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Writers in diverse genres produce many worthy titles

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The year 2011 was not a good one for book sales, but many excellent titles were published. Here are some of the year's best:

Fiction

- 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.

- 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.

- Eleanor Brown's "The Weird Sisters" (Putnam), a story of three daughters of a Shakespeare scholar who return home after their mother is diagnosed with cancer, is one of the year's best.

- 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.

- 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 & 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).