TLS THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Books of the Year

Seventy-four contributors from around the world share their standout book(s) from the past twelve months

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Thomas Adès

H is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald (Cape) is a rich and powerful weaving of passionate, but wholly unsentimental, nature writing, ecology, literary investigation and indeed politics, fired by an intense personal narrative of loss, grief, anger and acceptance. In the clarity and beauty of its evocations of landscape and nature, the expressive precision of its language and above all its fiercely felt triangulation of humanity's place in the wider environment, it belongs on the same distinguished shelf as Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*. I was gripped and awed by Will Eaves's *The Absent Therapist* (CB editions), touching, addictive and unlike any other book.

Terri Apter

Until the second quarter of the twentieth century, doctors were ill-equipped to cure even common illnesses, so presumably their expertise lay in managing expectations and preparing for death. Today, medical expertise, and hubris, rarely admit mortality into treatment plans. As a result, patients become willing victims of painful and senseless procedures that, one day, will be recognized as cultural collusion in torture. In *Being Mortal: Illness, medicine, and what matters in the end* (Profile), Atul Gawande is brutally honest about

his own ignorance: he, like most doctors, has had no training in a mortality mindset. Yet, if anyone can navigate through political alarms over "death panels", Gawande can. Even as he exposes the delusions of patients who adhere to rhetoric of "fighting" and "not giving in", he demonstrates warmth and respect for them and their families. *Being Mortal* reminds us that we all share a final story; the challenge is to make it better, together.

John Ashbery

Back in the 1940s when I first began reading contemporary poetry, the British poet Nicholas Moore, son of the philosopher G. E. Moore, was among the foremost innovative young poets in both Britain and America. Though largely forgotten well before his death in 1986, his fame has been kept alive by a few devotees, two of whom, John Lucas and Matthew Welton, have just brought out his *Selected Poems* (Shoestring Press). English poet Mark Ford, perhaps Moore's most brilliant disciple, has recently published his own *Selected Poems* with Coffee House Press in Minneapolis, and a younger British experimental poet, Oli Hazzard, brought out a group of strange and lovely prose poems called *Within Habit* (Test Centre). All three books are among my favourite poetry publications this year.

Julian Barnes

Poets write closer to their lives than novelists, so when you follow a poet down the years you acquire a (possibly false) sense of proximity. I've had Hugo Williams and Kit Wright as decades-long companions. Both are witty and lyrical (and very tall), Wright more the balladeer; they are now seventyish, and the bleaknesses of age and mortality are pushing into their latest collections: Williams's *I Knew the Bride* (Faber) and Wright's *Ode to Didcot Power Station* (Bloodaxe). This makes them even better (and just as companionable). Helen Garner's *This House of Grief* (Text) is a gripping account of a murder trial in which few of the participants act and react in ways we might predict. It's an examination not just of what happened, but

also of what we prefer to believe and what we cannot face believing. Michael Lewis explains the more extreme forms of financial activity in ways the general reader can grasp. *Flash Boys* (Allen Lane) analyses the world of high-frequency trading in lucid and depressing detail.

Paul Batchelor

Geoffrey Hill's *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012*, which appeared from Oxford University Press at the tail-end of 2013, is my book of the year. Hill's work is habitually described in terms of an early and a late period, but seeing it gathered together (along with a wealth of previously unpublished work) one is struck by the consistencies: the unflagging urgency of its enquiry, its respect for the claims of the material and the medium, and its demand for the reader's intelligent patience. Yes, Hill can be difficult, but he is also capable of vivid clarity, offering countless moments of intense lyric beauty. This is work of the first importance.

Mary Beard

One of the most important archaeological discoveries of my lifetime was a sanctuary dedicated to the Roman emperors, unearthed at Aphrodisias in Turkey during the 1970s. Loaded with sculpture, it changed the way we saw Roman rule and how it was represented in the provinces (here was the emperor Claudius shafting a half-naked Britannia, and a deceptively charming pair of Nero with his mother). Now its definitive publication by R. R. R. Smith has appeared, *The Marble Reliefs from the Julio-Claudian Sebasteion* (Philipp von Zabern) – a brilliant and minutely detailed study, at a reasonable cost. Not everyone's stocking-filler, but a must for the keen classicist. Closer to home, and more stocking-filler size, the new Pevsner of Cambridgeshire stands out (Yale University Press). Simon Bradley had done a marvellous job in checking out the bits of the county that the great man missed, and leavening some of his prejudices, without losing the wit or the style. Don't go to Cambridge without it.

Lucy Beckett

Caroline Moorehead's *Village of Secrets* (Chatto and Windus), meticulously researched and calmly told, is the remarkable story of the wartime saving of thousands of people, mostly Jews and mostly children, in the Vivarais-Lignon plateau high in the Massif Central, which had long been a refuge for Huguenots and other persecuted Protestants. This was unoccupied France but the Vichy government set up its own concentration camps and energetically rounded up victims for the death trains to the east. A few pastors, schoolmasters and doctors, and hundreds of farmers, silently took in, fed, clothed and protected those whom they were risking their lives to help, most terrifyingly in 1944 as the Germans scoured the hills and forests to catch every last Jew. Camus spent the bitter winter of 1942–3 in the village at the centre of this story, writing *La Peste*.

Jonathan Benthall

Zia Haider Rahman's debut novel *In the Light of What We Know* (Picador) ranges over rural poverty in Bangladesh, mathematics and epistemology, Wall Street derivatives, human rights advocacy, development projects in Afghanistan, and much else – brilliantly articulated with an acerbic irony and bursting literary allusiveness that only at times seem over the top. Courtroom artists in Britain have to work from memory, but in the USA they have the advantage of being allowed to sit with their drawing materials. *The Illustrated Courtroom: Fifty years of courtroom art* by Elizabeth Williams and Sue Russell (CUNY Journalism Press) is an anthology of this underrated genre. The camera has not yet displaced it in evoking tension: Charles Manson restrained by a bailiff as he leaps to attack the judge, Michael Jackson weeping as he is cleared of child abuse, Bernard Madoff led away to the lockup in handcuffs.

Beverley Bie Brahic

Agota Kristof's *The Notebook* (translated by Alan Sheridan, CB editions). It embarrasses me to say I'd never heard of *The Notebook* until its reissue, along with Nina Bogin's translation of *The Illiterate*, Kristof's memoir. *The Notebook* is a great book, in the absolute. Two boys dumped on their grandmother in wartime Europe refine their survival skills in ways not contemplated by classical tales. Unexpected attachments leaven brutality, and everything is told with a matter-of-factness that took my breath away. Elena Ferrante's *Storia di chi fugge et chi resta* (*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Europa Editions) is as addictive as *Breaking Bad*. By all accounts Ann Goldstein's translation is excellent. Kristof – bare wood; Ferrante – thick paint. Where have I been, not to have heard about them?

Paul Binding

In *Arctic Summer* (Atlantic) Damon Galgut brings his own awareness of tensions arising from different cultural provenances to E. M. Forster's protracted struggle to comprehend India and his Indian friend, Masood, and to write a novel worthy of both. Galgut's narrative drive is as strong as ever, and, remarkably, offers a subtle delineation of the travails of artistic creation. Per Petterson's *I Refuse* (Harvill Secker; translation, Don Bartlett) is his most mysterious novel to date. In their rural community Jim and Tommy are inseparable when young, yet their friendship does not survive maturity. Why not? Certain scenes – like that on the lake when the ice starts cracking – resemble luminous question- marks. *Everything is Wonderful* (Grove), Sigrid Rausing's evocation of her year as a socio-anthropologist witnessing the breakup of a collective farm on a remote Estonian peninsula, is both a truthful record of time and place, and a marvellous metaphor for how people cope with change.

William Boyd

Of all the books published to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of

the First World War the one that has most radically and permanently altered my impressions of that conflict is *The Battlefields of the First World War: The unseen panoramas of the Western Front* by Peter Barton (Constable). These extraordinary panoramic photographs, taken by the Royal Engineers and their German counterparts, were designed for mapping and artillery-spotting purposes. They show in fascinating detail the famous battlefields – Mons, Loos, the Somme, Ypres, etc – and reveal, with an almost 180-degree sweep and expert accompanying analysis, the war in a geographical context that makes you completely reconfigure the received wisdom of those near- mythic battles. You are in those trenches peering out through a loophole scanning no-man's- land. The effect of these photographs is uncanny – highly disturbing, oddly beautiful, terrifying, moving and humbling. An accompanying DVD-Rom allows even more photographic interaction and zooming – if you can bear it.

David Bromwich

A posthumous selection of Muriel Spark's reviews, lectures and radio talks, *The Golden Fleece* (Carcanet) contains memorable appreciations of Emily Brontë as a poet and of the prophecy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which "demonstrated the flaw in a way of thought which was becoming a way of life". The judgements, often oblique, are always unmistakable: "At a dinner party, while smiling till her face ached, Mrs Gaskell's inward eye would be weighing and pricing the beef". Spark says her favourite books to re-read are Proust and the Bible – particularly the Old Testament, with its "clearly delineated characters" and above all "God himself, with his I did this, and I made that, his Thou shalt perish and his I repent . . . . He basks unashamed in his own glory, and his anger is positively blasphemous". She basks unashamed in her wit but holds something in reserve.

Alex Clark

Perhaps appropriately, I first came to Roxane Gay through social media – the

internet community's ability to empower (and, sometimes, diminish) is one of her great subjects. Of course, and for very good reasons, Twitter is not everyone's cup of tea, but Gay is a tweeter par excellence: humane and compassionate, always funny, often angry but never vicious. Her collection of essays, *Bad Feminist* (HarperPerennial), is similarly appealing, but thankfully unconstrained by punitive character limits: in it, she ranges over popular culture, contemporary America, race, academia, social deprivation, trash TV and – as the title hints at – the impossibility and undesirability of living up to ideological blueprints. She is also excellent on competitive Scrabble. She has been my (and many others', I suspect) great discovery of the year.

Jonathan Clark

Unless they are intolerant, one learns much about theism from atheists, and much about atheism from theists. In *The Soul of the World* (Princeton), Roger Scruton, a secularist who cannot resist writing about God, explores areas of philosophy in which he is expert (mind, art, architecture, music, the erotic) and ends by questioning what Mary Midgley called "nothing buttery", the idea that the human mind is nothing but what is described by neuroscience, and so on through the list. Scruton finds that recent trends in philosophy have reopened what might be called a space for the sacred; have re-legitimated respect and even reverence. None of this quite amounts to an additional classic argument for the existence of God; but it is symptomatic. Dover Beach is not about to be submerged. But a tide has turned, and boats at anchor now point the other way.

Richard Davenport-Hines

Robert Tombs's *The English and their History* (Allen Lane) is history at its best. He gives a fluent, elegant and abundantly energetic narrative from the Bronze Age to the Scottish Referendum of 2014. In doing so, he puts our contemporary problems into a historical continuum which cuts them to size

and makes them intelligible. England has been a sovereign kingdom for most of its history: Tombs chronicles its history, reclaims English cultural and political identity from suppressed memory, and records the impact of the London government as an international power and democratic influence. The final section of the book, covering the last half-century, is a triumph of precision and candour : I have not read history that is so important and exciting for years. It convinced me that England's constitutional settlement with Scotland must be adjusted, and North Britons kept from undue parliamentary and fiscal influence in English affairs.

Margaret Drabble

Two very different but complementary books of family history: Alison Light's *Common People* (Fig Tree) is an impressively researched volume recapturing the lost and the forgotten. I read it with admiration, awe and sorrow. So many very hard lives, so many of them ending, almost routinely, in the workhouse or the asylum. The book includes an account of the author's childhood but extends into a full social history, rich with allusions to Austen, Dickens and Gissing. The portrait of the Navy and Fanny Price's Portsmouth is particularly fine. Novelist Diane Johnson's *Flyover Lives* (Viking) is an affectionately witty and stylish account of her Midwest origins in Illinois, her settler ancestors, her girlhood dreams of escape (as a pirate), her love of France. The opening chapter, "A Weekend with the Generals", is a satiric masterpiece, and happily the generals and their wives don't fare much better in the last chapter either.

Katherine Duncan-Jones

Philip Larkin's mother "kept her songs, they took so little space": I have kept a collection of diminutive dark-blue World's Classics. One that I read for the first time this year is George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894) – a compelling chronicle of the life-story of an illiterate yet resourceful woman. Taking up no space at all – for I peruse it in libraries – is Volume IV of *British Drama*

1533–1642 (Oxford University Press), edited by Martin Wiggins in association with Catherine Richardson. Covering 1598–1602, it's informative across the range of plays and entertainments generated during the closing years of Elizabeth I. The extreme complexities of the three-text *Hamlet* are methodically set out in ten pages. Even plays of which no text survives can leave fascinating traces. An Admiral's Men comedy entitled *As Merry As May Be* may be the last play the Queen saw, barely a month before her death.

Richard J. Evans

My book of the year is *Germany: Memories of a nation* (Allen Lane) by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, to accompany the Museum's exhibition of the same name and a series of broadcasts on BBC Radio 4. Sumptuously illustrated, it is unfailingly interesting and stimulating. There is nobody better than MacGregor at getting the maximum meaning out of a cultural object, and the book succeeds triumphantly in demonstrating the richness and diversity of German culture and its many links with history and memory.

Richard Fortey

It may seem to have a grisly appropriateness at the moment, but *Severed* (Granta), Frances Larsen's wonderfully original book, shows that the obsession with severed heads has been deeply embedded in the human psyche for centuries. The head is, after all, that part of the anatomy that reveals personality, identity and indisputable proof of death. She traces the curious histories of heads parted from the dull stuff of their associated arms and legs and torsos. There are shrunken heads, historic heads, heads displayed on pikes in triumph, anthropologists' collections of skulls, heads dissected in attempts to reveal the secrets of consciousness. It is a splendid example of plotting a new brand of history that cuts through conventional categories of science, literature and art. Something to get one's head around.

Roy Foster

Charles Townshend's *The Republic: The fight for Irish independence* (Allen Lane) nailed the Irish revolutionary events of 1918–23 with his inimitable kind of forensic panache; while Senia Paseta's masterly *Irish Nationalist Women 1900–1918* (Cambridge University Press) in a huge archival trawl illuminated an energetic and half-forgotten world of radicalism. Samuel Hynes, ex-fighter pilot as well as supremely gifted literary critic, commemorates another war centenary in *The Unsubstantial Air: American fliers in the First World War* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux): a beautifully written evocation of the Ivy Leaguers, farm boys and wild men who flew avions de chasse from (mainly) French airfields, based on their letters, flight diaries and memories. The most intriguing biography was Selina Hastings's *The Red Earl: The extraordinary life of the 16th Earl of Huntingdon* (Bloomsbury): a consummate quest-for-Corvo, pursuing her secretive quarry through the worlds of 1920s Bright Young Things, 1930s Communism and the Diego Rivera circle, before his lapse into a discreet old age.

Edmund Gordon

The fuss people were making about Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* sequence (Harvill/Vintage) when the third volume was published in March made me realize I had some catching up to do: I read the 1,500-odd pages currently available in English in a few intoxicated days, and the experience put most of my other reading this year in the shade. One novel that did have enough sparkle to cut through the penumbra was Colm Toíbín's *Nora Webster* (Viking). It's much shorter than Knausgaard's magnum opus, but just as immersive, and shares many of the same qualities – lancing honesty and deadpan humour among them. But Toíbín is much the finer craftsman, and his virtuoso study of a widow's progress in 1960s Ireland is one of the most beautiful things I have read in years.

Peter Green

Joseph ben Mattathias – Pharisaical Jewish aristocrat, anti-revolutionary, professional survivor (not least from a Masada-like suicide pact), lucky prophet of Vespasian's rise to the purple – ended his life as Titus Flavius Josephus, Roman citizen and historian, with a fine house, a pension, and Flavian patronage. Frederic Raphael's brilliant study of this looking-glass war character, *A Jew among Romans* (Pantheon) is both well researched history and immensely readable, not only for its riveting narrative, but also for its exuberant digressions on the whole history of the Jewish Diaspora, and a gallery of characters from Spinoza to Disraeli. An exact contemporary of Josephus, the Spanish Roman epigrammatist Martial has long been hamstrung in translation by the impossibility of reproducing his witty obscenities. But now Susan McLean, in *Selected Epigrams: Martial* (University of Wisconsin Press) has given us a neatly chosen, crisply rhymed selection of his most pungent sallies: perfect bedtime reading.

Paul Griffiths

Bob Gilmore's *Claude Vivier* (University of Rochester Press) is a thorough, clear-sighted and humane biography of one of the most extraordinary composers of recent times. Through gauzes of glistening sound, Vivier sought to recover the innocence of childhood. He learned from his teacher Stockhausen and from musicians on Bali, from minimalists and spectralists, but what he wrote was acutely personal, and came from a life hurtling towards an early death, at the hands of a Paris bar pick-up in 1983. Gilmore moves gracefully between the gay scene in Paris or Montreal and the scores on the composer's desk (as Vivier himself did) to create a deeply engaged and engaging portrait. Two blocks of sky-blue text hinged on a single word. The pages of Oli Hazzard's *Within Habit* (Test Centre) are all alike, echoing, elucidating, undermining and sidestepping each other in a three-dimensional maze of meaning.

Lidija Haas

The book that absorbed me most completely was Elena Ferrante's *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (Europa Editions; translated by Ann Goldstein), the latest in her Neapolitan series. To read a vivid personal story so deftly embedded in its political and social context – Italy in the 1960s and 70s – feels rarer than it should. Two other especially captivating translated works: *With My Dog-Eyes* (Melville House), a densely allusive novella by the late Brazilian writer Hilda Hilst, traces the coming undone of a mathematics professor, and is too brilliantly bizarre to describe at this length ("If I wrote in English," the translator, Adam Morris, quotes Hilst as bragging in his introduction, "I would be Joyce"); and *Natural Histories* (Seven Stories; translated by J. T. Lichtenstein), Guadalupe Nettel's collection of wry, spare stories in which animal behaviour illuminates human quirks and obsessions. Then there's Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (Granta), a tale of urban motherhood and adultery told in fragments, scraps, quotations. A formal experiment that never seems forced or precious, it's a small marvel of economy and wit.

Rachel Hadas

In *Plato at the Googleplex: Why philosophy won't go away* (Pantheon), Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's talents as a novelist combine with her philosophical acumen and pedagogic deftness to produce a book which is magisterial, enlightening, and often funny. *Plato at the Googleplex* toggles between two modes: five chapters of historical and intellectual background alternate with five dialogues which bring Plato into the twenty-first century as a visitor to Google's campus, a cable TV show guest, and in other guises. At the close, Plato is about to undergo an MRI of his brain. The book supplies an excellent workout for one's own modest brain. Spiced with comic relief (a technique not unknown to Plato's Socrates), Goldstein's dialogues, which often quote the philosopher verbatim, could easily stand alone. The author makes us feel, as Plato does, that no matter how exhaustive the

dialogue, there's always more to be said, more thinking to be done. In a sense, this compendious book (459 pages) is a brief introduction to its immense subject.

James Hall

Ruth Guilding's *Owning the Past: Why the English collected antique sculpture 1640–1840* (Yale) can be recommended for its 318 evocative illustrations as much as for its clear informative text. Guilding explores the rise and fall of the taste for antique marbles in England, starting with the pioneering Earl of Arundel, and ending with the arrival from Greece of the more "authentic" Elgin Marbles. She maps the extraordinary genealogies and political histories created from combinations of antique and modern busts placed in Palladian settings, as well as the "connoisseurship of libertinism" and neo-classical sculpture galleries. A starring role is given to the thwarted hellenophile Sir Richard Worsley (1751–1805), who turned to antiquarianism after an unusual sex scandal, living in a cottage with his housekeeper while filling Appuldurcombe House on the Isle of Wight with antiquities (now a shell managed by English Heritage).

Claire Harman

In a year stuffed with books about the centenary of the Great War, Mark Bostridge's *The Fateful Year: England 1914* (Viking) stood out for its intelligent reappraisal of the whole twelve months, the scandals, crimes, fashions and fancies that went on before and during the epoch-changing conflict that broke out on August 4. Beautifully written, witty and thoughtful, it puts the portentous date back in context in a very timely way. Another centenary – of his birth – has been marked with the publication of *A C. H. Sisson Reader* (Carcanet), a rich selection from the great outsider's poems, stories, essays and translations that I hope will wake more readers up to his intemperate and melancholy brilliance.

Sudhir Hazareesingh

The year 2014 marked the centenary of the assassination of the French Socialist leader Jean Jaurès, an anniversary fittingly honoured by Gilles Candar and Vincent Duclert's *Jean Jaurès* (Fayard). This magnificent biography superbly conveys Jaurès's intellectual energy and his soaring sense of humanity. It dwells on his major contribution to the Dreyfusard campaign, his extraordinary eloquence as a parliamentarian, and his valiant struggles for workers' rights and for a lasting European peace. Jaurès's internationalism also led him to criticize French colonial practices, and celebrate Islamic civilization. There is a fascinating evocation, too, of his self-styled "meridional identity", rooted in his idealization of the *petite patrie*. As socialism faces a grave crisis in France, and soulless technocrats have colonized the state and the political system, Jaurès's imaginative synthesis of republican and socialist thought offers a salutary reminder of the richness of the French progressive tradition, and the virtue of principled moral leadership.

Michael Hofmann

The Dog (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) by Jack Livings is an exceptional first book of short stories. Eight pieces, all set in China, with scarcely an American character anywhere. I read as slowly as I could, and still finished it in a day. All the stories are good, and "The Crystal Sarcophagus" is outstanding. A poisoned world, with ruthless people, apparatchiks, Stakhanovites, rude, cruel, anxious chancers, and all subtly alien, quite without the American gene. A Cathay for our time, done with so much understanding and conviction, you'd think you'd been there. Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (Granta) is a delectable and generous book: the novel of a marriage, written with elegance and wisdom and learning in bittersweet paragraphs: "The wife is praying a little. To Rilke, she thinks." (Good luck with that!) It's like a flotilla of origami shapes. Burning.

Clive James

To accompany Michael Donaghy's *Collected Poems*, there is a reader's guide to Donaghy called *Smith*, by Don Paterson. I already knew Donaghy was good but Paterson expertly analyses just how good he was. The two poets were friends, so the book is often touching on the personal level. We should all miss Donaghy, however, even if we didn't know him: it was a great talent that died so young. From Australia, there is a beautiful new collection from Stephen Edgar, *Exhibits of the Sun* (Black Pepper). The sudden lyricism of his images grows ever more amazing, not just for their accuracy but for their impetus, like "A horde of headlong grass in central Asia". The avalanche of anthologies continues. Edited by Andy Jackson, *Double Bill* (Red Squirrel) is a chunky bunch of short poems that take showbiz for a subject. I was all set to ignore it, but it turned out to be full of smile-aloud charm and wild ideas.

Gabriel Josipovici

Dror Burstein's *Netanya* (Dalkey Archive) was an unexpected pleasure: an Israeli novel that is neither striving to be profound nor unbearably whimsical, it consists of nothing but the thoughts of a young man lying on his back on a park bench and looking up at the stars. But what thoughts! What profundity lightly carried, and what humour and humanity! Once again a volume of Beckett's letters (Cambridge University Press) reminded me of the man's modesty, warmth and genius with language – it's been a joy to live with him for all 700 pages of Volume Three. Jean Echenoz's *14* came out in France in 2012 but is now out in English (New Press; translated by Linda Coverdale) . In the plethora of books about the First World War this quiet account of what it meant for five French friends to enter a fray for which nothing had prepared them has to stand out, if only for its great concluding passage, as the girl he has always been in love with finally, amazingly, comes to the protagonist, back from the front, beginning: "Il s'est couché près d'elle et l'a prise dans son bras".

Daniel Karlin

I was in Paris when Patrick Modiano won the Nobel Prize – to the bafflement of French commentators as much as anyone. I knew absolutely nothing about him. His most recent work of fiction, *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier* (Gallimard; "So that you don't get lost in the neighbourhood"), had been published a couple of weeks beforehand. The unprepossessing, seemingly unwieldy title ("get lost" is also "lose yourself") refers to a slip of paper with a child's name and address, a promise of safeguarding that cannot be kept. Its meaning is unfolded gradually, with remorseless art and an economy of means that Hemingway might envy, as the defences of an ageing, self-protective writer gradually break down and a long-buried self comes to light. Memory feeds the present, and feeds off it, in ways I know now to be characteristic of this writer. The ending is almost unbearable, but has the stamp of necessity.

Jonathan Keates

Since Yeats's "Easter, 1916" is one of my best-loved poems, I've hugely enjoyed the generous, humane and stylish exploration of its mingled perspectives afforded by R. F. Foster's *Vivid Faces: The revolutionary generation in Ireland 1890–1923* (Allen Lane; reviewed on p30). Sasha Abramsky's warm tribute to his grandfather Chimen, socialist magus and impassioned bibliophile, in *The House of Twenty Thousand Books* (Halban) struck an instant chord; and a fresh chapter was opened in Italian garden history by Helena Attlee's *The Land Where Lemons Grow* (Particular Books), expertly unpeeling Italy's citrus culture from Garda to Palermo. Two arresting poetry collections have been John Fuller's shimmeringly elusive *The Dice Cup* (Chatto) and Miguel Cullen's streetsmart ventriloquism in *Wave Caps* (Odilo Press).

Adam Kirsch

Malcolm Cowley, the American critic and editor, is mainly remembered today for *Exile's Return*, his memoir of Paris and Greenwich Village in the 1920s. *The Long Voyage: Selected letters of Malcolm Cowley 1915–1987* (Harvard) gives a fuller picture of a life spent at the centre of modern American literature, while shedding particular light on the political temptations faced by writers in the Communist period. The Israeli novelist Assaf Gavron has produced in *The Hilltop* (Oneworld) a comic and humane novel about the state of Israeli society today, with a focus on religious settlers in the West Bank – an unpopular group that Gavron manages to humanize while still criticizing. My favourite new book of poems this year was *Accepting the Disaster* by Joshua Mehigan (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), which displays a rare mastery of rhyme and meter while sounding utterly contemporary in its elegiac treatment of work, small-town American life, poverty and mortality.

Elizabeth Lowry

Memoir of the year? *Divided Lives: Dreams of a mother and daughter* (Virago), Lyndall Gordon's enthralling and painful account of her relationship with her mother, Rhoda Press. Gordon's childhood in 1950s and 60s South Africa is brought sensitively to life in this portrait of the fragile, gifted, demanding Rhoda, whose undiagnosed epilepsy drives her to cast her daughter in the role of confidante and carer. A supremely receptive child, the young Lyndall soon realizes that she is to be "a channel for my mother's life and writings". How Gordon struggles to detach herself from this at times overwhelming bond, rejecting the role of satellite to a minor talent to become a literary contender in her own right, is the true story of her memoir – one which she tells with tenderness and compassion.

Eimear McBride

It's been a good year for the short story and its versatility was admirably showcased in three very different collections by American writers: *Bark* by Lorrie Moore (Faber), *Thunderstruck* by Elizabeth McCracken (Cape) and

American Innovations by Rivka Galchen (Fourth Estate). Katherine Faw Morris's debut novel *Young God* (Granta) was brutal and wonderful, but CB editions' reissue of the much neglected *The Notebook* by Agota Kristof is the book I have not been able to stop thinking about all year.

Keith Miller

My daughter defines "tradition" as something which she enjoyed that has taken place at least once before. In that spirit I have been casting around for a book about pop music to recommend; and I lighted upon the paperback of *Eminent Hipsters* by Donald Fagen (Vintage), the doyen of wistfully ruminative jazz-rock. It's a keen concordance to the music that formed him as an artist; and a grimly funny account of life on the road with a reformed Steely Dan ("The crowd looked so geriatric I was tempted to start calling out bingo numbers"). The most impressive work of fiction I have read this year is *The Peripheral* by William Gibson (Viking), a cautionary tale of the near and further future: what it lacks in literary affect it more than makes up for in its fine-grained powers of observation and its sheer credibility.

Andrew Motion

Bedouin of the London Evening: Collected Poems (Bloodaxe) by Rosemary Tonks. Admired and conspicuous on the poetry scene in the 1960s, Tonks disappeared from view in the 1970s; her recent death in obscurity has led to this edition, expertly introduced by Neil Astley), which should re-establish her reputation as a compelling mid-century poet, who manages to combine Anglo-Saxon and French traditions in highly original ways. *Everything is Wonderful* (Grove) by Sigrid Rausing. A beautifully remembered account of Rausing's anthropological fieldwork on a collective farm in Estonia in the 1990s: fascinating as the portrait of an isolated community, and the larger politics of the time. *H is for Hawk* (Cape) by Helen Macdonald. A grief-story, a T. H. White-story and a falconry story, which is equally sharp-eyed about things in nature and feelings in people.

Ferdinand Mount

Andro Linklater died the week before *Owning the Earth: The transforming history of land ownership* (Bloomsbury) was first published, a sad but not untypical end to a life that always defied expectations, which this remarkable book does too. At first, it seems like a history of how the appropriation of land always leads to cruelty and inequality, whether in the New World or the Old. But then Linklater develops a fascinating narrative to show how, contrariwise, land reform everywhere from Ireland to Japan has again and again improved the people's welfare and may still have the capacity do so again. A ground-breaker in every sense. Conforming to my rule that the finest novels today are mostly written by women in parts of North America where it's really cold in winter, Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* (Virago) will not disappoint those readers who are already vicarious citizens of her Gilead and whose only complaint is that her novels come along as rarely as Sunday buses. *At Maldon* (CB editions), J. O. Morgan's version of the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, has all the clash and clang of *War Music*, and the same odd modernism to bring you up short – bin-liners, cricket balls, umbrellas. My ears are still singing with the gurgle of Saxon blood. Morgan is a worthy inheritor of Logue's broadsword.

Paul Muldoon

The Letters of Robert Frost: Volume I, 1886–1920 (Harvard) is edited by Donald Sheehy, Mark Richardson and, notably, Robert Faggen, the main force behind an ambitious enterprise to contextualize one of the greatest poets of the twentieth or any century. Every page gives up a wealth of information. On December 1, 1915, for example, Frost wrote to George Browne after his wife Elinor's miscarriage that "We are out of those woods – though perhaps not far enough to feel safe in crowing yet; and we are still six in the family, no more and, thank God, no less". That same day he wrote to Lascelles Abercrombie to report "we are out of those woods – though

perhaps not yet far enough to feel safe in crowing. We are still six in the family, no more and, thank God, no less". There's something heartbreaking – as well as something heartening – about Frost's allowing these words to do double duty. They at once bespeak physical exhaustion and intellectual relief at having found a phrase ("out of the woods") that would serve him again in a letter to John Bartlett dated to the following day. Out of the woods, or stopping by them, Frost was already well on his way to defining the psychological landscape of many of his most powerful poems.

Jeremy Noel-Tod

"A whole made of pieces bringing precise objects | out of focus | into play" nicely describes a trio of the finest British poetry books published this year. The phrase is from Oli Hazzard's *Within Habit* (Test Centre), a handsome, laptop-sized pamphlet coolly printed in cobalt blue. Each sentence is – in computing terms – "piped" together by vertical bars, resulting in a flickering prose poem that runs "outside the block of | language just down the road from where we | live". Bricolage is a neglected compositional method in this country, but one that can produce much brilliance. Both Tim Atkins's *Collected Petrarch* (Crater Press) and Tom Raworth's *XIVLiners* (Sancho Panza) versify rags of language in their exuberant reinvention of the sonnet sequence as a panoramic "history / which conceived of itself / through a certain form / as a human being / no longer guilty of being mad" (Raworth).

Joyce Carol Oates

Among outstanding books of the year are new editions of perennial favourites – *The Best American Short Stories 2014*, edited by Jennifer Egan (Houghton Mifflin) and *Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses 2015* (Pushcart Press) edited by Bill Henderson. The latter especially, a hefty, generous collection of divers talents, provides an excellent overview of contemporary American literary writing. Among outstanding novels is the impressive debut of Zia Haider Rahman, the meditative, mysterious, decidedly non-page-turner *In the*

Light of What We Know (Picador) a postcolonial novel writ large. The meticulous interweaving of Rahman's fiction necessitates reading both forward and back, and makes us realize: who cares about "page-turners" when the true pleasure of a work of fiction is its gravitational pull upon us? Also highly recommend are Sheila Kohler's sharp, incisive novel *Dreaming for Freud* (Penguin), Lorrie Moore's melancholy/funny *Bark* (Faber) and Michael Dirda's loving evocation of a boyhood favourite, *On Conan Doyle* (Princeton), an ode to storytelling and reading.

Marjorie Perloff

There is, to date, no complete English translation of Karl Kraus's astonishing documentary anti-war drama *Die Letzten Tage der Menschheit* (1914–22). Now the Irish writer Michael Russell has announced that in the course of 2014–16, he will be publishing a complete translation of the play: excerpts are already available on line (http://thelastdaysofmankind.com/index.html). To whet our appetite, Forgotten Cities Press has just published Russell's translation of the drama's epilogue, a kind of Walpurgisnacht called *The Last Night*, written in rhymed verse and ranging from the *Sprechgesang* of a shellshocked General ("What's up with this one, / Head off at the throat, / And that one, both legs gone, and a button off his coat!") to a flirtatious dialogue between male and female gas masks. The play concludes with the Voice of God saying tersely "Ich habe es nicht gewollt" ("This is not what I wanted") – words actually spoken by the Emperor Franz Joseph on his deathbed. Kraus's quirky mixture of High German and Viennese street slang is, as Russell is the first to admit, impossible to reproduce in English: the dramatist's solution is to find a parallel in the Irish English of the period, especially that of James Joyce, and I think it works brilliantly. Kraus's prophetic exposé of the world of media speak may finally convince English-speaking readers of what they have been missing.

Rachel Polonsky

In *A Literary Education and Other Essays* (Axios), Joseph Epstein calls the TLS the "perfect paper . . . for the serious dilettante" (thinking there may be as many as 400,000 such people in the world). This remark prompted a friend to make me an unexpected gift of the book. Among Epstein's stylish, often biting essays on American intellectual life, I particularly enjoyed his memoir of coming of age in Jewish Chicago in the 1950s. *Poetry and Film: Artistic kinship between Arsenii and Andrei Tarkovsky* compiled by Kitty Hunter Blair (Tate) is a wonderful revelation of the creative relationship between father and son, their interweaving of poetry and cinematic image. Her translations of Arsenii Tarkovsky's poems are a delight, and her fine introduction sent me back to films like *Mirror* and *Nostalghia* with new eyes. *Night Heron* by Adam Brookes (Sphere), a smart spy thriller set in China, I found wholly diverting: another world.

Theodore K. Rabb

The 2014 book that most decisively forced me to rethink my understanding of the past was Paul M. Cobb's *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic history of the Crusades* (Oxford University Press). What Cobb creates is a broad geographic and chronological context for the Crusades, placing them within a vast encounter between Christians and Muslims. He embraces the entire Mediterranean world over a period of five centuries, and shows that in Muslim eyes the West's handful of expeditions to the Holy Land during the 200 years following 1096 (the traditional subject of "The Crusades") was merely one long episode among many. Ranging from the slow conquest of Al-Andalus and the Normans' invasion of Sicily to the fall of Constantinople and Ottoman incursions into Europe, we learn about political change in Islam, the ambiguities of the struggles between the faiths, and gain a perspective on religious activism vastly different from what we see around us today.

Craig Raine

Life, Love and the Archers by Wendy Cope (Hodder) is funny, fearless and

unflinchingly truthful. *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* (1986) was originally dedicated to "Arthur S Couch, my psychoanalyst, and everyone else who helped". I was her editor. A cod dedication, I thought. And a brilliant joke to have a shrink called Arthur S. Couch. It wasn't a joke and the dedication was changed: "To Arthur S. Couch and everyone else who helped". Her sombre back story is the painful spine of these sprightly, wry prose pieces. Janet Malcolm's *Forty-One False Starts* (Granta): the title essay attempts to come to terms with the painter David Salle and his work – implicitly arguing that the allegedly definitive summation is in truth much more tentative and provisional. Malcolm skewers the pretensions of biographers. She is aware that Bloomsbury, for example, is a work of fiction. She knows, too, that letters are the real thing and better than the biographical construct.

Frederic Raphael

Michael Schmidt's *The Novel: A biography* (Harvard) is less a handbook, more a two-hand book. For all its 1,200 pages, it maintains an invigorating level of informed and informative generosity. Daniel Cordier's *récit*, *Les Feux de Saint-Elme* (Gallimard), published in the author's ninety-fifth year, is a terse prequel to his unrivalled Alias Caracalla, the long and invaluable, because unblinkingly honest, account of his life as Jean Moulin's "secretary" during the Occupation. Saint-Elme was the Catholic boarding school where young Daniel fell in love with a boy called Cohen, whom he seeks out many years later, with ironic consequence. Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* (Knopf) is both an unintimidated challenge to Hannah Arendt's glib notion of Eichmann's insignificance and a clear analysis of the origins and enduring uses of Holocaust Denial. *Montaigne: La vie sans loi* (Flammarion), Pierre Manent's lucid, critical tribute to the great Girondin's undogmatic self-centredness, is worthy to stand alongside Jean Starobinski's classic study.

Graham Robb

At my local library bookdrop in a remote part of North Cumbria, the sheep farmers' current favourite is Zane Grey, whose *Riders of the Purple Sage* appeared just over a century ago. The "restored edition" by Jon Tuska (Five Star), using Grey's original manuscript, shows how much of his clanking magnificence was lost when his tales of simple souls in overpowering landscapes were bowdlerized for pulp magazines. Helen Oyeyemi's creepy but cute and convincingly American *Boy, Snow, Bird* (Picador) is set in a small New England town in the 1950s and 60s. In recounting the life of a Snow White who turns into a wicked stepmother, it describes the mistreatment of the unusually intelligent and beautiful, and the insanity which lurks in self-knowledge.

Ritchie Robertson

Three biographies stand out. In *Bertolt Brecht: A literary Life* (Bloomsbury), based on extensive new research, Stephen Parker presents Brecht's complicated life in richer detail than ever before, and makes him, if hardly likeable, at least sympathetic. Reiner Stach has completed his Kafka trilogy with *Kafka: Die frühen Jahre* (S. Fischer), recounting Kafka's life from birth to 1911 with judicious psychological insight, avoiding all the clichés, and giving a "thick description" of his social milieu. Paul Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen: European witness* (Yale), explores the connections between Andersen's trauma-ridden life and his fiction, not only the fairy stories but the six novels. These are available, if at all, only in Victorian translations; Binding's enthusiastic advocacy ought to encourage publishers to commission new versions. Commendably, he quotes Andersen in Danish, adding his own translations, and thus acknowledges him as a literary artist capable of verbal subtlety.

Roger Scruton

Among the books I have read this year two have made a particular impression

on me. Ian McEwan's *The Children Act* (Cape) concerns a dilemma which is both moral and legal. Reviewers seem to me to have misunderstood this book, believing it to be a belated contribution to the tedious God debate. In fact it is a touching proof of the humanity of our common law system, and a sensitive evocation of the Inns of Court, which have played such an important, and largely unknown, part in ensuring that judges too are human. Michael Žantovsky's *Havel* (Grove) is the authoritative biography of a great man, a true artist and a flawed character, by someone who shared Havel's dissident background, and who writes of him with real insight and love. Žantovsky is as intelligent and subtle as his subject, and his book an unforgettable tribute.

Andrew Scull

Karl Marx once famously remarked that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living". Nightmare or not, history's concern with dead generations usually extends only as far back as written records survive. Cyprian Broodbank's book, *The Making of the Middle Sea: A history of the Mediterranean* from the beginning to the emergence of the Classical world (Thames and Hudson), triumphantly takes us through and past that barrier. *The Middle Sea* is beautifully written – a massive study, impressive in its reach and learning, whose prose sparkles and draws even the casual reader into a fascinating world one might have thought was irretrievably lost. The early history of *Homo sapiens*, the rise of farming and of seaborne navigation and trade, the impact of metallurgy, the rise and fall of a host of early civilizations, climate change, the geology of the Mediterranean basin, all these and more enter the picture. The elegant and eloquent prose is complemented by an abundant series of illustrations and maps, vividly reproduced and an essential part of the rich and complex story that unfolds before us. Broodbank transforms our understanding of the Mediterranean, and forces us (among other things) to rethink our understanding of Classical Greece and Rome – and thus some of the central foundations of our own civilization. *The Middle Sea* is nothing less than a tour de force, a stunning achievement.

Ruth Scurr

H is for Hawk (Cape) does three separate things and excels at each of them. First it is an account of training a goshawk. Helen Macdonald makes this process accessible to readers with no prior knowledge of falconry, or even birds. She explains a wealth of technicalities and specialist vocabulary in prose as delightful to read as a novel. She also examines the history of falconry and its literature stretching back to the sixteenth century, all with the same elegance and lightness of touch. Secondly, *H is for Hawk* is a shadow biography of the writer T. H. White – a very strange and damaged man. There is tremendous compassion in Macdonald's portrait of White. She never condescends to him or dismisses him, even as his own attempt to train a goshawk turns into a complete fiasco, in strong contrast to her own success. Finally, this is a book about grief. It is honest and personal, but in projecting her despair after her father's death onto the natural world, Macdonald has produced a profound meditation on the line between living and dying.

Tom Shippey

"Philology has fallen on hard times in the English-speaking world", declares James Turner. For most educated people its associations are with the i-mutations and back mutations which were once a much-disliked part of the English-department syllabus. But that was a product of the nineteenth century. In *Philology: The forgotten origins of the modern humanities* (Princeton), Turner goes further back, to the commentators on Homer, and to the humanistic rediscovery of philology. This, he says, is still the foundation of the humanities as we know them, its distinctive feature being not love of words, but tough love. From its sceptical scrutiny nothing, not even the Bible, is immune. Philology changed history – it was no use just reading old documents, they had to be interrogated. It changed ideas about literature, which could no longer be merely *belles lettres*, it did the same for art history. Even archaeology became the philology of prehistory. Turner's

exceptionally wide-ranging study shows in detail how Western culture has become, and has remained, distinctively philological.

Helen Simpson

Three short-story collections and a gripping murder trial! Romesh Gunesekera's *Noontide Toll* (New Press) gives a deceptively gentle, obliquely authoritative and essential tour of post-war Sri Lanka via a cab driver's observational musings: Vasantha feels his passengers' stories are now lodged with him and if he doesn't say anything they'll be lost for good. Colin Barrett's *Young Skins* (Cape), an outstanding first book, describes everyday mayhem in small-town Ireland with dandyish glee; the central Grand Guignol story is utterly terrifying. In Margaret Atwood's *Stone Mattress* (Nan A. Talese), nine merrily murderous tales of come-uppance and senior score-settling grasp the reader by the throat (as one terminally ill character says, "Fun is not knowing how it will end"). And in *This House of Grief* (Text), Helen Garner describes with wonderful subtlety and honesty the trial of a man accused of drowning his three sons; she is fascinated by what we're capable of and how fiercely we hide it from ourselves.

Elaine Showalter

The book I read most eagerly and discussed mostly avidly in 2014 was *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (Knopf), by Jill Lepore. The David Woods Kempner Professor of American History at Harvard and a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, Lepore is among the most productive, intellectually invigorating and surprising cultural critics in the United States. Wonder Woman, aka Princess Diana of the Amazons, or Diana Prince, was invented in 1941 by William Moulton Marston, an eccentric and self-promoting psychologist, who lived in a blissful *ménage à trois*, and sometimes *quatre*, with a group of iconoclastic New Women, all inspired by Margaret Sanger and her belief in women as the future of humanity. Marston foresaw an American matriarchy and "a nation of amazons" – a theme of feminist utopian fiction; and Lepore

tells the story of American feminism through the biography of his circle in this breathtaking book.

Clive Sinclair

When did you last watch a great thriller? Probably when you caught a rerun of a classic film noir; say Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, or Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*. Jules Feiffer must have felt the lack too, because his new book, *Kill My Mother* (Liveright), looks like the storyboard of some unmade masterpiece from the 1940s. Its plot runs from California to the wartorn Pacific jungle, and is peopled by femmes fatales, a sozzled shamus, and Hollywood lowlife. Not only the book, but the movie of the year. A volume by the nonagenarian street photographer Fred Lyon, *San Francisco: Portrait of a city 1940–1960* (Princeton Architectural Press) makes a perfect companion. Perhaps his most dazzling photograph shows a couple walking through a foggy San Francisco night, their path illuminated by a flashlight. Beside them is an empty car backlit by street lamps. It is a perfect emblem of film noir, not to mention the human condition.

Ali Smith

In *Boy, Snow, Bird* (Picador) Helen Oyeyemi continues her serious inquiry into the novel's potential and into what happens when you shake an old story into an otherwise unimaginable time, setting, shape and relevance. To me she is one of our most exciting, witty and questioning novelists as well as quite simply a writer of sentences so elegant that they gleam. A book which really caught me by surprise this year was Nicola Barker's *In the Approaches* (Fourth Estate). Its take on things of the spirit, somehow both rollicking and profoundly calm, comes complete with a vision of benign energy that opened on me after the book was closed and continues to resonate months afterwards. How did she do it? This masterful, sleight-of-hand, open-souled and anti-elitist generosity, unprecedented in the English novel right now, is like an injection of vitality.

Wesley Stace

One couldn't ask more of Bob Dylan himself who, at seventy-three, revels in his late style almost nightly in concert halls worldwide. But the lateness of the hour has meant a dubious (and basically uncool) monetization of the brand: paintings enjoyed only by the galleries who profit from them; the autograph once so rarely given now providing an endless revenue stream, reproduced in "limited edition" prints, on luxury watches and harmonicas. It is therefore cause for celebration that the art that matters is also getting the treatment it deserves. Dylan has finally put his trust in scholarship with *The Lyrics: Since 1962* (Simon and Schuster), a beautifully designed 960-page edition that gathers every lyric, with (for the first time) "other wordings" and entire alternatives as sung live. The choice of Christopher Ricks as editor (with Lisa and Julie Nemrow), not to mention the cheeky gold-embossed laurel wreath and lyre on the cover, give the game away: Nobel, anyone? Forget the money-spinning art: music aside, this is what you want, and why Dylan, who has half an eye on posterity, will be remembered.

A. E. Stallings

The book I most looked forward to getting my hands on this year was Joshua Mehigan's second collection, *Accepting the Disaster* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). This is, poem after poem, one of the best volumes of recent years. Comparisons have been made to Philip Larkin – Mehigan has a way with rhyme and meter, and his pessimism is as dark as industrial sludge. If deprivation was, for Larkin, what daffodils were for Wordsworth, for Mehigan, it's brownfields and smoke stacks. I'd add Edwin Arlington Robinson to his influences, for the deft portraits, and the first-person plural that functions both as the neighbourhood and tragic chorus. It was a good year for terrific second collections. Two more, both from the Waywiser Press, are Geoffrey Brock's *Voices Bright Flags*, whose haunting sequence "Homeland Security" braids the personal and political, and Clive Watkins's

Already the Flames, with its keen eye and intelligent music.

George Steiner

Among the very many works on the vexed theme of Zionism, Ariel Shavit's *My Promised Land* (Scribe) stands out. Lucidly written, brim full with authoritative knowledge and fair-mindedness, Shavit's analysis of the sources and current condition of Zionism is at once bracing and sad. It tells of formidable achievements in Israel, of generational tensions and, until now, insoluble dilemmas in respect of the Palestinian and Islamic enemy. In a larger sense, Shavit's narrative tells of the bitter limitations of political processes and of the irrational dynamics of hope. Roy Calne is a pioneering surgeon of international stature. He is also a witty, scrupulous writer. In *The Ratchet of Science* (Nova Science), he inquires into the ambiguous blessings of medical-scientific progress. Drawing on the wide spectrum of fundamental and technical advances, Calne points to the social, human cost which these entail. The calm, at times ironic analyses which he presents make this little book a classic. It deserves the widest possible readership.

Tom Stoppard

Before starting on *The Land Where Lemons Grow* by Helena Attlee (Particular Books) I was not conscious of any desire to know about the history of citrus fruit in Italy, but it turned out to be the book I pressed on friends more than any other this year. If they were bemused, I hope they remained to be charmed. I read it randomly a few pages at a time over many weeks until there were no pages I hadn't read twice. It was my respite from purposive reading. Of the latter, I would not wish to have missed *The Age of Nothing* by Peter Watson (Weidenfeld), a brisk 565 pages on the displacement of God from Western culture. I read Clive James's *Poetry Notebook 2006–2014* (Picador) standing by my poetry wall to save getting up and down, and my wall turned out to be just railings. But the most important book of the year was *Hack Attack* by Nick Davies (Chatto), which

tells of more and worse than red-top misbehaviour.

Raymond Tallis

Daniel Todes's *Ivan Pavlov. A Russian life in science* (Oxford University Press), twenty-five years in the making, is a colossal work of scholarship and imagination. He brings to life Pavlov's gigantic personality, his tireless pursuit of the physiological understanding of humanity he believed would be the key to the social and moral progress his country so desperately needed, and his fearless engagement with the intellectual and turbulent political realities of his times. Roger Scruton's *Notes from Underground* (Beaufort Books) is set in the Prague of the 1980s that he came to know well as one of the Velvet Philosophers. The drama, the shabbiness, the terror, and the ambiguities and moral dilemmas of that period of so-called "normalisation" are brilliantly captured in a novel which combines true philosophical wisdom, penetrating social observation, the sensibility of a lyric poet, and a storytellers' art that keeps the reader in an agony of suspense.

D. J. Taylor

What with Stephen Lloyd's *Constant Lambert: Beyond the Rio Grande* (Boydell), the former Fall bass player Steve Hanley's *The Big Midweek* (Route) and the Steely Dan frontman Donald Fagen's *Eminent Hipsters* (Vintage), it was a distinctly musical year. The Lloyd is recommended for its compendiousness, the Hanley for its subtle, yet withering, portrait of his lead singer Mark E. Smith – on this telling, one of the great monsters of rock and roll – and the Fagen for its caustic account of a North American tour undertaken in one's sixties when the budget is insufficient to guarantee comfort. Among political biographies, John Campbell's *Roy Jenkins: A well-rounded life* (Cape) was worthy to sit on the same shelf as his Lives of Heath and Thatcher. The novel I most enjoyed, inexplicably – or perhaps all too explicably – ignored by the Booker judges, was Philip Hensher's *The Emperor Waltz* (Fourth Estate).

Adam Thirlwell

The Italian novelist Giorgio Bassani has been my year's discovery, in particular his great novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, but this discovery was in fact prompted by *The Smell of Hay* (Penguin Modern Classics), a small collection of stories and essaylets translated by Jamie McKendrick, with a deft afterword by Ali Smith which carefully explicates the structure of Bassani's fictions, and the way this last book "remains an open text and a cyclic one both at once". Two other things I've loved were Donald Antrim's stories, *The Emerald Light in the Air* (Granta), pure pieces of the Modern Grotesque, or Chekhov Gone Wild; and Fiona Maddocks's book-length conversation with Harrison Birtwistle, *Wild Tracks* (Faber): anyone with the smallest interest in composition – not just concertos but novels, buildings, lives, you name it – should read this absorbing, spiky, dazzling book.

Peter Thonemann

Chris Wickham's *Medieval Rome: Stability and crisis of a city, 900–1150* (Oxford) is a breathtaking book. Wickham is the most ambitious and provocative of medieval historians: his *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (2005) redrew the map of post-Roman Europe, and now *Medieval Rome* sets new standards for urban history-writing. Beginning with a bravura sketch of the Roman regional economy, Wickham maps the political transformation of the city from the late Carolingian period through to the rise of the Roman commune in the mid-twelfth century. The heart of the book is an eleventh-century "Roman Revolution" – mirroring Ronald Syme's Augustan revolution of the first century BC – which saw an old Roman aristocracy being displaced by an ambitious new class of elite families clustered around the papal court. Sleepy Boxing Day reading it isn't (woe betide the reader who confuses emphyteutic with *libellus* land-leases), but *Medieval Rome* is as good as it gets.

Jeremy Treglown

The first full biography of Dadaism's co-founder, *TaTa Dada: The real life and celestial adventures of Tristan Tzara* (MIT), provides among much else about his long career an absorbing account of the importance of Romanian and Swiss cultures to what's still thought of as a Parisian phenomenon. Marius Hentea is a young American scholar, fluent in Romanian and French. His well-illustrated, sane book is full of insights: about why a clever multilingual Jew in anti-Semitic Romania might have wanted to dismantle language; about the synergy between xenophobically conservative First World War Zurich and the fertility of its immigrant avant-garde; about the shifts in Tzara's work during the 1930s and 40s – especially the war years when he was in Vichy France, generally on the run. By focusing on Tzara's "real life" as well as his "celestial adventures", Hentea gives a fresh sense of the circumstances in which a bunch of students challenged European high culture. When young Tzara was urging his friends "to shit in diverse colors to ornament the zoo of art with the flags of every consulate", his mother wrote to him saying she was pleased to see from his wedding photograph that he had put on weight but that he must remember to drink plenty of mineral water. It's one of many moments when domesticity is shown in strange cohabitation with nihilism.

Brian Vickers

Two important scholarly works that will be read for years to come are Marina Tarlinskaya, *Shakespeare and the Versification of English Drama, 1561–1642* (Ashgate), which uses quantitative prosody to trace the evolution of verse from Gorboduc to the closing of the theatres, and Quentin Skinner, *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press), a brilliant study of the teachings of classical legal rhetoric as used and misused by Shakespeare's speakers. My book of the year is Hugo Williams, *I Knew the Bride* (Faber), for the later poems "From the Dialysis Ward". Unlike Gottfried Benn's "Man

and woman go through the cancer ward", where the poetic voice comments on patients in various stages of decay, here the poet is the patient, lying in bed, waiting to see if today's nurse has mastered "the art of needling". The detached self-examination that Williams has always practised offers a peculiarly apt medium for this life-threatening experience. "I'm technically dead, they tell me, / But I remember being alive / as if it were yesterday".

Marina Warner

Patrick Modiano was a surprise and a wonderful choice for the Nobel. A beautifully light-fingered, elliptical decrypter, he shows his beloved and familiar city denatured and emptied by the Occupation in *Dora Bruder* (*The Search Warrant*, Harvill), and the less well-known *Rues des boutiques obscures* (*Missing Person*, David R. Godine). A new novel, *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier* (Gallimard), returns to haunted childhood and memory loss. The immaculate Cahiers Series (Sylph/American University of Paris) edited by Dan Gunn, creates oblique diptychs with word and image: I especially enjoyed Paul Griffiths's *The Tilted Cup: Noh Stories* – twistingly, endlessly inventive. His title refers to translation ("What spills over . . . is not lost . . .") . At two readings this year, I heard a fascinating duet between poets: Susan Wicks worked with Valérie Rouzeau for the madcap, linguistically acrobatic *Talking Vrouz* (Arc), and Jamie McKendrick has tuned himself perfectly to the transfigured anguish of Antonella Anedda's *Archipelago* (Bloodaxe).

Edmund White

Le Royaume (P.O.L.) by Emmanuel Carrère is the one book about Christianity I've ever read that is convincing. *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier* by Patrick Modiano (Gallimard) is written in a sombre style occasionally slashed with startling streaks of colour. Ben Lerner's *10:04* (Faber) is a troubling metaphysical meditation on New York now.

A. N. Wilson

The exact noise that a snipe makes when flushed? Tolstoy reproduced it in *Anna Karenina*, and Rosamund Bartlett, the novel's latest translator (Oxford University Press), goes to the trouble to try to "get" this . Hers is much the best English rendering which has ever appeared. (Yes, even better than the immortal Louise and Aylmer Maude). Her eye for detail never lets her down, whether she identifies wood cow-wheat or birch mushrooms in the rural bits of the book, or captures the breezy worldiness of the citified sections. Bartlett also offers a superb introduction – best thing ever written about the novel – and helpful notes. It is also a very beautifully produced book. It's been a good year for the great Russians, for Oliver Ready's translation of *Crime and Punishment* (Penguin Classics) is another five-star hit, which will make you see the original with new eyes.

Emily Wilson

Joy Connolly's *The Life of Roman Republicanism* (Princeton), a wide-ranging look at Cicero, Sallust and Horace (and many others) in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, provides an inspiring suggestion that rethinking Roman political thought may help us change our own (North American) ideas of what it might mean to be a citizen. I was inspired in a different way by Josephine Balmer's *Piecing Together the Fragments* (Oxford University Press), which explores the grey areas between translation, interpretation and imitation of classical poetry. A dear friend of mine lost his seventeen-year-old son in a car crash in August this year, so I was ready for Edward Hirsch's *Gabriel* (Knopf), a powerful, allusive and searching poem about Hirsch's own son's death, life and the work of mourning, the "labor in the dark / we carry inside ourselves".

Frances Wilson

Alice Oswald's marvellous new pamphlet poem, *Tithonus*, subtitled *46*

minutes in the life of the dawn, printed by the Letter Press in Devon. Decrepit and seedy, Tithonus is turned by his lover the goddess Aurora into a grasshopper and abandoned in a corner of her palace. Here he sits out his "withered immortality" (in Tennyson's appalled phrase), babbling to himself and waiting night after night for Dawn to make an appearance, which she invariably does. The poem records the insect ruminations of Tithonus, forgotten but indestructible; it also presents an astonishing panorama of that everyday moment of bated breath and charged potentiality, when the creaturely and vegetable worlds tilt forwards and start their own individual and collective chatter, when light makes imagined things visible and unchangeable. Verse on the borderline of prose, rhythmically and syntactically alive in every pore. A substantial new work in excitingly fugitive form.

David Wootton

Dictionary of Untranslatables: A philosophical lexicon, edited by Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (Princeton). What can you hope to learn from a dictionary of untranslatables? First, that interpretation and translation are not the same thing. Second that if we want to understand the web of language within which we think and communicate, the very best way of grasping the seemingly ungraspable is through other languages, where all sorts of things we take for granted suddenly cease to apply. Like any dictionary this is a book for dipping in to, and the same might be said of Neil MacGregor's *Germany: Memories of a nation* (Allen Lane), but MacGregor's brilliance is to lead you on, so that you end up reading far further than you intended to. There's a real passion in this book, half-concealed behind the measured prose and level-headed judgements.

Zinovy Zinik

Mikhail Ryklin's *Pristan' Dionisa* ("Dionysius' Mooring", Logos) is an intricate blend of intimate memoirs and personal testimony on modern

Russian history. “Dionysius’ Mooring” was Anna Alchuck’s poetic code name for death. In 2003, this remarkable Russian artist and poet faced criminal charges for taking part in a “blasphemous” art show in Moscow called *Beware, Religion!* that provoked xenophobic religious hysteria in Russia. In 2008, her body was found in a Berlin canal. Her husband, Mikhail Ryklin, a philosopher and historian, doesn’t believe that she was murdered by Russian vigilantes, but, rather, that she committed suicide, driven to despair by a sense of betrayal, guilt and complicity, as she witnessed the transformation of the short-lived Russian republic of joy and freedom of the late 1980s into an authoritarian monster, in which the Russian Orthodox Church, the state security apparatus and the ruling mafia have become indistinguishable from each other.