

December 14, 2008

The 10 Best Books of 2008

The editors of the Book Review have selected these titles from the list of [100 Notable Books of 2008](#).

FICTION

[DANGEROUS LAUGHTER](#)

Thirteen Stories

By [Steven Millhauser](#).

Alfred A. Knopf, \$24.

In his first collection in five years, a master fabulist in the tradition of Poe and Nabokov invents spookily plausible parallel universes in which the deepest human emotions and yearnings are transformed into their monstrous opposites. Millhauser is especially attuned to the purgatory of adolescence. In the title story, teenagers attend sinister “laugh parties”; in another, a mysteriously afflicted girl hides in the darkness of her attic bedroom. Time and again these parables revive the possibility that “under this world there is another, waiting to be born.” ([Excerpt](#))

[A MERCY](#)

By [Toni Morrison](#).

Alfred A. Knopf, \$23.95.

The fate of a slave child abandoned by her mother animates this allusive novel — part Faulknerian puzzle, part dream-song — about orphaned women who form an eccentric household in late-17th-century America. Morrison’s farmers and rum traders, masters and slaves, indentured whites and captive Native Americans live side by side, often in violent conflict, in a lawless, ripe American Eden that is both a haven and a prison — an emerging nation whose identity is rooted equally in Old World superstitions and New World appetites and fears. ([First Chapter](#))

[NETHERLAND](#)

By [Joseph O’Neill](#).

Pantheon Books, \$23.95.

O’Neill’s seductive ode to New York — a city that even in bad times stubbornly clings to its belief

“in its salvific worth” — is narrated by a Dutch financier whose privileged Manhattan existence is upended by the events of Sept. 11, 2001. When his wife departs for London with their small son, he stays behind, finding camaraderie in the unexpectedly buoyant world of immigrant cricket players, most of them West Indians and South Asians, including an entrepreneur with Gatsby-size aspirations. ([First Chapter](#))

[2666](#)

By Roberto Bolaño. Translated by Natasha Wimmer.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, cloth and paper, \$30.

Bolaño, the prodigious Chilean writer who died at age 50 in 2003, has posthumously risen, like a figure in one of his own splendid creations, to the summit of modern fiction. This latest work, first published in Spanish in 2004, is a mega- and meta-detective novel with strong hints of apocalyptic foreboding. It contains five separate narratives, each pursuing a different story with a cast of beguiling characters — European literary scholars, an African-American journalist and more — whose lives converge in a Mexican border town where hundreds of young women have been brutally murdered. ([Excerpt](#))

[UNACCUSTOMED EARTH](#)

By [Jhumpa Lahiri](#).

Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.

There is much cultural news in these precisely observed studies of modern-day Bengali-Americans — many of them Ivy-league strivers ensconced in prosperous suburbs who can't quite overcome the tug of traditions nurtured in Calcutta. With quiet artistry and tender sympathy, Lahiri creates an impressive range of vivid characters — young and old, male and female, self-knowing and self-deluding — in engrossing stories that replenish the classic themes of domestic realism: loneliness, estrangement and family discord. ([Excerpt](#))

NONFICTION

[THE DARK SIDE](#)

The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals

By Jane Mayer.

Doubleday, \$27.50.

Mayer's meticulously reported descent into the depths of President Bush's antiterrorist policies peels away the layers of legal and bureaucratic maneuvering that gave us Guantánamo Bay, “[extraordinary rendition](#),” “enhanced” interrogation methods, “black sites,” warrantless domestic surveillance and all the rest. But Mayer also describes the efforts of unsung heroes, tucked deep

inside the administration, who risked their careers in the struggle to balance the rule of law against the need to meet a threat unlike any other in the nation's history.

[THE FOREVER WAR](#)

By Dexter Filkins.

Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.

The New York Times correspondent, whose tours of duty have taken him from Afghanistan in 1998 to Iraq during the American intervention, captures a decade of armed struggle in harrowingly detailed vignettes. Whether interviewing jihadists in Kabul, accompanying marines on risky patrols in Falluja or visiting grieving families in Baghdad, Filkins makes us see, with almost hallucinogenic immediacy, the true human meaning and consequences of the “war on terror.” ([First Chapter](#))

[NOTHING TO BE FRIGHTENED OF](#)

By [Julian Barnes](#).

Alfred A. Knopf, \$24.95.

This absorbing memoir traces Barnes's progress from atheism (at age 20) to agnosticism (at 60) and examines the problem of religion not by rehashing the familiar quarrel between science and mystery, but rather by weighing the timeless questions of mortality and aging. Barnes distills his own experiences — and those of his parents and brother — in polished and wise sentences that recall the writing of Montaigne, Flaubert and the other French masters he includes in his discussion. ([First Chapter](#))

[THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING](#)

Death and the American Civil War

By Drew Gilpin Faust.

Alfred A. Knopf, \$27.95.

In this powerful book, Faust, the president of [Harvard](#), explores the legacy, or legacies, of the “harvest of death” sown and reaped by the Civil War. In the space of four years, 620,000 Americans died in uniform, roughly the same number as those lost in all the nation's combined wars from the Revolution through Korea. This doesn't include the thousands of civilians killed in epidemics, guerrilla raids and draft riots. The collective trauma created “a newly centralized nation-state,” Faust writes, but it also established “sacrifice and its memorialization as the ground on which North and South would ultimately reunite.” ([First Chapter](#))

[THE WORLD IS WHAT IT IS](#)

The Authorized Biography of [V. S. Naipaul](#)

By Patrick French.

Alfred A. Knopf, \$30.

The most surprising word in this biography is “authorized.” Naipaul, the greatest of all postcolonial authors, cooperated fully with French, opening up a huge cache of private letters and diaries and supplementing the revelations they disclosed with remarkably candid interviews. It was a brave, and wise, decision. French, a first-rate biographer, has a novelist’s command of story and character, and he patiently connects his subject’s brilliant oeuvre with the disturbing facts of an unruly life. ([First Chapter](#))

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