in "**The Making of an All-American City**," edited by Mark Abbott (Virginia Publishing).

For residents of Ladue, Charlene Bry unearths years of history and photographs in the coffee table-worthy "**Ladue Found**" (Virginia).

Harlan Steinbaum went beyond Missouri while writing "**Tough Calls From the Corner Office**" (HarperCollins), but no doubt most St. Louis readers will hone in on stories from local executives such as Sanford McDonnell and Maxine Clark.

CRIME THRILLERS

Readers enjoyed a bumper crop of crime thrillers. One of the best was "**Damage**" (Dutton), in which author John Lescroart takes a challenging approach. Right away, he identifies the bad guy in a series of San Francisco killings. Even so, Lescroart holds readers fast for almost 400 pages.

In "**The Collaborator**" (Overlook), Briton Gerald Seymour mixes the Mafia and deadly toxic waste. In this book, his characters rise to a level of literature that goes far above the genre.

Wyoming native C.J. Box brings his home state to literate life in "**Cold Wind**" (Putnam), another in his series starring game warden Joe Pickett. As this tale opens, Pickett finds a murder victim in an unlikely place: chained to a vane on a big wind turbine.

In "**Field Gray**" (Putnam), British author Philip Kerr brings back Berlin detective Bernie Gunther. In a tale that runs from 1931 through 1954, Gunther must deal with nagging ethical questions in pursuing a cop killer.

Another long-running character is author John Sandford's Lucas Davenport. In "**Buried Prey**" (Putnam), two corpses turn up when a house is torn down. Davenport must fight a turf war with other police officials as he tracks down the killer.

Michael Connelly may be the best thriller writer we have. He shows why in "**The Fifth Witness**" (Little, Brown). It's a dandy courtroom drama starring Connelly's ethically challenged Lincoln lawyer, Mickey Haller.

David Anthony teaches English at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and has written a black-comedy thriller, "**Something for Nothing**" (Algonquin). In this tale, an unlikable hero is forced to smuggle drugs — and to deal with a surprise of a villain.

Similarly, St. Louis writer Scott Phillips gives the starring role to a cad in "**The Adjustment**" (Counterpoint, 217 pages, \$25). In postwar Wichita, Kansas, his cad pimps for a corporate bigwig — but finds his own wife in peril because of his wartime misdeeds.

In "**Silent Enemy**" (Putnam), author Thomas W. Young has his hero flying an Air Force C-5 that's carrying a big problem: a bomb that will go off if the plane descends to land. This tale has wings.

POETRY

While the summertime shuttering of Borders might have given readers a sense that books are in diminuendo, American poets chorused powerfully for one of their best years. Midwesterners showed especially strongly with worthy entries from Rodney Jones, Carl Phillips, Devin Johnston, Joseph Harrington, Tony Trigilio and many others. This year's roundup features two from that list and four others from across the country.

Rae Armantrout's static feedback, often fragmentary and playful, ("Give a meme/ a hair-do"), belies an underlying peacefulness of contemplation: "It's well/ that things should stir/ inconsequentially/ around me." "**Money Shot**" (Wesleyan) is a fine follow-up to Armantrout's Pulitzer Prize-winning "**Versed**."

No one has suffused poetry with music, especially jazz, more breathtakingly than Yusef Komunyakaa, whose collection "**The Chameleon Couch**" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) stands as one of his finest.

Not everyone who wins the Yale Younger Poets Award goes on to become a literary legend, but Adrienne Rich, who won it in 1950, has done that. Her place in our canon is secure. Every reader can find a place in declarations like "I do not give/ simplehearted love and nor/ allow you simply love me" from "**Tonight No Poetry Will Serve**" (Norton).

Thick with religious language, rural symbolism and literary allusion — and barbed with surprising music — Rodney Jones' poetry is becoming a national treasure, too. "**Imaginary Logic**" (Houghton Mifflin) is his best book in years.

Devin Johnston, who teaches at St. Louis University, is emerging as a new sort of old-school imagiste. In "**Traveler**" (FS&G) he begins one poem with "In the subdivisions of the dead/ a Plum Blossom cigarette/ stuck upright," and, in another, mentions Schnucks.

A single, book-length poem might not seem appealing to today's impatient reader. Anselm Berrigan obviously doesn't care and proves he doesn't need to in "**Notes From Irrelevance**" (Wave), which sings easily through 65 pages with (in the author's words) "upscale pop sexiness." Love all the cultural references.

Reviewers who contributed to this roundup include Harry Levins, Dale Singer, Repps Hudson, Harper Barnes, Amanda St. Amand, Myron A. Marty, Aaron Belz, Tim O'Neil, Steve Weinberg, Joseph Losos, Ellen Harris, Betsy Taylor and Tim Fox.

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