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## BOOKS & ARTS

### Books of the year

## Pick of the pile

Dec 4th 2008

From The Economist print edition

Illustration by Daniel Pudles



The best books of 2008 covered the Iraq war, Chinese capitalism, Mississippi blues, fishing in Sweden, ayatollahs, human waste and the secret life of words

### Politics and current affairs

#### **The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State.**

By Noah Feldman.

Princeton University Press; 200 pages; \$22.95 and £13.50

A short, incisive and elegant book by a Harvard specialist in Islamic political thought, which analyses the dilemma posed by the huge popular support, among many Muslims, for explicitly Islamic forms of government.

#### **A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East.**

By Lawrence Freedman.

PublicAffairs; 624 pages; \$29.95. Weidenfeld & Nicolson; £20

The region's key events provide ample material for this subtle re-examination: the fall of the shah, the three wars in the Persian Gulf,  *jihad*  in Afghanistan, Jimmy Carter's half-success at peacemaking at Camp David in 1978 and Bill Clinton's failure there two decades later.

#### **Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy.**

By David Marquand.

Weidenfeld & Nicolson; 496 pages; £25

A rich, compelling and convincing account of recent British political history by a man who has experienced it as a member of parliament, a journalist and a distinguished academic historian.

**The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict.**

By Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes.  
Norton; 311 pages; \$22.95. Allen Lane; £20

With the patience of auditors and the passion of polemicists, two academics, one a Nobel prize-winning economist and the other a public-finance expert at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, take an unflinching look at the hidden cost of invading Iraq.

**The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals.**

By Jane Mayer.  
Doubleday; 400 pages; \$27.50 and £22.85

A comprehensive and compelling examination of how a handful of officials, working in extreme secrecy, even from their colleagues, prosecuted the war on terror, undermining America's civil liberties.

**Law and the Long War: The Future of Justice in the Age of Terror.**

By Benjamin Wittes.  
Penguin Press; 305 pages; \$25.95

How the Bush administration came to adopt the tactics that became the hallmark of its struggle against al-Qaeda and its ilk.

**India: The Emerging Giant.**

By Arvind Panagariya.  
Oxford University Press; 544 pages; \$39.95 and £19.99

An analysis of how Manmohan Singh, first as finance minister and now as prime minister, sought to fight India's poverty with sweeping reforms aimed at promoting rapid economic growth.

**Dinner with Mugabe: The Untold Story of a Freedom Fighter Who Became a Tyrant.**

By Heidi Holland.  
Penguin; 280 pages; \$30 and £17.99

The most intimate account yet published of Robert Mugabe's transformation from liberation hero to reviled despot.

**Economics and business****The Trillion Dollar Meltdown: Easy Money, High Rollers, and the Great Credit Crash.**

By Charles R. Morris.  
PublicAffairs; 224 pages; \$22.95 and £13.99

The first big book on the credit crunch saw the crisis coming three years ago. Freak-out-onomics for I-told-you-sos.

**Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State.**

By Yasheng Huang.  
Cambridge University Press; 366 pages; \$30 and £15.99

Convincingly overturns the usual analyses of the nature of China's economy, and brilliantly predicts, a year ahead of other commentators, its steep decline.

**When Markets Collide: Investment Strategies for the Age of Global Economic Change.**

By Mohamed El-Erian.  
McGraw Hill; 304 pages; \$27.95 and £15.99

Ignore the in-your-face cover. This is a fluent and intelligent account of the credit crisis: why it happened and how to survive it. Winner of the 2008 *Financial Times* and Goldman Sachs business book of the year award.

**The Venturesome Economy: How Innovation Sustains Prosperity in a More Connected World.**

By Amar Bhide.  
Princeton University Press; 520 pages; \$35 and £19.95

A counterintuitive view of technology and globalisation that will delight those who believe that American innovation

is insulated from economic ups and downs.

**The Logic of Life: The Rational Economics of an Irrational World.**

By Tim Harford.

Random House; 272 pages; \$25. Little, Brown; £18.95

Neither too lofty nor dumbed down, this is a fascinating study of how society is shaped by hidden pay-offs and punishments.

**Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World.**

By Don Tapscott.

McGraw-Hill; 384 pages; \$27.95 and £15.99

A management guru explains why the net generation, who grew up playing video games and spending time on the internet, are not all messed up, as many people suspect, but have actually been improved by the experience.

Illustration by Daniel Pudles



**Globality: Competing with Everyone from Everywhere for Everything.**

By Hal Sirkin, Jim Hemerling and Arindam Bhattacharya.

Business Plus; 304 pages; \$26.99 and £18.99

Hal Sirkin and two colleagues explore how rich-country multinationals face increasingly effective competition from new emerging-market corporate champions, which compete not just on lower costs but also on greater ingenuity and efficiency.

**The Partnership: The Making of Goldman Sachs.**

By Charles D. Ellis.

Penguin Press; 752 pages; \$37.95. Allen Lane; £25

Goldman Sachs has long set the gold standard in finance, even though the current crisis nearly brought it down. With unprecedented access to insiders, Charles Ellis provides the best account yet of the rise of this investment bank and what makes it tick.

## History

**The Return of History and the End of Dreams.**

By Robert Kagan.

Knopf; 128 pages; \$19.95. Atlantic Books; £12.99

A short, simple book arguing that we are now back in a world of clashing national ambitions and interests; not so different from the 19th century.

**A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World.**

By William J. Bernstein.

Atlantic Monthly Press; 467 pages; \$30. Atlantic Books; £22

Globalisation often gets a bad press, so it is interesting to read this hymn to commercial exchange that shows how, largely for better, sometimes for worse, our world has been defined by trade.

**Freedom for the Thought that We Hate: A Biography of the First Amendment.**

By Anthony Lewis.

Basic Books; 240 pages; \$25 and £14.99

A concise and wise presentation of the history and scope of freedom of thought in the United States, with conclusions that are well worth pondering.

**The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science.**

By Richard Holmes.

Harper Press; 380 pages; £20. To be published in America by Pantheon Books in July

A dazzling cornucopia exploring the impact of discovery upon such great Romantic writers as Mary Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron and John Keats.

**Masters and Commanders: How Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Alanbrooke Won the War in the West.**

By Andrew Roberts.

Allen Lane; 720 pages; £25. To be published in America by Harper in May

Andrew Roberts lays claim to the title of Britain's finest contemporary military historian with this important analysis of grand strategy during the second world war, which, among other delights, vindicates that much maligned British way of doing things: the committee.

**Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China.**

By Philip P. Pan.

Simon & Schuster; 368 pages; \$28. Picador; £14.99

Detailed profiles of 11 Chinese, mostly present day, which together provide a not very pretty snapshot of China's political development. One of the best descriptions of what life has been like for many Chinese citizens during the past 15 years.

**Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present.**

By Jonathan Fenby.

Ecco Books; 816 pages; \$34.95. Published in Britain as "The Penguin History of Modern China"; Allen Lane; £30

The extraordinary growth in China's population, economic productivity and military grasp has not been matched, to anything like the same extent, by developments in the way the country is governed. Jonathan Fenby has written a much-needed new history that points to a coming crisis.

**The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919.**

By Mark Thompson.

Faber & Faber; 464 pages; £25. To be published in America by Basic Books in March

A startling indictment of the Italian state's conduct during the first world war, which shows how Italy's nationalist dream of expansion would turn into the Fascist nightmare.

**The Blackest Streets: The Life and Death of a Victorian Slum.**

By Sarah Wise.

The Bodley Head; 240 pages; £20

An affecting history of life in the crowded slums of 19th-century London which traces, with great restraint, the links between poor housing, poverty and criminality.

**Empires of the Sea: The Siege of Malta, the Battle of Lepanto, and the Contest for the Centre of the World.**

By Roger Crowley.

Random House; 368 pages; \$30. Faber and Faber; £20

How the clash of civilisations between Christianity and Islam came to be fought out during the Ottoman sieges of Rhodes and Malta and the battle of Lepanto, with some fairly familiar faults on both sides already becoming visible more than 500 years ago.

**American Rifle: A Biography.**

By Alexander Rose.

Delacorte Press; 512 pages; \$30

How and why American soldiers have learnt to shoot straight.

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## Biography

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### **Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America.**

By Rick Perlstein.

Scribner; 896 pages; \$37.50 and £25

Americans supported Richard Nixon because of his anger and resentment, not despite it. Rick Perlstein offers compelling evidence for a simple but convincing thesis about Nixon's appeal.

### **The World Is What It Is: The Authorised Biography of V.S. Naipaul.**

By Patrick French.

Knopf; 576 pages; \$30. Picador; £20

An elegant and insightful study of the Trinidad-born Nobel laureate who made his name as a novelist and chronicler of India and the Islamic world. A singular example of how good authorised biographies can, and should, be.

### **Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare.**

By Jonathan Bate.

Random House; 496 pages; \$35. Viking; £25

It is almost impossible to write something fresh about William Shakespeare. Yet Jonathan Bate has succeeded, with a sparkling and arresting portrait of the Bard and his world as discovered in his writings.

### **White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson & Thomas Wentworth Higginson.**

By Brenda Wineapple.

Knopf; 432 pages; \$27.95 and £27.95

A portrait of a friendship that is also a sweeping cultural and political history of the lead-in to the American civil war and its aftermath.

### **Chagall: A Biography.**

By Jackie Wullschlager.

Knopf; 608 pages; \$40. Allen Lane; £30

Manages to be both magical and utterly credible in describing an artist who put fiddlers on the roof and made lovers fly through the air.

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## Science and technology

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### **The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters.**

By Rose George.

Metropolitan Books; 304 pages; \$26. Portobello Books; £12.99

A frank and illuminating look at a generally neglected, but very important, aspect of human life.

### **The Princeton Companion to Mathematics.**

Edited by Timothy Gowers, June Barrow-Green and Imre Leader.

Princeton University Press; 1,008 pages; \$99 and £60

This is a panoramic view of modern mathematics. It is tough going in some places, but much of it is surprisingly accessible. A must for budding number-crunchers.

### **Bad Science.**

By Ben Goldacre.

Fourth Estate; 352 pages; £12

A fine lesson in how to skewer the enemies of reason and the peddlers of cant and half-truths.

**The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Duelling Journalists, and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth-Century New York.**

By Matthew Goodman.

Basic Books; 384 pages; \$26 and £15.99

In retelling the story of how, in the 1830s, the *New York Sun* tried to persuade its readers there was life on the moon, Matthew Goodman vividly brings to life a town on the brink of becoming a world-class city.

**Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness.**

By Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein.

Yale University Press; 304 pages; \$26 and £18

How behavioural economics affects everything—from what we eat in restaurants to our investments and pension choices.

**Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population.**

By Matthew Connelly.

Harvard University Press/Belknap; 544 pages; \$35 and £22.95

A vivid account of how the road to controlling population growth in the 20th century was paved with good intentions and unpleasant policies that did not work.

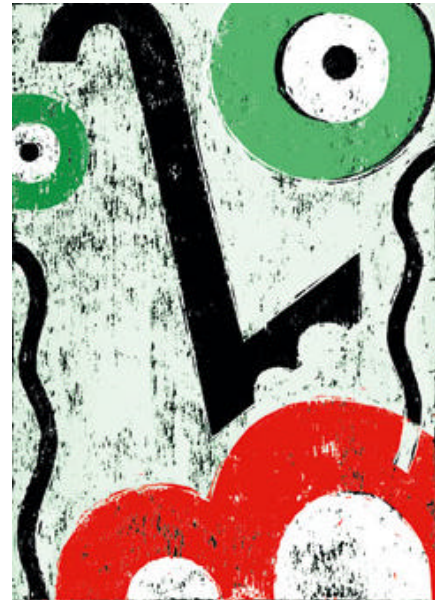
**Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets.**

By Sudhir Venkatesh.

Penguin Press; 320 pages; \$25.95. Allen Lane; £18.99

A rich portrait of the urban poor, drawn not from statistics but from vivid tales of some of the 30,000 residents of Robert Taylor Homes, America's biggest public housing scheme, on Chicago's South Side.

Illustration by Daniel Pudles




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## Culture and digressions

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**Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts.**

By Joseph Horowitz.

HarperCollins; 480 pages; \$27.50 and £27.50

A many-layered account, focusing on the interwar years, of the European immigrants, particularly those from Germany and Russia, who helped create American culture.

**Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History: Volume I, 1863-1959.**

Edited by Bruce Altshuler.

Phaidon; 410 pages; \$90 and £45

The story of the medium through which most art lovers have experienced modern art: the big group show. A must for anyone interested in art, politics and taste in the 20th century.

**The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English.**

By Henry Hitchings.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 440 pages; \$27. John Murray; £16.99

A globe-trotting survey of the world's lingua franca, which includes such nuggets as the word "chagrin", derived from the Turkish for roughened leather, or scaly sharkskin, and "lens", which comes from the Latin for "lentil", or "window" meaning "eye of wind" in old Norse.

**How Fiction Works.**

By James Wood.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 288 pages; \$24. Jonathan Cape; £16.99

Illustration by Daniel Pudles

Displaying a playful exuberance wonderfully at odds with the dry, jargon-strewn tradition of academic criticism, this deft, slender volume analyses how novelists pull rabbits out of hats.

**Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionised American Music.**

By Ted Gioia.

Norton; 448 pages; \$27.95 and £16.99

A way of life as much as music, the passionate blues singing of Mississippi's steamy cotton fields ultimately gave rise to rock 'n' roll. Ted Gioia expertly traces its colourful history and heroes.

**Cold Cream: My Early Life and Other Mistakes.**

By Ferdinand Mount.

Bloomsbury; 384 pages; £15

A beautifully written, poignant and, at times, very funny memoir by a man who describes himself at different points in his life as idle, supercilious, incompetent and emotionally retarded.




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**Fiction and memoirs**

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**Sea of Poppies: A Novel.**

By Amitav Ghosh.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 528 pages; \$26. John Murray; £18.99

Set in India in 1838, this rich and panoramic adventure tells the intricate stories of a cast of hundreds in lustrous and mesmerising prose. The first of a promised trilogy from a master of fiction.

**Breath: A Novel.**

By Tim Winton.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 224 pages; \$23. Picador; £14.99

Two teenagers get caught up with a dangerous surfer, his wife and the waves in this Australian coming-of-age novel that perfectly balances youthful romanticism and disillusion.

**Lush Life.**

By Richard Price.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 464 pages; \$26. Bloomsbury; £12.99

The wry bartenders, brusque cops and gritty rhythmic dialogue of Manhattan's Lower East Side turn this fast-paced murder-mystery into a whodunnit with literary heft.

**The Secret Scripture.**

By Sebastian Barry.

Viking; 304 pages; \$24.95. Faber and Faber; £16.99

An elderly female inhabitant of a mental hospital and her psychiatrist tell their stories through their journals. A moving and memorable novel about conflicting versions of Ireland's past.

**Fishing in Utopia: Sweden and the Future That Disappeared.**

By Andrew Brown.

Granta Books; 352 pages; £16.99

Fishing, journalism and the death throes of the Swedish social system are the unpromising ingredients of this thought-provoking and evocative autobiographical memoir.

**The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran.**

By Hooman Majd.

Doubleday; 288 pages; \$24.95

A Western-educated son of an ayatollah portrays the intricacies of Iranian society in this illuminating, critical and affectionate memoir of his homeland.

**Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape.**

By Raja Shehadeh.

Scribner; 200 pages; \$15. Profile Books; £7.99

This superbly written and sad memoir tells the story of a lawyer's fight against Israel's seizure of Palestinian land and how he seeks solace by walking in the wild countryside of the West Bank.

**The Three of Us: A Family Story.**

By Julia Blackburn.

Pantheon; 313 pages; \$26. Jonathan Cape; £16.99

A raw and moving story about a chaotic family and a lost childhood. Beautifully crafted and brave, this book is surprisingly full of forgiveness and humour.

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