

Our Staff Pick Their Favorite Books of 2008

Fiction

Attack of the Theater People by Marc Acito

Edward Zanni is kicked out of drama school for being "too jazz hands for Julliard." He goes on to be a party motivator--wowing 13-year-old girls, unwittingly breaking the law and becoming a target for the feds, a tenacious groupie, and his ex-stepmother.

--RA

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga

Don't miss this year's Man Booker Prize for Fiction: a dark and unforgettable story of the son of a rickshaw puller in modern-day India.

--KF

To This Day by S.Y. Agnon

A Jewish man with a lively sense of humor and a tendency to spin parables has trouble securing decent lodging in Berlin during World War I. Much more is going on in this tricky little book than a search for housing. The war plays a mischievously understated role, and questions of Jewishness and the diaspora provide its powerful undercurrent. Agnon won the Nobel Prize in 1966, but this book, originally written in 1952, has only now been translated into English.

--Scott

The Elegance of the Hedgehog by Muriel Barbery

Like its two narrators--Renee, the pessimistic, widowed concierge at an upscale Parisian apartment house, and Paloma, a smart but suicidal preteen resident--this book is delightfully eclectic. The plot is simple, but the characters are not. Renee and Paloma share with us their astute observations on life, loneliness, family, friendship, culture and cats in a way that is dark, funny, philosophical, heartbreaking and redemptive all at once.

--MVW

People of the Book by Geraldine Brooks

In 1996, Hanna Heath, a young Australian book conservator is called upon to analyze the famed Sarajevo Haggadah, a priceless 600-year-old Jewish prayer book that has been salvaged from a destroyed Bosnian library. When Hanna discovers a series of artifacts in the centuries-old book, she unwittingly exposes an international cover-up.

--Leslie

Diary of a Bad Year by J.M. Coetzee

This brief book is an entertaining and unusual blurring of fiction and non-fiction. A septuagenarian author writing an anthology of “strong opinions” enlists secretarial help from his attractive neighbor, Anya. The pages are divided into three-parts: C’s essays on a diverse range of political and social concerns; Anya’s account of working for C and living with her financier husband; and C’s diary. The multiple narratives and essays are inventively woven into a fascinating, thought-provoking whole.

--Scott

The Pirates! In an Adventure with Communists by Gideon Defoe

The Pirate Captain attempts to help Karl Marx (whose beard is distinctly similar to his own) discover who is trying to make the communists look bad in Europe.

--RA

Riven by Jerry B. Jenkins

Riven is a powerful novel about two very different men, each of whom struggles with his own inner turmoil. Torn by loss of a dream and difficult relationships, their paths cross. A story of faith, courage, and inspiration emerge.

--Margo June

Unaccustomed Earth by Jhumpa Lahiri

This new collection of short stories continues many of the same themes developed in Lahiri's previous works, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*. Lahiri explores immigration, exile, and generational and cultural differences through realistic, complex characters and with precise, emotionally evocative language.

--MVW

A Most Wanted Man by John Le Carre

An idealistic German lawyer and an aging British banker form an alliance to save a starving, tortured Russian Muslim from those who see him only as a pawn in the War on Terror. While not as compelling as *The Constant Gardener* or *Absolute Friends*, Le Carre is always worth reading.

--Eileen

Netherland by Joseph O'Neill

This story of a family living in New York City after 9/11 -- Rachel from London, Hans from Holland, their son Jake, and Hans' Trinidadian cricket-playing friend, Chuck -- is a poignant reflection on love, friendship, and the challenging delights of finding meaning in new worlds. A book for the ages.

--KF

The Diving Pool by Yoko Ogawa

Three realistic yet haunting novellas by a popular Japanese author who is rarely translated into English. Ogawa creates an ominous atmosphere out of everyday events such as a sister's pregnancy and a woman's visit to her old college dorm. There is no need for the supernatural as the author brings out the horror that lies within her characters.

--Richard

Knockemstiff by Donald Ray Pollock

A series of interconnected stories varying in time but all set in the small midwestern town of Knockemstiff, Ohio. Blunt, unrelenting and darkly humorous at times, this book follows its characters as they grapple with addiction, family and the consequences of living in a town that has never seen better days.

--Richard

Searching for Paradise in Parker, PA by Kris Radish

Addy has had it with Lucky and his garage, the "Kingdom of Krap." Just when she plans to drive right through the piles of old appliances and reject bowling balls, Lucky knocks on her window and tells her he has won a luxury trip to Costa Rica. Addy's hopes that the trip can help revive their marriage are dashed when Lucky injures his back and cancels their trip to paradise. Addy's women friends and Lucky's bowling team are soon taking sides in their marital separation.

The Most of It by Mary Ruefle

Somewhere between prose poems and fiction, these playful and experimental pieces tackle everyday topics and focus the mind with their strong images and metaphors -- such as a giant burning cherries jubilee as the capital's war monument, or whether a planned new garden bench is for looking at or sitting on. Others extend to the surreal, such as the title story in which an aunt sends letters written in handwriting so large that they have to be pieced together on the street and read from the rooftop. These creative miniatures go down easy and encourage re-reading. If you like this book, you might want to try the somewhat darker short fiction by Lydia Davis.

--Scott

Love in the Time of Fridges by Tim Scott

Feral fridges roam the streets trying to avoid being caught by the government and shipped to the desert. New Seattle Health and Safety reminds you: Be careful of apple pie filling! It's absurdly hot!

--RA

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society by Mary Ann Shaffer

Island residents meet to discuss books and fight the oppressive atmosphere created by the Nazi occupation of this island during World War II. A gentle read that emphasizes literature's ability to bridge differences in age, social status and gender—and even to foster a romance.

--Eileen

Camera by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

Toussaint's characters are stuck in a world of false starts, stalled cars, taxi shortages and a sort of Beckettian waiting in this novella of failed connections. The writing is clear-eyed and patient, at times lyrically detailing mundane details of everyday life, such as trying to fork an olive as it slides around on a plate. This one's not for thrill-seekers, but if you are drawn in by assured narration, astute symbolism and lackadaisical meditations, this book is for you.

--Scott

The Assistant by Robert Walser

Young Joseph Marti works for wayward inventor Karl Tobler, whose estate is slipping further into insolvency. He doesn't have much to do other than deflect creditors and entertain Tobler's wife when the boss is away or at the tavern. This perceptive narrative captures both the indolence and vitality of youth as it vacillates between aesthetic reverie, self-criticism and ennui. Walser was admired by Franz Kafka, Robert Musil and Walter Benjamin, but this 1908 title has only now been published in English.

--Scott

Non-fiction

Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul by

Karen Abbott

A look at Chicago in 1900 and the rise of history's most prestigious bordello, the sisters who ran it, the politicians who protected it, and the crusaders who tried to bring it down.

--RA

Free for All by Don Borchert

This book is about "oddballs, geeks and gangstas in the public library" and the "mild mannered librarian who tells all!" I loved this book... it was laugh out loud funny!

--Linda

Barefoot Contessa: Back to Basics: Fabulous Flavor from Simple Ingredients by Ina Garten

This essential Ina Garten cookbook focuses on the techniques behind her elegant food and easy entertaining style, offering nearly 100 brand new recipes that will become favorites. With full-color photographs and great cooking tips.

--Leslie

Dark Summit by Nick Heil

Have commercial expeditions turned Mount Everest into a deadly circus? The 2006 climbing season saw more people die on Mount Everest than any previous year. On the way to the summit, numerous climbers passed David Sharp as he lay dying adjacent to the climbing route, raising an outcry and fueling the controversy about what constitutes morality above 8,000 feet, the area known as "the death zone." A must for armchair Everest aficionados.

A Nuclear Family Vacation by Nathan Hodge and Sharon Weinberger

Join this husband and wife journalistic team as they travel to many of the sites where nuclear weapons were created, tested and rationalized. From the scientists of Los Alamos to the young men and women in silos waiting to launch their deadly payload, the authors question them all about the role of nuclear weapons in a world with only one superpower left standing.

--Richard

I Will Not Be Broken: Five Steps to Overcoming a Life Crisis by Jerry White

A guide to recreating a happy and fulfilling life after a catastrophe. This striking book has been called "a road map for the individual and their family to re-enter the land of the living."

--Leslie

Kids & Teens

Robe of Skulls by Vivian French

This chapter book for children incorporates all the compelling qualities of a once-upon-a-time tale and weaves a funny and energetic story that children will be sure to love. The story starts when Sorceress Lady Lamorna wants to purchase a new black velvet gown embroidered with spider webs and adorned with little skulls all along the hem but finds she has run out of gold. She comes up with an evil plan involving princes, frogs and blackmail to raise the needed funds. I loved how the plot turned, twisted and kept me guessing until the end.

--Andrea Wallis

Nicholas in Trouble by Rene Goscinny

Nicholas in Trouble is the fifth book in the wonderful series of children's books, originally written in French in the '50s and '60s. Nicholas will delight English-speaking readers once again with his quick wit, charm and mischief.

--KF

Model: a Memoir by Cheryl Diamond

I'm just finishing reading *Model: a Memoir*, by Cheryl Diamond. The author, a former high-fashion model in New York City, describes what a difficult career modeling actually is. There's a high price to pay for all the glamour and excitement.

--Margaret Remick

Moonpowder by John Rocco

This beautiful book tells the adventure of Eli Treebuckle, "fixer of all things fixable," as he works with the moon to save dreams. The illustrations are breathtaking! I can imagine this story being a bed-time favorite for many young ones.

--Andrea Wallis