

The 20 best books of the year

From celebrity chimps to the Crusades, birds' brains to baby-boom bohemians, Boyd Tonkin and Katy Guest select some of the outstanding publications of 2008

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British fiction

Something to Tell You by Hanif Kureishi (Faber, £7.99)

After a quarter-century of nimble and witty provocations, Hanif Kureishi has kept all his mischievous gift for insight and outrage. Uniting public affairs with affairs of the heart, this novel of London life and lust takes its psychoanalyst narrator on a journey into his, and his culture's, tangled past. Jamal Khan confesses the secrets – disturbing, erotic but always touching – behind his progress from a conflict-ridden suburban youth in the 1970s to a cheerily chaotic inner-city middle age. Kureishi fuses social comedy, humane sympathy and a unique ability to get under the skin of baby-boom bohemians. Frank, fearless and funny, this novel will live in readers' minds long after its politer cousins expire of respectable boredom. BT

Children's

Nation by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday, £16.99)

Does Nation merely count as a children's novel? As with Alice's Adventures in Wonderland or Gulliver's Travels, delighted readers of whatever age will swiftly cease to care. Here, Pratchett forsakes his Discworld for a stand-alone fable of conquest, civilisation and enlightenment – with a bumper crop of gags on the way. In a slightly twisted universe that parallels Europe's imperial past, shipwrecked Daphne meets Mau, the last survivor of his nation, on the island that his people used to inhabit before a tsunami. Mau must free himself from the iron grip of traditional belief; Daphne, of the shackles of race and class prejudice. Cue a wisely hilarious excursion through ideas of community, identity and belonging, all wrapped up in Pratchett's sublime silliness. BT

International fiction

A Blessed Child by Linn Ullmann (Picador, £14.99)

Nordic fiction means much more than gloomy sleuths, as this outstanding blend of family saga and sharp satirical comedy proves. A daughter of Ingmar Bergman, Linn Ullmann writes with all the atmospheric depth and psychological subtlety you might expect. Yet this novel of a fading patriarch and his fractious children moves far beyond the roman-à-clef. After a long separation, three Oslo-based adult daughters of a charismatic medic converge on the Swedish Baltic island where he lives in solitude. This return stirs memories of a traumatic summer.

Well served by Sarah Death's translation, Ullmann excels at the landscapes of the heart as much as with the windswept mysteries of her isle. BT

Art

Seven Days in the Art World by Sarah Thornton (Granta, £15.99)

It could well be, as the age of art bling turns to bust, that Sarah Thornton's acute and zesty tour of the market and its movers will soon read like past history. No matter: her book will survive as a hard-thinking but high-spirited memorial to that strange millennial period when contemporary art offered a glittery rendezvous for talent, ambition, hype – and shedloads of free-floating cash. From decision time at the Turner Prize to a hot auction night at Christie's; from a frenzied selling souk in Switzerland to the grandiose village fete of the Venice Biennale, Thornton swoops with a trained eye and sharp claws on the makers and breakers of reputation. She brings to light the bizarre machinery that keeps studio showbiz on the road, and in the headlines. BT

Sport

Playing the Enemy by John Carlin (Atlantic, £18.99)

Sport generates plenty of fine writing, but very few books match the historical sweep and world-shaking urgency of this one. John Carlin, then a correspondent for The Independent in South Africa, followed the twisting trail by which Nelson Mandela, newly released from captivity, made peace with his Afrikaner jailers as the ANC moved into government. Their ultimate meeting-point came on the rugby field, in the 1995 World Cup that sealed the pride of a "rainbow nation" in its post-apartheid identity. Mandela, in a fine portrait, emerges as both noble and shrewd – becoming a rugby buff when he grasped the game's potential role. Carlin juggles events on and off the pitch without a slip, as he explores a rare case of sporting obsession that healed rather than harmed. BT

Music

The Rest is Noise by Alex Ross (Fourth Estate, £25)

From Mahler and Schoenberg to Björk and the Velvet Underground, The New Yorker's supremely gifted critic tells the story of musical composition through the 20th century – and makes it sound brand new. As a typically fine chapter on Benjamin Britten indicates, here is a writer who can link life and work without trivialising either. Alex Ross can also switch from Duke Ellington to Jean Sibelius without missing a beat, but he's no mere pick-and-mix style-surfer. Behind the beautifully written segues between "classical", jazz and pop traditions lies a coherent view of musical genius both empowered and threatened by changes in audience, society and technology. This history of modern sounds develops into an intimate history of modern souls as well. BT

Big ideas

The Oxford Book of Modern Science Writing, Ed. Richard Dawkins (OUP, £20)

In which the pope of secularism sets aside all sectarian spin to present a generous selection from the finest popular science of the past 100 years. From JBS Haldane and Francis Crick to Steven Pinker and Jared Diamond, Dawkins picks and matches with an eye not merely for grandeur of thought but felicity of expression. If a few items may tax the lay browser, many more communicate all the excitement of the quest for the mysterious reality of our universe with drive, eloquence – and even humour. Dawkins balances any risk of biological bias with plenty of high-flying cosmology and maths, while critics of him as a dry-as-dust debunker should note his choice of Rachel Carson's poetic eco-lyricism. BT

Poetry

New and Collected Poems by George Szirtes (Bloodaxe, £15)

Sometimes a collection of a poet's work opens up a vista of achievement as if for the first time. George Szirtes is still in vigorous mid-stream: he came to England as an eight-year-old refugee from Budapest in 1956. But this grand gathering of his poems shows – in more than 500 beguiling pages – just how tall he stands and how far he sees. From the off, Szirtes merged formal clarity and strong flavour with audacity and ambition of emotions and ideas. Any "difficulty" here lies in our history-haunted times and murky passions, not in wilful obscurity. Szirtes can just as often be comic, charming, playful: he's a poet for all seasons. From sonnets and ballads to engrossing long narratives, this treasure chest has gems for every mood. BT

History

Millennium by Tom Holland (Little Brown, £25)

Fresh from his triumphs in Rome and Persia, Tom Holland turns his brilliant narrative spotlight on the so-called "dark ages" that followed the Western Empire's decline. Global in reach, this book sweeps thrillingly over the troubled centuries that saw the triumph of Byzantium, the ascent of Islam – and the lingering disaster of the Crusades. With a focus on the emerging "Christendom" of the years around 1000AD, Millennium shows the forging of the medieval West in a moral and political quagmire of mud, blood and superstition. Unlike other blockbuster histories, this one takes as much care with beliefs as with the battles they provoked. We all live in the feverish aftermath of these events, which makes Holland's galloping guidance all the more timely. BT

Nature

Consider the Birds by Colin Tudge (Allen Lane, £25)

Bird books roost on the shop shelves in healthy numbers, yet most divide into picturesque, subjective nature-writing on one hand, or no-nonsense twitchers' guides on the other. Colin Tudge marries the poetry and the science of the dinosaurs' best-loved descendants. Starting with evolution and the marvel of flight, Tudge spans the globe's feathered families in a vivid (and charmingly illustrated) group-by-group survey. Later sections soar into high-level ornithology, with readable accounts of matters such as mating and migration – and a coda on the "mind" of birds that hails the wonder of non-human lives. Taking issue with the reductive view of animals as "robots", Tudge shows how much we share. BT

Food

Ottolenghi by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi (Ebury, £25)

While their enticing restaurants in trendy parts of London are said to resemble classy modern art galleries, but with lots of cakes, Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi's first cookbook is like a glossy work of art, but one that shows you how to make the cakes. This is a happy coincidence in a credit crunch year. The collection calls on their Israeli background (one is Jewish, one Palestinian), and is kind but not patronising to lesser cooks. Their favourite ingredients are of the "noisy" type, they say: lemon, pomegranate, garlic, chilli... Foodies call their buttered prawns with tomato, olives and arak "a masterpiece". KG

Gardening

The Morville Hours: the Story of a Garden by Katherine Swift (Bloomsbury, £17.99)

Structured in the format of a medieval book of hours, this is the story of a garden, inherited by the author in 1988, that has roots going back thousands of years. Swift arrived at The Dower House, Morville Hall, having worked as a rare book librarian in Oxford and Dublin, as well as becoming for four years a full-time gardener and writer. Her book is written with as much love and thought and attention to detail as she clearly gives to her gardening, and is the story of all the people who have tended her patch of Shropshire land. Broken up by the chimes of the parish church clock and the passing of the seasons, it is a gentle interlude in a hectic world. KG

Biography

Alasdair Gray: a Secretary's Biography by Rodge Glass (Bloomsbury, £25)

As much a book about the tricksiness of writing biography as it is the story of the famous writer's life, this is the official life of Alasdair Gray, written by his barman, typist, secretary and puzzled friend. There is hardly any modern Scottish writer who does not now claim to be influenced by Gray, and Glass, his employee and biggest fan, is no exception. Beginning with a delighted invitation from Gray to "be my Boswell", he continues through his own confusion and Gray's obfuscation to reach an approximation of the kind of guy his mentor is – with a little help from Gray's novels, which the biographee skims at the kitchen table as an aide-memoire. KG

Memoir

Me Cheeta: the Autobiography (Fourth estate, £16.99)

Though it could have fallen into just about any category (memoir/travel/cinema/history/novel/satire/ complete nonsense of a fabrication), Me Cheeta is billed as the warts and all autobiography of the legendary ape of the Tarzan films. Salacious, knowing, clever and utterly wicked, it is the ultimate tell-all LA memoir (at a Hollywood orgy, which names names, Cheeta claims that the actors are "like a bunch of fucking bonobos"). The author has been outed as a British scribe, but it is easy to think of this as the work of the world's oldest chimpanzee, dashed off crossly between avant-garde paintings at his poolside retirement home. Celebrity memoirists should read this and weep. KG

Humour

I Can Has Cheezburger? by Eric Nakagawa (Hodder & Stoughton, £9.99)

Starting as a single photograph seen by an easy-to-amuse cat owner, becoming a website, then a blog and finally a worldwide cult with millions of daily hits, I Can Has Cheezburger? and the lolcats phenomenon now look like becoming a surreal, Christmas bestseller. Basically some cute pictures of cats with captions in lolspeak (or pidgin kitty), the book is introduced by Professor Happycat and is stupid, brilliant and far more ridiculously funny than it has any right to be. Fans (who have already produced a lolspeak dictionary) will find that the language becomes maddeningly addictive. Don't get it? Don't let on: Ceiling Cat is watching you. KG

Politics

The Audacity of Hope by Barack Obama (Canongate, £8.99)

Mostly written at the end of a busy Senate day, after his children went to sleep and before he went to bed at 1am, The Audacity of Hope is what a political treatise should look like, from a president who will redefine the genre as much as he looks like redefining the role of president. Full of the passion, commitment and tear-jerking eloquence that we saw and wept at uncontrollably in his victory speech, it shows how he became the US President Elect and, with any luck, why he will make a good job of it. The book has been stuck fast in The New York Times bestseller list and is well on its way to being equally successful with British Obamaniacs. Well done Canongate for securing the UK publishing rights. KG

Travel

Amazon by Bruce Parry (Michael Joseph, £20)

Amazon is surely another step towards Bruce Parry's coronation as a national treasure – a kind of Michael Palin with a greater openness to impromptu facial piercings and weird psychotropic experiences. The book, like the television series, covers more than 6,000km of Amazon river, mostly by foot and boat, starting at its source in the Peruvian Andes and ending in the Amazonian rainforest, as well as meeting some remarkable characters along the way. On paper, Parry is just as committed as on film, but by its nature the book is softer and more reflective than the onscreen version. How Parry resists judging people is anyone's guess, but greatly to his credit. KG

Cinema & TV

Parky: My Autobiography by Michael Parkinson (Hodder & Stoughton, £20)

The new biography by the professional Yorkshireman is one of an unusual crop that has stormed the bestseller charts this year: celebrity memoirs that were actually written by the person whose name is on the cover. Parkinson's style turns out to be funny and self-deprecating and just as laid-back as he is on camera, starting with the obligatory poor childhood in a mining town ("I remember thinking it wouldn't bother me, provided I could marry Ingrid Bergman and get a house much nearer the pit") and ending up in the telly stratosphere. Fans will be pleased to hear that Meg Ryan and Emu are well-covered, but in fact the early chapters about his childhood and mother are most compelling. KG

Crime

The Suspicions of Mr Whicher by Kate Summerscale (Bloomsbury, £11.99)

Another genre-swapping tour de force, Summerscale's "non-fiction novel" can be thought of as a biography, a history and a thrilling analysis of a true crime from 1860. The central character is Jack Whicher, a Scotland Yard detective, and the crime is the savage murder of a four-year-old boy. As ever, child murder was a national event and the episode inspired novelists including Dickens and Wilkie Collins. Summerscale's story, which deservedly won this year's Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction, has the pace and the intrigue that makes the historical crime thriller so compelling when a writer really gets it right. KG

Historical fiction

A Mercy by Toni Morrison (Chatto & Windus, £15.99)

Fans of Toni Morrison would be thrilled by any new work from their hard-working heroine, but this, her ninth novel, is one of her best. Set in 1680s colonial America, the story is told from the perspective of three women outsiders in a male-dominated household: a native American woman, a sea captain's daughter and an English mail order bride. The characters, Morrison says, are like modern migrants – "ordinary people who came without help" – and they all struggle to find their way in a stunningly evoked but brutal landscape. This is a story about betrayal and loss, need and belonging that raises important questions about the way America was won. KG