

The Washington Post

NOTABLE NONFICTION OF 2011

December 9, 2011

1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created

By [Charles C. Mann](#) (Knopf, \$30.50)

A god's-eye view of the world in 1493 that explores the economic and ecological shifts unleashed by Columbus's discovery of America. — *Gregory McNamee*

AGE OF GREED: The Triumph of Finance and the Decline of America, 1970 to the Present

By [Jeff Madrick](#) (Knopf, \$30)

Looking for the roots of our financial decline, Madrick narrates a history that brims with powerful men, ugly fights, infamous scandals, twists and turns, and, true to the book's title, lots of shameless cupidity. — *David Greenberg*

ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE: The Hidden History of the Financial Crisis

By [Bethany McLean](#) and Joe Nocera (Portfolio/Penguin, \$32.95)

Although delivered in a measured tone, the revelations in this account of the events that helped bring on the financial crisis are nonetheless shocking. — *Daniel Gross*

AND SO IT GOES: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life

By Charles J. Shields (Henry Holt, \$30)

This unsparing but ultimately convincing portrait shows Vonnegut as alternately generous and abrasive, kind and petulant, sentimental and emotionally remote — a man defined by his contradictions and determined to have his say. Shields looks beyond Vonnegut's status as cultural icon, showing us the gifted, all-too-human figure beneath. The result is a first-rate biography and a cogent work of social and cultural history. — *William Sheehan*

AND THE SHOW WENT ON: Cultural Life in Nazi-Occupied Paris

By [Alan Riding](#) (Knopf, \$28.95)

A vivid historical account of the Nazi era that plunges the reader into the French cultural scene of the 1930s and '40s and shows us how real men and real women dealt with the devil. — *Michael Dirda*

A WORLD ON FIRE: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War

By [Amanda Foreman](#) (Random House, \$35)

An energetic, detailed tale of the British engagement with the American Civil War built around a huge cast of politicians, diplomats, soldiers and civilians in Great Britain, the United States and the Confederacy. — *Gary W. Gallagher*

BELIEVING IS SEEING: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography

By [Errol Morris](#) (Penguin Press, \$40)

A thought-provoking and detailed exploration of photography's connection to the real world by the Academy Award-winning filmmaker. — *Michael S. Roth*

BLUE NIGHTS

By [Joan Didion](#) (Knopf, \$25)

Didion's companion volume to "The Year of Magical Thinking," a memoir about the death of her daughter and her own diminished capacities, is a beautiful condolence note to humanity about some of the painful realities of the human condition. — *Heller McAlpin*

BOOMERANG: Travels in the New Third World

By [Michael Lewis](#) (Norton, \$25.95)

In his latest

best book on the planet's seemingly endless financial implosion, Lewis drops in on Iceland, Greece, Ireland and Germany and chronicles the messes they've made of their markets and money. — *Carlos Lozada*

BRANCH RICKEY

By [Jimmy Breslin](#) (Viking, \$19.95)

Breslin's eloquent tale of the man who masterminded the integration of baseball. — *Steven Levingston*

CARAVAGGIO

By [Andrew Graham-Dixon](#) (Norton, 39.95)

This enthralling biography of the great Italian painter reads like a historical-swashbuckler-cum-detective-story while also providing an introduction to some of the most admired paintings in Western art. — *Michael Dirda*

CATHERINE THE GREAT: Portrait of a Woman

By [Robert K. Massie](#) (Random House, \$35)

Massie, biographer of the tsars, brings great authority to this sweeping account of Catherine and her times. His story of this epic life is warm, sure and confiding, even when plowing through yet another war with the Turks. — *Kathy Lally*

CHARLES DICKENS: A Life

By [Claire Tomalin](#) (Penguin Press, \$36)

In her vivid and moving new biography of Dickens, Tomalin demonstrates that the writer's own life was rich in the attributes we call "Dickensian": shameless melodrama, gargantuan appetites, and reversals of fortune. — *Michael Sims*

COCKTAIL HOUR UNDER THE TREE OF FORGETFULNESS

By [Alexandra Fuller](#) (Penguin Press, \$25.95)

Set against the backdrop of war-torn Africa, Fuller treats us to the inside scoop on her glamorous, tragic, indomitable mother. — *Binka Le Breton*

DESTINY OF THE REPUBLIC: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President

By [Candice Millard](#) (Doubleday, \$28.95)

A crisp, concise, revealing history of the assassination of James Garfield and its aftermath. Millard makes a convincing case that Garfield's death helped unify the country after the Civil War. — *Del Quentin Wilber*

ENDGAME: Bobby Fischer's Remarkable Rise and Fall — From America's Brightest Prodigy to the Edge of Madness

By [Frank Brady](#) (Crown, \$25.99)

Brady, a onetime confidant of chess master Bobby Fischer's, mines new materials to offer a nuanced portrait worthy of his charismatic subject. — *Michael Dirda*

THE FOREMOST GOOD FORTUNE

By [Susan Conley](#) (Knopf, \$25.95)

A cranky account of how an American family journeys to China on a business trip and learns, the hard way, what it is — in any way — to become "Chinese." — *Carolyn See*

THE GREATER JOURNEY: Americans in Paris

By [David McCullough](#)

(Simon & Schuster, \$37.50)

A lively and entertaining panorama of 19th-century American expatriate life in Paris, from the prolific biographer. — *Michael Sims*

THE HEMLOCK CUP: Socrates, Athens, and the Search for the Good Life

By [Bettany Hughes](#) (Knopf, \$35)

Hughes vividly brings to life Socrates and the world of ancient Athens, shedding new light on the mythological figure and his milieu. — *Steve Donoghue*

IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin

By [Erik Larson](#) (Crown, \$26)

Larson's account of an American family swept into the maw of Nazi Berlin reads like an elegant thriller. There were several occasions on which I had to stop and check to make sure it really was a work of nonfiction. — *Philip Kerr*

IN THE PLEX: How Google Thinks, Works, and Shapes Our Lives

By [Steven Levy](#) (Simon & Schuster, \$26)

A detailed intellectual history of Google's major innovations that lays bare its outsize ambitions and prodigious talents. — *Siva Vaidhyanathan*

JERUSALEM: The Biography

By [Simon Sebag Montefiore](#) (Knopf, \$35)

Sebag, whose great-great uncle built Jerusalem's first Jewish neighborhood outside the old city, offers a fact-rich account of the conquerors, empires and warlords who have taken turns ruling and ravaging the city. — *Jackson Diehl*

THE LAST RESORT

By [Norma Watkins](#)

(University of Mississippi, \$28)

A gorgeous memoir of a rural hotel made for the ruling Southern class, except there's nothing much to rule anymore. — *Carolyn See*

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL BECKETT, Vol. 2, 1941-1956

Edited by George Craig et al.

(Cambridge, \$50)

[This sumptuous volume](#), complete with lavishly detailed notes, yearly chronologies and an extensive biographical appendix, reveals Beckett during his most creative period. — *Michael Dirda*

LIFE ITSELF: A Memoir

By [Roger Ebert](#) (Grand Central, \$27.99)

Ebert weaves tales from childhood, interviews with film stars and directors, funny and touching stories about colleagues in a series of loosely organized, often beautifully written essays. — *Gerald Bartell*

LOST IN SHANGRI-LA:

A True Story of Survival, Adventure, and the Most Incredible Rescue Mission of World War II.

By [Mitchell Zuckoff](#) (Harper, \$26.99)

Zuckoff vividly reconstructs the remarkable tale of three survivors of a 1945 plane crash who were trapped in a jungle. — *David Grann*

LOVE AND CAPITAL: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution

By [Mary Gabriel](#) (Little, Brown, \$35)

Gabriel's ambitious biography, a National Book Award finalist, gives us a more human and more flawed Karl Marx than the stern patriarch, intellectual giant and revolutionary theorist we have seen before. — *Elaine Showalter*

MALCOLM X: A Life of Reinvention

By [Manning Marable](#) (Viking, \$30)

Marable's portrait of Malcolm X, a National Book Award finalist, is not just a biography but also a history of Muslims in America and a sweeping account of one man's transformation. — *Wil Haygood*

THE MEMORY PALACE

By [Mira Bartok](#) (Free Press, \$25)

In this disturbing, beautiful book, Bartok, a prolific children's author, recounts growing up in the shadow of her mother's schizophrenia. — *Reeve Lindbergh*

MOONWALKING WITH EINSTEIN: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything

By [Joshua Foer](#) (Penguin Press, \$26.95)

Drawing on both science and personal experience, Foer argues that in exchange for scientific progress, we may have traded away our most valuable resource: human memory. — *Marie Arana*

NEVER SAY DIE: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age

By [Susan Jacoby](#) (Pantheon, \$27.95)

Jacoby's tough-minded and important book demolishes popular myths that we can "cure" the "disease" of aging. — *Judith Viorst*

THE NEXT CONVERGENCE: The Future of Economic Growth in a Multispeed World

By [Michael Spence](#) (Farrar Straus Giroux, \$27)

Spence, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, presents a nuanced, highly readable argument on the fraught relationship between today's booming developing markets and the seemingly stagnant developed ones. — *Daniel Gross*

NOTHING DAUNTED: The Unexpected Education of Two Society Girls in the West

By [Dorothy Wickenden](#) (Scribner, \$26)

Wickenden's enchanting family memoir tells the story of two plucky society girls from New York who head west for no other reason than to fight off boredom. — *Marie Arana*

PLAYING WITH FIRE: Pakistan at War With Itself

By [Pamela Constable](#) (Random House, \$28)

Post foreign correspondent Constable's engaging account of Pakistan's highly complex society helps explain why the country has not fulfilled some of the dire predictions made about its imminent collapse. — *Owen Bennett-Jones*

RAWHIDE DOWN: The Near Assassination of Ronald Reagan

By [Del Quentin Wilber](#) (Henry Holt, \$27)

Wilber, a Post reporter, offers a gripping, detailed account of the day Reagan was shot, while also looking at the political footprint of that historic moment.

— *David Baldacci*

RECKLESS ENDANGERMENT: How Outsized Ambition, Greed, and Corruption Led to Economic Armageddon

By [Gretchen Morgenson and Joshua Rosner](#) (Times, \$30)

The authors make a powerful argument that cozy connections between government and the financial industry were the primary cause of the financial crisis. — *John B. Taylor*

THE RISE AND FALL OF ANCIENT EGYPT

By [Toby Wilkinson](#) (Random House, \$35)

An illuminating and refreshingly readable overview of the phenomenon of ancient Egypt, from its prehistory to the death of Cleopatra. — *Steve Donoghue*

ROCK THE CASBAH: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World

By [Robin Wright](#) (Simon & Schuster, \$26.99)

Former Post reporter Wright deftly escorts readers around the Muslim world in a book that puts the popular uprisings that have swept the Arabic-speaking Middle East in the context of a larger movement. — *Lee Smith*

A SINGULAR WOMAN: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mother

By [Janny Scott](#) (Riverhead, \$26.95)

Through meticulous reporting, archival research and extensive interviews, Scott demystifies Ann Dunham, offering a nuanced portrait of the woman who helped shape the 44th president.

— *Ann Gerhart*

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY: Coco Chanel's Secret War

By [Hal Vaughan](#) (Knopf, \$27.95)

The Chanel of Vaughan's compelling biography is a single-minded woman who faced history, made hard choices, connived, lied, collaborated and used every imaginable wile to survive. — *Marie Arana*

SMALL MEMORIES: A Memoir

By [Jose Saramago](#) (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$22)

In this quietly charming memoir, Nobel laureate Saramago, who died in 2010, recalls his early years in Portugal. — *Michael S. Roth*

STOLEN WORLD: A Tale of Reptiles, Smugglers and Skulduggery

By [Jennie Erin Smith](#) (Crown, \$25)

A chronicle of the illicit world of animal smuggling that reads like “The Lavender Hill Mob,” and is a perfect advertisement for crime. — *Carolyn See*

THE STORY OF CHARLOTTE’S WEB: E.B. White’s Eccentric Life in Nature and the Birth of an American Classic

By [Michael Sims](#) (Walker, \$25)

An unabashed homage to White that explores the roots of his children’s classic. — *Valerie Sayers*

TIGER, TIGER

By [Margaux Fragoso](#) (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$26)

Fragoso’s memoir about her complex relationship with a pedophile manages to tell a disturbing story beautifully, leading readers into the secret world she inhabited for decades and even inspiring a modicum of sympathy for the man who manipulated and abused her. — *Lisa Bonos*

THE TRIPLE AGENT: The al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA

By [Joby Warrick](#) (Doubleday, \$26.95).

Warrick, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Post reporter, takes readers inside international spy agencies in his riveting story of a Jordanian doctor who penetrated both the inner circle of al-Qaeda and the CIA. — *Steve Hendricks*

VAN GOGH: The Life

By Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith (Random House, \$40)

Naifeh and Smith question the conventional wisdom of Van Gogh as the mad, suffering genius who cut off his ear for a prostitute and committed suicide in a cornfield with circling crows. What if untreatable epilepsy drove him mad, he didn’t cut off his ear to impress a woman, and he was shot by delinquents? they ask. Their investigation reads like a novel, full of suspense and intimate detail. — *Julia Fray*

THE WARS OF AFGHANISTAN: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers

By [Peter Tomsen](#) (PublicAffairs, \$39.99)

In this sweeping look at Afghanistan, Tomsen, a former U.S. special envoy to the Afghan resistance groups, helps us understand how Afghanistan in the 20th century was able to achieve not only intermittent calm and prosperity but also gradual democratization.

— *Stephen Tanner*

WHO’S AFRAID OF POST-BLACKNESS? What It Means to Be Black Now

By [Toure](#) (Free Press, \$25)

With liberal doses of personal experience, Toure demolishes the notion that there is only one way to be racially authentic.

— *Gwen Ifill*

A WIDOW’S STORY: A Memoir

By [Joyce Carol Oates](#) (Ecco, \$27.99)

Oates’s account of her grief after the death of her husband is as enthralling as it is painful. — *Valerie Sayers*

WILD BILL DONOVAN: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage

By [Douglas Waller](#) (Free Press, \$30)

A dramatic yet scholarly biography of the man who built a far-flung intelligence organization from scratch in the midst of World War II. — *David Wise*