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# The 10 Best Books of 2006

## FICTION

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Ji Lee

### ABSURDISTAN

By Gary Shteyngart. Random House, \$24.95.  
 Shteyngart's scruffy, exuberant second novel, equal parts Gogol and Borat, is immodest on every level - it's long, crude, manic and has cheap vodka on its breath. It also happens to be smart, funny and, in the end, extraordinarily rich and moving. "Absurdistan" introduces Misha Vainberg, the rap-music-obsessed, grossly overweight son of the 1,238th richest man in Russia. After attending college in the United States, he is now stuck in St. Petersburg, scrambling for an American visa that may never arrive. Caught between worlds, and mired in his own prejudices and thwarted desires, Vainberg just may be an antihero for our times.

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## NOTE

This list will run in the Dec. 10 print edition of the Book Review.

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### THE COLLECTED STORIES OF AMY HEMPEL

Scribner, \$27.50.  
 A quietly powerful presence in American fiction during the past two decades, Hempel has demonstrated unusual discipline in assembling her urbane, pointillistic and wickedly funny short stories. Since the publication of her first collection, "Reasons to Live," in 1985, only three more slim volumes have appeared - a total of some 15,000 sentences, and nearly every one of them has a crisp, distinctive bite. These collected stories show the true scale of Hempel's achievement. Her compact fictions, populated by smart, neurotic, somewhat damaged narrators, speak grandly to the longings and insecurities in all of us, and in a voice that is bracingly direct and sneakily profound.

### THE EMPEROR'S CHILDREN

By Claire Messud. Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.  
 This superbly intelligent, keenly observed comedy of manners, set amid the glitter of cultural Manhattan in 2001, also looks unsparingly, though sympathetically, at a privileged class unwittingly poised, in its insularity, for the

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catastrophe of 9/11. Messud gracefully intertwines the stories of three friends, attractive, entitled 30-ish Brown graduates "torn between Big Ideas and a party" but falling behind in the contest for public rewards and losing the struggle for personal contentment. The vibrant supporting cast includes a deliciously drawn literary seducer ("without question, a great man") and two ambitious interlopers, teeming with malign energy, whose arrival on the scene propels the action forward.

**THE LAY OF THE LAND**

By Richard Ford. Alfred A. Knopf, \$26.95.

The third installment, following "The Sportswriter" (1986) and "Independence Day" (1995), in the serial epic of Frank Bascombe - flawed husband, fuddled dad, writer turned real estate agent and voluble first-person narrator. Once again the action revolves around a holiday. This time it's Thanksgiving 2000: the Florida recount grinds toward its predictable outcome, and Bascombe, now 55, battles prostate cancer and copes with a strange turn in his second marriage. The story, which unfolds over three days, is filled with incidents, some of them violent, but as ever the drama is rooted in the interior world of its authentically life-size hero, as he logs long hours on the highways and back roads of New Jersey, taking expansive stock of middle-age defeats and registering the erosions of a brilliantly evoked landscape of suburbs, strip malls and ocean towns.

**SPECIAL TOPICS IN CALAMITY PHYSICS**

By Marisha Pessl. Viking, \$25.95.

The antic ghost of Nabokov hovers over this buoyantly literate first novel, a murder mystery narrated by a teenager enamored of her own precocity but also in thrall to her father, an enigmatic itinerant professor, and to the charismatic female teacher whose death is announced on the first page. Each of the 36 chapters is titled for a classic (by authors ranging from Shakespeare to Carlo Emilio Gadda), and the plot snakes ingeniously toward a revelation capped by a clever "final exam." All this is beguiling, but the most solid pleasures of this book originate in the freshness of Pessl's voice and in the purity of her storytelling gift.

**NONFICTION****FALLING THROUGH THE EARTH****A Memoir.**

By Danielle Trussoni. Henry Holt & Company, \$23.

This intense, at times searing memoir revisits the author's rough-and-tumble Wisconsin girlhood, spent on the wrong side of the tracks in the company of her father, a Vietnam vet who began his tour as "a cocksure country boy" but returned "wild and haunted," unfit for family life and driven to extremes of philandering, alcoholism and violence. Trussoni mixes these memories with spellbinding versions of the war stories her father reluctantly dredged up and with reflections on her own journey to Vietnam, undertaken in an attempt to recapture, and come to terms with, her father's experiences as a "tunnel rat" who volunteered for the harrowing duty of scouring underground labyrinths in search of an elusive and deadly enemy.

**THE LOOMING TOWER****Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11.**

By Lawrence Wright. Alfred A. Knopf, \$27.95.

In the fullest account yet of the events that led to the fateful day, Wright unmaskes the secret world of Osama bin Laden and his collaborators and also chronicles the efforts of

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a handful of American intelligence officers alert to the approaching danger but frustrated, time and again, in their efforts to stop it. Wright, a staff writer for The New Yorker, builds his heart-stopping narrative through the patient and meticulous accumulation of details and through vivid portraits of Al Qaeda's leaders. Most memorably, he tells the story of John O'Neill, the tormented F.B.I. agent who worked frantically to prevent the impending terrorist attack, only to die in the World Trade Center.

### **MAYFLOWER**

#### **A Story of Courage, Community, and War.**

By Nathaniel Philbrick. Viking, \$29.95.

This absorbing history of the Plymouth Colony is a model of revisionism. Philbrick impressively recreates the pilgrims' dismal 1620 voyage, bringing to life passengers and crew, and then relates the events of the settlement and its first contacts with the native inhabitants of Massachusetts. Most striking are the parallels he subtly draws with the present, particularly in his account of how Plymouth's leaders, including Miles Standish, rejected diplomatic overtures toward the Indians, successful though they'd been, and instead pursued a "dehumanizing" policy of violent aggression that led to the needless bloodshed of King Philip's War.

### **THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA**

#### **A Natural History of Four Meals.**

By Michael Pollan. The Penguin Press, \$26.95.

"When you can eat just about anything nature has to offer, deciding what you should eat will inevitably stir anxiety," Pollan writes in this supple and probing book. He gracefully navigates within these anxieties as he traces the origins of four meals - from a fast-food dinner to a "hunter-gatherer" feast - and makes us see, with remarkable clarity, exactly how what we eat affects both our bodies and the planet. Pollan is the perfect tour guide: his prose is incisive and alive, and pointed without being tendentious. In an uncommonly good year for American food writing, this is a book that stands out.

### **THE PLACES IN BETWEEN**

By Rory Stewart. Harvest/Harcourt, Paper, \$14.

"You are the first tourist in Afghanistan," Stewart, a young Scotsman, was warned by an Afghan official before commencing the journey recounted in this splendid book. "It is mid-winter - there are three meters of snow on the high passes, there are wolves, and this is a war. You will die, I can guarantee." Stewart, thankfully, did not die, and his report on his adventures - walking across Afghanistan in January of 2002, shortly after the fall of the Taliban - belongs with the masterpieces of the travel genre. Stewart may be foolhardy, but on the page he is a terrific companion: smart, compassionate and human. His book cracks open a fascinating, blasted world miles away from the newspaper headlines.

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