



## Best books of 2011: The Top 10 fiction and nonfiction titles from The Plain Dealer

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By **Karen R. Long, The Plain Dealer**

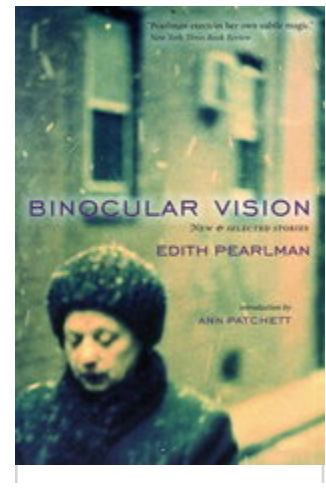
A good book -- perhaps a cheerful fire -- and a stretch of time are bound to reward and replenish. Here are our selections for the best books of 2011, choices that can sustain a reader through a long winter's night, and bring pleasure to a new year.

### FICTION

#### **Binocular Vision**

Edith Pearlman

Lookout Books, 375 pp., \$18.95



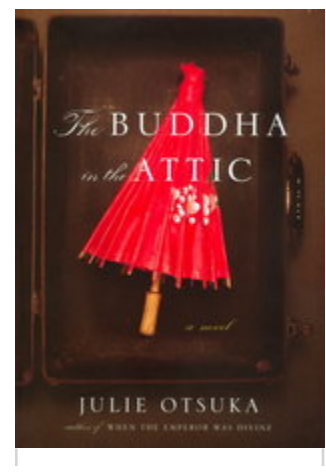
Subtle, incisive and often funny -- "The cantor's a baritone, not bad if you like phlegm" -- these 34 short stories are a marvel. "Capers" is about an older couple attempting to reignite passion by shoplifting. "The Story" turns on the decision not to tell it. "How to Fall" is a tour-de-force that began with the writer's crush on Milton Berle. Often set in a fictional Boston suburb, Godolphin, a place "not so much out of fashion as beyond its reach," this is fiction of the first rank.

#### **The Buddha in the Attic**

Julie Otsuka

Knopf, 129 pp., \$22

"On the boat we were mostly virgins." A clutch of 1920s mail-order brides, age 12-37, journey from Kyoto, Japan, to San Francisco, where they discover their expectations were spun on fiction. Writing in the plural "we," Otsuka follows these farm workers, maids and clerks in such incantatory prose that she lifts



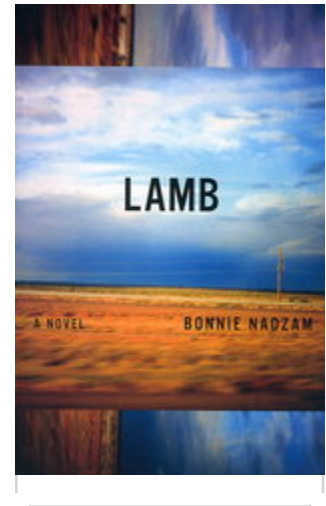
each detail like a razored hymn. The final bit, in the voices of Anglos, diminishes the spell, but overall, this novella delivers more craft than books five times as long.

## **Lamb**

Bonnie Nadzam

Other Press, 275 pp., \$15.95

David Lamb, 54, is a prosperous Chicago businessman who decides to "help" Tommie, an awkward, unpopular 11-year-old girl. This novel "asks a lot of its reader," as the talented Nadzam has said. The reward is a stunning, often counterintuitive portrait that blasts apart our coded tabloid headlines. Difficult to read, not from any overt descriptions, but from dread. Controlled, lucid writing helped this win the prize for best first novel from the Center for Fiction in New York.

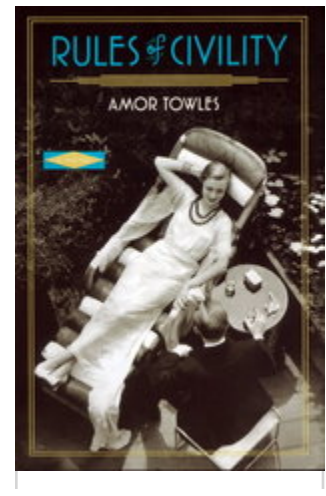


## **Rules of Civility**

Amor Towles

Viking, 336 pp., \$26.95

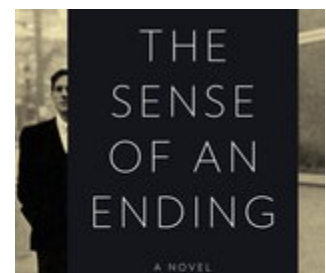
Jazz and martinis in 1938 Manhattan? Yes, please. This is a witty novel with a Fitzgeraldian tone, lit up by the spark and treachery of social climbing. At its center is Katey Kontent, who starts out in the secretarial pool. "Most of us shell our days like peanuts," one character remarks. "One in a thousand can look at the world with amazement." The period details are crisp, the secondary figures are X-acto-knife vivid and the dialogue crackles like party ice.



## **The Sense of an Ending**

Julian Barnes

Knopf, 163 pp., \$23.95



From its pitch-perfect title, to its enigmatic opening paragraph, to its final word -- "unrest" -- this quietly mesmerizing novel is a masterpiece. Tony Webster, an Englishman, looks back on his youth and romantic entanglements, and his memory is not to be trusted. The story becomes a tense, moral whodunit, told by a reasonably intelligent man who reads history, has a sense of humor, and once, long ago, mailed a miserable, bitter, unforgivable letter. Won, justly so, the Man Booker Prize this year.

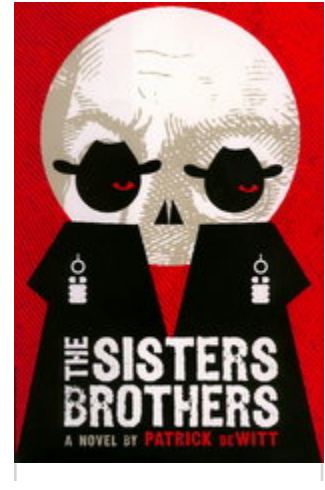


### **The Sisters Brothers**

Patrick deWitt

Ecco, 328 pp., \$24.99

The best crime novel of the year may well be this weird, wonderfully written, hyperviolent, genre-bending Western. The brothers are Charlie and Eli Sisters, a notorious pair of hired killers who ride their horses, Nimble and Tub, into the California gold rush of 1851. The brothers banter like Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield in "Pulp Fiction" as they ply their grisly business. Fans of Charles Portis, take note. A deserved winner of Canada's prestigious Governor General's Award.

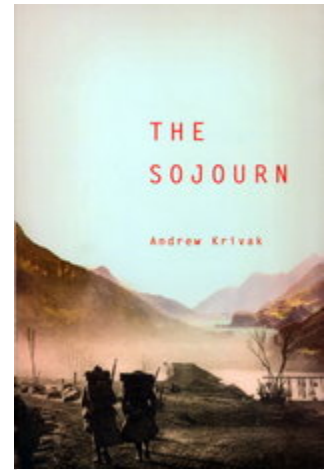


### **The Sojourn**

Andrew Krivak

Bellevue Literary Press, 191 pp., \$14.95

This spiritually resonant book tells of a World War I sharpshooter, his flawed, faithful father and the cousin who becomes a brother. It begins with an annoyingly italicized section but then settles into a hypnotic story of Slovak father and son. They leave Colorado and return to the Balkans, where they become shepherds until the Great War finds them. Recalls "The Deer Hunter," but the restraint, plot and, especially, the ending are much better. Deserves to become a war classic.

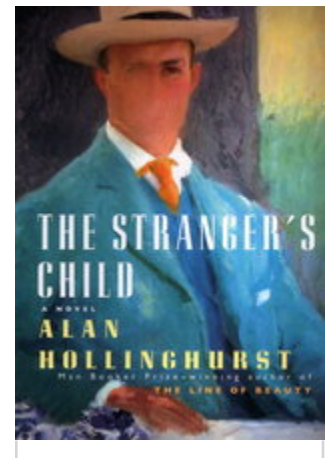


**The Stranger's Child**

Alan Hollinghurst

Knopf, 435 pp., \$27.95

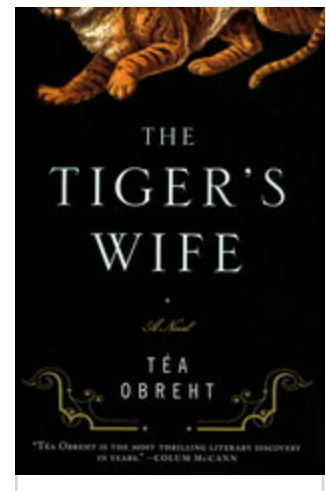
Even readers weary of British class novels will fall for Hollinghurst's ambitious, irresistible fifth book. It opens in 1913, when the dashing Cecil Valance visits Two Acres, the setting and title of his most famous poem. He dies in battle, the public enshrines "Two Acres" as a doomed, patriotic paean to Daphne Sawle; it was really meant for her brother, George. Hollinghurst follows the declining families and snooping literary biographers through a century of gay life. Splendid, carnal and sly.

**The Tiger's Wife**

Tea Obrecht

Random House, 337 pp., \$15

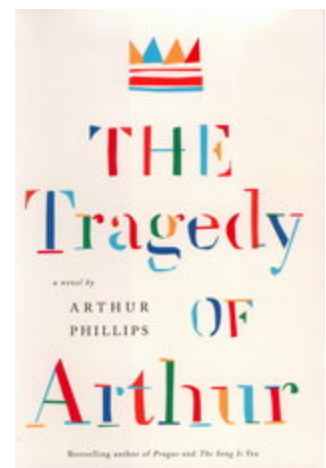
In a Balkans still uneasy with strife, physician Natalie tries to uncover the circumstances of her grandfather's death. Part of her investigation is forensic, and part is fueled by fables, the stories he told about a Deathless Man and another about a Tiger's Wife. The description of the tiger, and of every animal here, are among the best set down in literature. Obrecht, just 26, explores the purposes of the stories we tell. One of the year's most anticipated novels.

**The Tragedy of Arthur**

Arthur Phillips

Random House, 368 pp., \$28

Brimming with merry wordplay, this story about the discovery of a "new" Shakespeare play boldly reprints the disputed manuscript as its final 107 pages, all five acts in iambic pentameter. The play is fun, but the prologue is the thing,



written by the peevish, put-up son of the con artist who unearths the work. Readers sleuth among contradictory statements, misspellings, besmirched motives. The trapdoors on the play's provenance drop through to fresh revelations, and the human folly sings and stings.

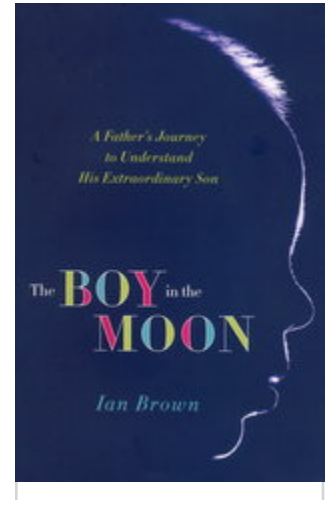
## NON-FICTION

### **The Boy in the Moon**

Ian Brown

St. Martin's, 293 pp., \$24.99

In this exemplary memoir, Toronto journalist Brown writes about a son who hits himself incessantly -- who wails, who can't talk -- in an unflinching, keen book. Crisp, observant and, occasionally, subversively funny, Brown chronicles the days and nights with Walker, who rests on the boundary of what it is to be human. An atheist, Brown asks the tough questions, writing, "Everything about him compels me, unless it terrifies me, and sometimes it does both." The reader joins in the mystery.

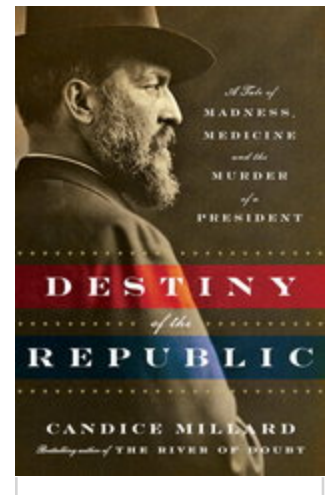


### **Destiny of the Republic**

Candice Millard

Doubleday, 339 pp., \$28.95

Ohio's James A. Garfield was president only four months when a delusional drifter shot him; then, thanks to his doctors' bungling, he lingered 80 days in excruciating pain. Millard, a gifted researcher and thrilling writer, rescues Garfield from his afterthought status, arguing that he was one of the most extraordinary men ever elected president. He rose from terrible poverty to handyman at Hiram College, becoming its president at age 26. In a similar vein as Millard's stirring Teddy Roosevelt book, "River of Doubt."



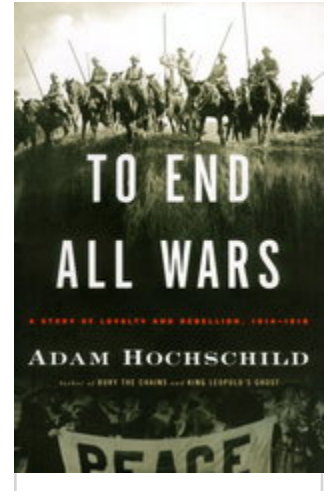


**To End All Wars**

Adam Hochschild

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 448 pp., \$28

The author of "King Leopold's Ghost" returns with another masterly history, this time of the obstinate prosecution of World War I, the first industrial war. In lancing prose, he recaps its "needless folly and madness" and, most pointedly, explores the patchy resistance to it, mostly in England, where some 20,000 men defied the draft. Questions of patriotism and morality enliven these pages, and shrink the decades since the mass slaughter, which also claimed 12 million to 13 million civilians. Riveting.

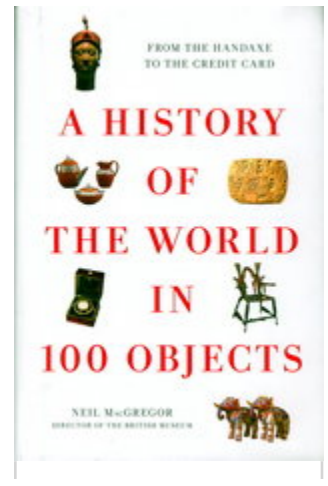


**A History of the World in 100 Objects**

Neil MacGregor

Viking, 707 pp., 150 color photos, \$45

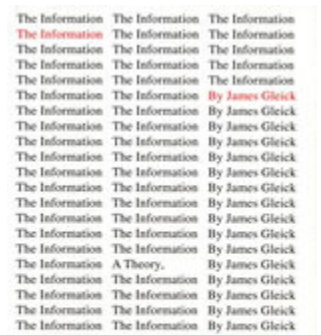
Bracingly original, this book sprang from a popular BBC radio series hosted by MacGregor, the director of the British Museum. Selecting museum objects evocative of humanity's turning points, he asks when people first started to wear jewelry and play music, who came up with money and why we feed our children cow's milk. The book begins with a 1.8 million-year-old stone chopping tool and ends with a United Arab Emirates credit card. The choices here are meant to be both revelatory and debatable.



**The Information**

James Gleick

Pantheon Books, 526 pp., \$29.95



From the author unafraid to explain "Chaos" comes another excellent science book, this time exploring our drive for information. Subtitled "A History, A Theory, A Flood," it starts with a tour-de-force examination of communication via African drum, lassos the math and physics on each era's technological innovation, then stumbles a notch on biology. To be human, Gleick writes, is to scour for meaning, to search, to filter, to collate. "Information is not knowledge, and knowledge is not wisdom," he warns. Intoxicating.

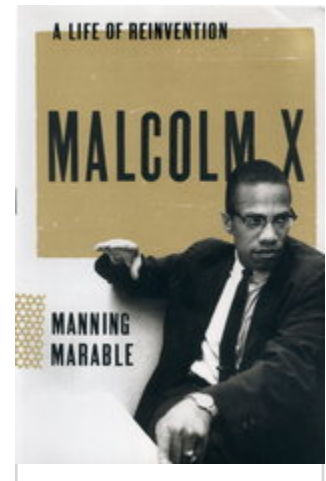
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## Malcolm X

Manning Marable

Viking, 594 pp., \$30

Subtitled "A Life of Reinvention," this exacting biography serves as the definitive treatment, for now, of a complex man. Born in Nebraska, Malcolm Little became a criminal, a preacher, a leader and eventually an icon, all before an assassin killed him at age 39. Marable, a leading scholar who once taught "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" at Ohio State University, dissolves the myth in years of painstaking research, in-depth interviews and document discovery. He excavates a brilliant, charismatic and mistake-prone man.

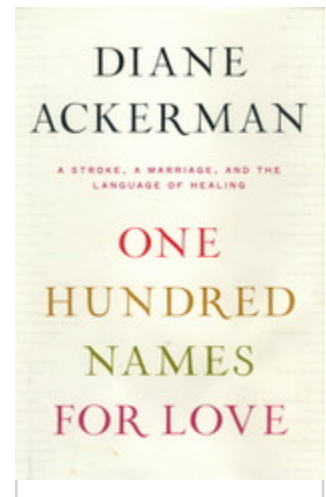


## One Hundred Names for Love

Diane Ackerman

W.W. Norton, 322 pp., \$26.95

Despite the goopy title, this smart memoir is a portrait of a moving, unorthodox, endearing marriage in the maw and wake of Paul West's catastrophic stroke. His wife, the intrepid Ackerman, author of "The Zookeeper's Wife," writes here with urgency, beauty and precision. She explores the brain, and West's wildly unlikely, and partial, comeback. A Zen Buddhist, Ackerman doesn't dwell on faith. But her mindfulness when her husband lost his mind made all the difference. And a splendid book.

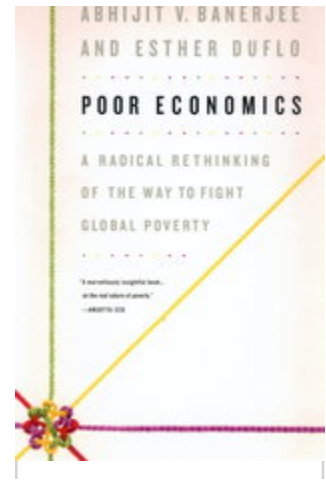


### Poor Economics

Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo

PublicAffairs, 303 pp., \$26.99

The London Financial Times declared "Poor Economics" the best business book of 2011. In an arena rife with cant, the authors spent 15 years running randomized controlled trials to test ways of combating poverty. Economics professors at MIT, they bring rigor and humility to studying how 13 percent of the world lives on 99 cents or less each day. With no clean water, no safe place to store money and no literacy, such people can be hurt -- or helped -- by outside interventions.

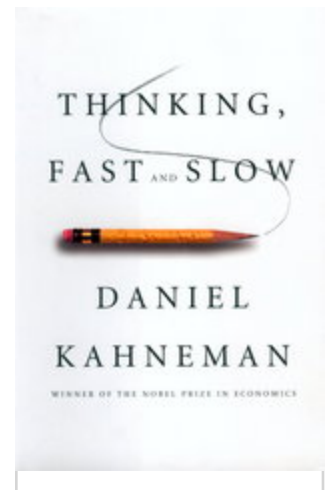


### Thinking, Fast and Slow

Daniel Kahneman

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 499 pp., \$30

In this mind-blowing book, the 2002 Nobel laureate in economics sums up pioneering research into decision-making. It isn't pretty. The book itself is even-handed, even sly, in investigating our inflated sense of ourselves and our chances of success. The ramifications turn out to be profound for jurors, reporters, bankers, historians, even philosophers. Kahneman writes cleanly, and with humor, about how our inflated, erroneous notions cause us to sue, start wars and launch businesses apt to fail. Sobering.

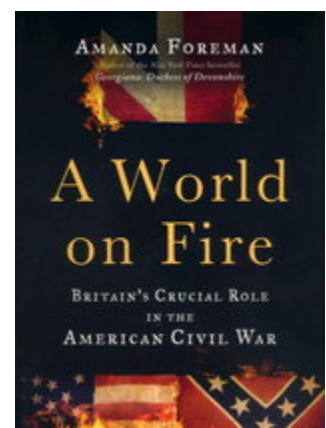


### A World on Fire

Amanda Foreman

Random House, 958 pp., \$35

Historian Foreman's study of "Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War" landed on top of the huge stack of sesquicentennial titles. England was





dependent on the American South for cotton, and between 1861 and 1865, thousands of British citizens volunteered on both sides of the American conflict -- and at least one fought on both sides. Through diaries, letters, journals and other primary sources, Foreman writes what she calls "history in the round." It bulges with vivid characters and trenchant scenes. Magnificent.



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