Bloomberg

King's New Kennedy, Greenblatt Finds 'Swerve' in Top 2011 Books

By Laurie Muchnick - Dec 14, 2011

Our favorite nonfiction books of the year travel through history from ancient Rome to the U.S. Civil War, while in fiction Stephen King sends a Maine schoolteacher back to 1958 to try to save John F. Kennedy's life. (A separate list of the year's top business books appeared yesterday.)

Baseball Novel

"The Art of Fielding" by Chad Harbach (Little, Brown/Fourth Estate). At a small Wisconsin college, a gifted shortstop named Henry Skrimshander is about to tie a record for errorless games when his throw to first goes awry and beans a teammate in the dugout. The accident serves to knit together five characters in this richly entertaining and accomplished first novel.

There's enough baseball to satisfy fans, and the academic setting lets Harbach have fun with students and faculty. Sports and school remain secondary, though, as emotional and sexual complications beset the central players and Henry's unreliable arm drags him into physical and psychological decline. Yet even while the book darkens, Harbach seems to be smiling at his creation, enjoying the many large and small resonances, the pleasure of writing when it works.

Calling All Women

"Bossypants" by Tina Fey (Little, Brown/Sphere). Tina Fey is a regular gal with overgrown eyebrows who just happens to be smarter and funnier than anyone else around.

"Maybe you bought this book because you love Sarah Palin and you want to find reasons to hate me," she writes. "We've got that! I use all kinds of elitist words like 'impervious' and 'torpor,' and I think gay people are just as good at watching their kids play hockey as straight people."

If you're a man, she'll thank you kindly for buying her book, but you're not the target audience. Pimply teenage girls, virginal college co-eds, striving young professional women, overworked moms: This book's for you.

Catherine the Real Person

"Catherine the Great" by Robert K. Massie (Random House). Energetic until her death in 1796, she would rise at six a.m., let the greyhounds into the garden, drink the first of five cups of black coffee and start on her letters.

"I still love to laugh," Catherine the Great wrote to a confidante who had grown old with her.

That most appealing human quality illuminates Massie's biography of the Russian empress. Now in his 80s, Massie, the author of "Nicholas and Alexandra" and "The Romanovs," has lost none of his taste for the delicious convolutions of court intrigue. He provides an exciting account of the chaotic years that changed the history of Russia.

Saving JFK

"11/22/63" by Stephen King (Scribner/Hodder & Stoughton). America's chief chronicler of the creepy travels back in time to save President Kennedy. The novel circles smoothly to its conclusion like a vulture closing in on a carcass as Jake Epping, a lonely school teacher from 2011, tracks Lee Oswald and Oswald chases history.

Oswald, desperate, paranoid and casually brutal, makes a perfect King villain, a self-pitying monster one minor setback away from lashing out at the world. As the fateful moment at Dealey Plaza nears, Epping falls in love, gets beat up and places huge bets on the World Series.

The Marx Family

"Love and Capital" by Mary Gabriel (Little, Brown). The only problem with this absorbing, affectionate biography of Karl and Jenny Marx is the title. Love the Marxes had, in abundance. Capital, no. The book to which Marx gave that name changed the world without bringing the family a penny in royalties for 16 years, and by then he was dead.

Gabriel breezily handles material of forbidding breadth, filling the reader in on the historical, political and industrial conditions in Europe that shaped Marx's thought, without ever losing her focus on his family. With its suicides, illicit affairs and even a deathbed revelation by Engels, her book reads like a Victorian novel.

Harry Potter Goes to Narnia

"The Magician King" by Lev Grossman (Viking/Heinemann). In his sequel to "The Magicians" -- a sly homage to C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling -- Grossman finds new ways to surprise and delight the

reader.

Wizard Quentin Coldwater, now a king of Fillory, sets out on an ill-defined quest to relieve the boredom of ruling a magical land of tedious abundance. Grossman has moved beyond "Harry Potter" and the Narnia books into Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, Alasdair Gray's "Lanark" and Arthurian romance, with a little bit of Homer on the side.

He transforms these inspirations in a crucible of bitter, often shockingly violent reality that renders them newly distinctive and makes the reader eager for a third installment.

Ann Patchett

"State of Wonder" by Ann Patchett (Harper/Bloomsbury). Patchett returns to the tropical setting of her best-known novel, "Bel Canto," and delivers another entrancing, ambitious tale. When a thin blue Aerogram brings word to the Vogel pharmaceutical company that one of its scientists is dead, buried in the Amazon jungle where he had been investigating an out-of-control research project, the CEO sends the man's labmate, Marina Singh, to find out what happened.

Patchett's lush prose is perfectly suited to describing Marina's descent into this hot, sticky, insect-haunted heart of darkness, complete with 15-foot snakes, cannibals and a tribe whose women keep bearing children into their 70s.

Long-Lost Poem

"The Swerve" by Stephen Greenblatt (Norton/Bodley Head). Harvard professor Greenblatt takes his intriguing title from a 1st-century Roman poet, Lucretius, who posited that a swerve -- a minimal motion -- might set off a ceaseless chain of particles. Greenblatt says that one such swerve happened in 1417, when a book hunter named Poggio Bacciolini found a copy of Lucretius's long-lost masterpiece, "On the Nature of Things," which extolled the virtue of beauty and pleasure. It became the defining text to a circle of humanists in Florence, opening the doors to the splendors of the Renaissance. Greenblatt's book is itself appropriately pleasurable.

Brits at War

"A World on Fire" by Amanda Foreman (Random House/Allen Lane). An estimated 50,000 Britons played a role in the U.S. Civil War, and very few of them, it seems, could stop writing about it -- in letters, diaries, newspaper articles, books and memoirs. There was a British eyewitness to just about everything. Foreman tells their stories, and the stories of politicians on both sides of the Atlantic who maneuvered either to drag the British into the war or keep them out of it. It is a tour

de force, a work of extreme virtuosity both in the research and the telling.

(Laurie Muchnick is an editor for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

To contact the writer of this review: Laurie Muchnick in New York at lmuchnick@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Manuela Hoelterhoff in New York at mhoelterhoff@bloomberg.net.