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opinion

Littwin: Now, for your reading pleasure ...

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Dear readers, we're taking the holiday off from the usual mix of politics and world affairs and Tim Tebowology to talk about, well, reading, which at this stage of my life is my principal temptation — which tells you a lot about this stage of my life.

During my recent trip to Italy — the one in which I basically mortgaged away any possibility of retirement — I ran across the Almost Corner Bookstore, which is, not surprisingly, an English-language bookstore almost on a corner in Rome, run by a semi-retired Irish expatriate. And that's where, on a beautiful autumn day, in one of the world's great cities, I buried myself for hours.

They don't do much Amazon.com in Rome. They insist on browsing. I browsed, and I bought three books for which I had no room in my luggage. If I could retire someday, running a bookstore in Rome wouldn't be the worst way to do it.

Instead, I'll settle for doing my annual column on the books I've read this year. I missed last year to howls of protest (OK, from two people). So as not to offend two more:

Debut novels so good they make a columnist want to quit writing. Chad Harbach's "The Art of Fielding" is about baseball on a small, midwest college campus. But, as one reviewer put it, it's about baseball in the way that Moby Dick is about fish. And Melville, by the way, plays a minor role in a book that is as much about literature as it is baseball and more about the romance, lost and found, in the pursuit of perfection, than either.

Here's Harbach on baseball: "You loved it because you considered it an art: an apparently pointless affair, undertaken by people with a special aptitude, which sidestepped attempts to paraphrase its value yet somehow seemed to communicate something true or even crucial about the Human Condition."

If Harbach is influenced by Jonathan Franzen — as he openly admits — Teju Cole's "Open City" could be ripped right out of the pages of the late W.G. Sebald ("Austerlitz"). The city is New York, the lead character an Nigerian immigrant doctor, who walks the streets and observes in a way that — if you like Sebald — will knock you out.

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If you think things are bad now ... . Go back to World War I, when everything went to hell. In Swedish historian Peter Englund's "The Beauty and the Sorrow," he wrote what he calls an anti-history. He takes 20 people, ordinary and not so ordinary, British and Hungarian and French and Russian and German and Turkish, and tells their stories from their diaries, carrying them from start to end of the war and leaving us with characters, and tragedy, that Tolstoy would have recognized.

Erik Larson ("The Devil in the White City") takes us to 1933 to tell the story of William Dodd, a history professor who became FDR's ambassador to Berlin just as Hitler was taking power. It's called "In the Garden of the Beasts" — and we know who the beasts are. But in 1933, they were just catching on. Larson mines diaries (especially of Dodd's daughter Martha, who slept with Nazis and communists alike) to produce history that reads like a can't-put-it-down novel.

But things aren't as bad as they will be. Novelist Gary Shteyngart ("The Russian Debutante's Handbook") is showy, self-indulgent and hilarious. If Orwell had been self-indulgently hilarious, he might have written "Super Sad True Love Story," which is about America in decline, swallowed up by its own consumerism, wherein everyone communicates with an an iPhone-like apparatus that keeps people constantly informed of the important stuff, like your ever-flashing credit score.

We still have books and rock 'n' roll — for now. I bought "The Marriage Plot" in my Rome bookstore for the ride home. It is an airplane read, particularly if you've got a long ride. Jeffrey Eugenides ("Middlesex") puts us back on campus in the '80s, to explore what books used to explore: love and war. We get wars on literature, postmodern vs. premodern, Derrida vs. Jane Austen, and looks at love through the lens (plot spoiler alert) of mental illness, which may be the most appropriate way.

"A Visit from the Goon Squad," by Jennifer Egan, is a novel, or 13 connected short stories, or a sly meditation on music from the '80s. (If you want a real memoir, do Patti Smith's fine "Just Kids," on her days with Robert Mapplethorpe). Egan gets the music perfect, and the connections provide their own beat.

Where writers matter. Julian Barnes is in that generation of British writers (Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, et al) that may be the last when w riters do matter. His Booker Prize-winning book, "The Sense of an Ending," goes back to school days to learn about making the wrong, safe choice. OK, that's about what most British novels do. But they don't do it like Barnes.

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Best for last. There have been approximately a million books written about the Civil War. But I've never read one like "A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War," which is fascinating and beautifully written and explains how the war divided Britain in much the same way it divided America. We get a look at the usual players, but from different perspectives, including those of the new-breed London foreign correspondents who influenced public opinion back home. All that mattered in this battle was which side would win the war.

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