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Life & Style

**David Sexton**
25.11.10

Which books appealed most this year? Candia McWilliam's memoir of blindness, [Jonathan Franzen's](#) blockbuster and [John le Carré's](#) latest thriller are among our favourites ...

NICKY HASLAM

Two of the most moving books this year were by friends, one a highly regarded writer, the other a first-time author. Candia McWilliam's *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness* (Cape, £18.99) is as bleak and deep as a snowscape, with the sudden golden shafts of humour and scholarly erudition one relishes in Candia's work. I read *Why Not Say What Happened?* (Bloomsbury, £25), a painful and yet bravely hilarious memoir by Ivana Lowell in manuscript by a summer sea in *Tuscany*, and parts of it gave me cold shivers.

ADAM NICOLSON

I loved *Mr Chartwell* by Rebecca Hunt (Fig Tree, £12.99), a disturbing and funny novel about a large black dog, with gloomy dark charms, who has [Winston Churchill](#) as one of his clients. And *The Waterloo Archive* (Frontline, £25), edited by Gareth Glover, of unpublished letters and journals describing the 1815 campaign is full of extraordinary detail: what happens when you slice a man's head off, how to fry slices of ox in a captured cuirass, the quantity of gin you need to fight a battle.

BELLA FREUD

My favourite and most long awaited read was [Keith Richards's](#) autobiography *Life* (Little, Brown, £20), co-written with my husband, [James Fox](#). I have read it in many forms and it is still unputdownable — the truth is even better than the myth. Polly Samson's *Perfect Lives* (Virago, £15.99) is a collection of short stories that makes you invent excuses to retire to a private place for a quick injection of reading.

ANDREW MOTION

The reputation of one of the great American poets of the late 20th century, Louis Simpson, has always been overshadowed by more famous near-contemporaries such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. Now Bloodaxe has published a new volume of selected poems by Simpson called *Voices in the Distance* (£9.95), which should give him the audience he deserves. The poems are sad and funny and strange — apparently very relaxed, but actually wound up tight. Masterly.

GEORDIE GREIG

Two slim books with weight as well as a light touch: [Seamus Heaney's](#) *Human Chain* (Faber, £12.99), his latest collection, stays long in the memory with many of the best poems reverting to his naturalist roots. Christopher Reid's *A Scattering* (Arete, £7.99) is an unputdownable verse tribute to his much-loved, late wife that is moving and life-enhancing, and deservedly won the Costa Book of the Year prize.

NICOLA HORLICK

In *A Week in December* by [Sebastian Faulks](#), (Vintage, £7.99) the author cleverly brings together the two things that are troubling the nation most — the collapse of the financial system and the threat of terrorism. The book is compelling. *The Finkler Question* (Bloomsbury, £18.99) by [Howard Jacobson](#), which deservedly won the [Booker Prize](#), is a book in which little really happens, although there are many comic moments, but it is hard to put down for some indefinable reason.

NICHOLAS COLERIDGE

I was gripped and sometimes repulsed by Piers Paul Read's brilliantly written, uncomfortably sleazy *The Misogynist* (Bloomsbury, £16.99). Ivana Lowell's *Why Not Say What Happened?* (Bloomsbury, £25) is packed with snobbery, grand houses and child abuse, which kept me



Dark times: yet Candia McWilliam's deeply moving memoir about her loss of vision contained golden shafts of humour



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awake. [Nicky Haslam's](#) *Redeeming Features* (Vintage, £25) is also chock-a-block with random snobbery, big houses and abuse, but you felt it was generally welcomed. I am a secret and unashamed Ken Follett fan and his magisterial new blockbuster, *Fall of Giants* (Macmillan, £20) doesn't disappoint.

RACHEL JOHNSON

The novel I liked best this year was *Freedom* (4th Estate, £20) by Jonathan Franzen, a portrait of a world poised on the brink of combustion, and a nation losing its superpowers, shot through the viewfinder of one long, difficult (are there any other sort?) marriage. I also loved Ivana Lowell's *Why Not Say What Happened?* (Bloomsbury, £25). It's always salutary to read writers like Lowell who are able to dish up death, destruction, addiction and other treats with such economy when most of us, let's face it, take ages and pages to say not much about anything at all.

VINCE CABLE

I have become seriously addicted to the dark, mysterious novels emerging from [Scandinavia](#) as fast as English translations will allow. Last Christmas I read the Larsson trilogy end to end, totally gripped by the complex but beautifully crafted plots and the tension built up from the contrast between blind bored egalitarianism, listed [Sweden](#) and its hidden underside of sexual abuse, misogyny and fascism. [Norway's](#) answer to Larsson is Jo Nesbo. His book *The Snowman* (Vintage, £6.99) is a superb, tasty, huge page-turner about a serial killer pursued by a quirky anti-establishment police officer. Seriously scary but a superior thriller. A modern classic I missed first time round is Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (Faber, £8.99). It takes us back to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the continuing horror story of the Congo: colonised by greedy brutal outsiders and alien religions giving way to African despotism and near anarchy.

FLORA FRASER

I'm sure others will join me in praising *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (Chatto, £18.99) by Edmund de Waal. It is not often that a family saga leaves readers panting for the new ceramics galleries at the V&A. I also want to recommend Candia McWilliam's *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness* (Cape, £18.99). As her friend, I saw the courage with which she faced the blindness that gave rise to this memoir. Courage haunts the book too.

PETER TATCHELL

I loved *The Pope Is Not Gay!* by Angelo Quattrocchi (Verso, £8.99). No great intellectual tome, but a quirky, amusing read, which deservedly ruffled the [Vatican](#). As the author wickedly reveals, [Benedict XVI](#) has reinvented Papal high camp. Pat Thane's *Unequal Britain* (Continuum, £18.99) documents the many advances since 1945 towards reducing gender, race, disability and sexual orientation discrimination. Britain has changed for the better, from a boring, conformist, monocultural nation, to one that mostly accepts and celebrates our glorious cultural diversity. Bravo!

JOHN SUTHERLAND

The two antique-format volumes I enjoyed most this year are not Franzen's *Freedom* (which could be retitled *Bombast*) or [Philip Larkin's](#) *Letters to Monica* (which could be retitled *Poor Miss Jones*). One wholly enjoyable book, short enough to be a bagatelle, is Proust's *Overcoat*, by Lorenza Foschini (Portobello, £9.99). By contrast, my other nomination is *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (OUP, £195). Published in two volumes and edited by Michael F Suarez and Henry Woudhuysen it is a worthy tombstone for that soon to be lamented thing, the codex.

FRANCES OSBORNE

Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* (Penguin, £7.99) is set in Jackson, Mississippi on the eve of the birth of the Civil Rights movement. Legions of black maids are raising children in white families who hold to segregation so religiously that they will even turn on one of their own. *Bluestockings* (Penguin, £9.99) by Jane Robinson is the riveting story of another long battle against discrimination. In 1869, when the first women enrolled at university in Britain, doctors warned that if they studied too hard their wombs would wither and die. The hard-fought struggle for female academic equality is one that we should not be allowed to forget.

TERENCE CONRAN

Sunnyside (Sceptre, £7.99) by Glenn David Gold might not match up to his excellent *Carter Beats the Devil* but is nonetheless a jolly romp through the life, times and adventures of [Charlie Chaplin](#). From the glamour of Hollywood in 1916 to the battlefields of [France](#), this is a book of epic and appropriately cinematic proportions that leaves you feeling exhausted. I make absolutely no apology for nominating my son [Jasper Conran's](#) *Country* (Conran Octopus, £50), a beautiful book that has given me more pleasure than any other this year. Along with the excellent photographer Andrew Montgomery, Jasper explores the countryside and leaves you yearning for a life of simplicity.

NICK CURTIS

[Ian McEwan's](#) *Solar* (Cape, £18.99) may have lacked the majesty of his earlier work *Saturday* but it marked a marvellous return to witty form. The death aged 90 this May of Peter O'Donnell, creator of the Modesty Blaise adventure strip which ran in the *Standard* for 38 years, sent me back to the eponymous first novel featuring his sexy, dynamic heroine. First published in 1965, it's better written than the Bond books, ground-breakingly feminist, and has been recently republished with a facsimile cover (Souvenir, £8.99).

NICHOLAS HYTNER

By the end of *Freedom* (4th Estate, £20) by Jonathan Franzen may feel you understand its protagonists better than you know anyone in the world around you, though you wouldn't necessarily want your own inner life mapped out with Franzen's kind of merciless precision. He comes terrifyingly close to suggesting that freedom, both political and personal, is a hopeless illusion; but in the struggle to achieve it the family at the centre of this overwhelming novel become fully and heroically human. It's every bit as good as everyone says it is.

SARAH SANDS

This has been a cracking year for political memoirs. At last, they have become readable and self-revealing — sometimes intentionally so. My favourites are [Tony Blair's](#) *A Journey* (Hutchinson, £25), and [George Bush's](#) *Decision Points* (Virgin, £25), which show the two leaders to be more soulmates than we had imagined. I recommend [Peter Mandelson's](#) *The Third Man* (HarperPress, £25) for the hilariously camp Prince of Darkness telly ad alone. Usually it is the humble who have the clearest perspectives on events, and I enjoyed [Chris Mullin's](#) *Decline and Fall: Diaries 2005-2010* (Profile, £20). A final mention to the collected writings of the late, great political sketchwriter Frank Johnson, edited by his widow Virginia Fraser, *Best Seat in the House* (JR Books, £18.99). A week is a long time in politics, but the appeal of political comedy is lasting.

GEORGE WALDEN

Two books about evil. The same characteristics we see in the state exist in every one of us, [Plato](#) said, for where else could they have come from? Michael Burleigh's *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (Harper, £30) illustrates this sombre truth. States led by monsters monopolise our censure, but in Burleigh's tough-minded book we see human evil in the round. The Archbishop of Canterbury has lamented the disappearance of the Chairman's [China](#), which "guaranteed everyone's welfare". He should read Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine* (Bloomsbury, £25), a harrowing account of the 1958-1962 Great Leap Forward. Forty-five million died, yet the Mao myth lives on, in the strangest places.

JIM O'NEILL

In terms of economics books, Tony Boeckh's *The Great Reflation* (Wiley, £23.99) is fantastic. As it was World Cup year, there were lots of football contenders, including [Simon Kuper](#) and [Stefan Szymanski](#)'s *Why England Lose* (HarperSport, £7.99), which should still be compulsory reading for all poor suffering England fans. I found both *Alone in Berlin* (Penguin, £7.99) by Hans Fallada, and *The Secret Speech* (Pocket, £7.99) by Tom Rob Smith riveting.

MICHAEL BURLEIGH

I liked two short books of mind and verve which will annoy all the right people. Roger Scruton's *The Uses of Pessimism* (Atlantic, £15.99) elegantly argues against the optimistic madness which, among other things, led Shirley Williams to abolish our grammar schools. Samuel Moyn's *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Harvard, £20.95) is a bold opening salvo against a utopian lawyers' racket that has fabricated its own lineage, and resulted in us sordidly compensating those who wish to destroy us.

CLAIRE HARMAN

Two difficult men dominate my books of the year: one is Jackson Brodie, Kate Atkinson's shambling, wonderfully sympathetic literary cop in the latest of her crime novels to feature him, *Started Early, Took My Dog* (Doubleday, £18.99). The other is Philip Larkin, as revealed through his *Letters to Monica* (Faber, £22.50) a treat for all curmudgeonophiles. We may be getting to the bottom of the barrel with Larkin texts, but who cares when he's treating his unlovable lover to descriptions of the damp patches on his ceiling, or staging a showdown between [Yeats](#) and Hardy. Heartwarmingly bleak.

JULIET NICOLSON

After You, Letters of Love, and Loss to a Husband and Father (Viking, £12.99) is a collection of exquisitely moving letters that [Natascha McElhone](#) wrote to her husband Martin after his sudden death from a heart attack. The passages describing the hope that eventually softened her grief are unforgettable and inspirational. I also loved the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire's evocative, funny, nostalgic autobiography, *Wait for Me* (John Murray, £20).

JANE SHILLING

The House of the Mosque (Canongate, £12.99) by expatriate Iranian writer Kader Abdolah, tells the story of a family scattered by the Iranian revolution. It was the first novel I read in 2010 and remains my favourite. In *Parrot and Olivier in America* (Faber, £18.99), his exhilarating riff on the life of Alexis de Tocqueville, [Peter Carey](#) writes prose as supple and daring as poetry.

JONATHAN MEADES

Pascal Bruckner's *The Tyranny of Guilt* (Princeton, £18.95) damningly scrutinises the many forms of pompous clerical treason and vaunting self-hatred present in Europe: the contempt for "dead white European males"; the preening conviction that African life is more "authentic" than European; anti-Semitism disguised as anti-Zionism; liberal support for totalitarian theocracies; the far Left's championing of Palestinian terrorism; knee-jerk anti-Americanism; the excusing of criminal behaviour because it is supposedly caused by economic misfortune; the willingness to "understand" suicide bombers as victims of colonialism (which ended half a century ago). It's a wake-up call to the West, but one that will, of course, go unheeded because the received ideas it so deftly nails constitute *la pensée unique* shared by politicians and intellectuals of all shades.

ROSAMUND URWIN

I found Emma Donoghue's *Room* (Picador, £12.99) so gripping that while reading it on the Tube I missed my stop. It is a beautifully written novel about an horrific subject: the incarceration of a woman and her son in a small shed. *Room* is disturbing, imaginative and hard to forget. I loved Cordelia Fine's *Delusions of Gender* (Icon, £14.99). Fine is that rare combination of a great scientist and a great writer, launching a witty and impeccably researched attack on the idea that the differences between the sexes are hard-wired in our brains.

ALEXANDRA SHULMAN

In *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (Chatto, £18.99) Edmund de Waal has written a history as tactile and perfectly crafted as the ceramics he is known for. On one level it is a dramatic family story but it is also inspirational on the subject of the ownership and collection of objects. Anyone who has ever lunched with an ex-lover in a fading Soho restaurant years after the end of the affair should read Christopher Reid's epic poem *The Song of Lunch* (Faber, £7.95). As should anyone who hasn't but wants to know what it would be like.

MARK SANDERSON

Jonathan Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (Viking, £18.99) did not get the acclaim it deserved. A state-of-the-nation novel that is actually very funny, it is also a moving exploration of loneliness. Juliet Gardiner's *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (Harper, £30) looks through the keyhole of "Britain's forgotten decade" to cast a whole new light on a period when, despite the gathering storm, some people still managed to have a spiffing time.

RICHARD GODWIN

In the centenary of Leo Tolstoy's death, it was a great pleasure to read Rosamund Bartlett's *Tolstoy: A Russian Life* (Profile, £25), an accessible and scholarly biography of the troubled master of realist fiction which conjures the splendid image of him wobbling around on a bicycle. No novel caught the zeitgeist better than *The Ask*, by Sam Lipsyte (Old Street, £11.99), a hilarious account of life under "late-capitalism". It cuts to the sad heart of our age.

ARCHIE NORMAN

Supermac: The Life of Harold Macmillan by D R Thorpe (Chatto, £25) is a spellbinding insight into the fascinating character of one of the most remarkable politicians of the 20th century. Thorpe manages to combine historical and personal insight into the biographical equivalent of a *Downton Abbey*. *The Third Man: Life at the Heart of New Labour* (HarperPress, £25) by Peter Mandelson is surprisingly coherent and a trenchant articulation of what New Labour was. It is also better written than Tony Blair's *A Journey*. And because it is laced with the roller coaster ride of Peter Mandelson's personal journey it has pathos. Mandelson was one of the formative

political figures of his time and if you want to understand what happened to [Labour](#) and why the [Conservatives](#) became irrelevant for a decade, this is a must-read.

ANDREW NEATHER

With his superb contacts and razor-sharp writing, it's hard to see how [Andrew Rawnsley's](#) *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour* (Penguin, £12.99) will ever be bettered as a devastatingly accurate history of the Blair-Brown years. To understand the pressures of the final years, though, read [Andrew Ross Sorkin's](#) *Too Big to Fail: Inside the Battle to Save Wall Street* (Penguin, £12.99). It's not just an extraordinary fly-on-the-wall account of the US banking crisis of 2008: despite being constructed from interviews with bankers, it's utterly gripping.

WILLIAM LEITH

This year, I was impressed by *The Rational Optimist* by Matt Ridley (Fourth Estate, £20). I'm normally extremely pessimistic about the human race but Ridley explains with tremendous erudition, and in exemplary prose, why things might turn out better than we fear. I also liked *Portrait of the Addict as a Young Man* by Bill Clegg (Cape, £12.99), a [New York](#) literary agent who spent time as a crack addict; his description of trying to catch a plane, while on a crack binge is superb.

MISHA GLENNY

I've just read Fintan O'Toole's *Enough is Enough* (Faber, £12.99), the follow-up to *Ship of Fools*, his fabulous critique of the poison that fuelled the Celtic Tiger. In this book, he explains how the Irish state must transform itself if the country is to escape the hell whither successive governments have led it. *A Loyal Spy* (Hodder, £7.99), Simon Conway's gripping political thriller, was a deserving winner of the [Ian Fleming](#) Steel Dagger award. It reveals the complexity of [Afghanistan](#), Islamic fundamentalism and Western hypocrisy through a heart-stopping but utterly credible narrative.

MELANIE McDONAGH

The most important book of the year is the groundbreaking, heartbreaking account by Frank Dikötter of Mao's Great Famine (Bloomsbury, £25). His forced collectivisation of agriculture cost 45 million Chinese lives between 1958 and 1962. Not many people know about that oriental Holocaust. But we damn well should. A happier read is *Bugs Britannica* (Chatto £25), Richard Mabey's and Peter Marren's delightful exploration of Britain's insect life. Fab illustrations.

LIZ HOGGARD

As a time-pressed reader, the highlight of my year was having a session with a "bibliotherapist" (Ella Berthoud, who works at The School of Life) who identified that I have a passion for dysfunctional family memoirs. Little wonder Candia McWilliam's lucid, unflinching account of losing her sight in *What to Look for in Winter* got completely under my skin. And I'd highly recommend *We Are a Muslim, Please* (Heinemann, £12.99), Channel 4 reporter Zaiba Malik's memoir of growing up in Bradford.

ARTEMIS COOPER

Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (Chatto, £18.99) is a book of astonishing originality, about what a particular collection of netsuke signified to its makers and owners, and what it came to mean when all else was lost. I also loved Ian Morris's *Why The West Rules — For Now* (Profile, £25). It's not for the feeble-wristed, but Morris handles huge ideas and transglobal theories with a breathtaking ease and humour.

KATIE LAW

The book that shone out for me was [Michael Frayn's](#) *My Father's Fortune: A Life* (Faber, £16.99) in which Frayn both pays tribute to his father and gives a wholly unsnobbish account of his lower middle-class upbringing in and the circumstances that led to his intellectual and social ascent. I've also just begun Candia McWilliam's *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness* (Cape, £18.99) and am gripped by her refreshingly idiosyncratic style.

VICTOR SEBESTYEN

The brilliant historian Tony Judt, who died last summer, suffered from a form of motor neurone disease. His posthumously published biographical essays, *The Memory Chalet* (Heinemann, £16) show what a learned, witty, subtle, and above all, civilised man we have lost. Our national obsession with the Second World War often seems unhealthy but occasionally a stand-out book on the subject appears. Michael Burleigh's *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (Harper, £30) is magisterial, with an original point on almost every page. Scintillating.

PAUL MYNERS

[Ed Miliband](#) said being out of government is "crap" but it does allow time to catch up with reading. Memorable books this year include *The Lacuna* by Barbara Kingsolver (Faber, £7.99); Anne Carson's accordion-folded poetic elegy to her brother, *Nox* (Norton, £19.99); and John le Carré's *Our Kind of Traitor*. But the book of the year is Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. Franzen looks at contemporary America through the life of a liberal family and those close to them. Everyone is free, but few are happy. *Freedom* is fine until "your freedom" encroaches on "my freedom". Franzen is at times funny, always challenging. A masterpiece.

FRANCIS SPUFFORD

I've been a fan of Lorrie Moore's short stories for ages, but *A Gate at the Stairs* (Faber, £7.99) is the first of her novels I've read. I wondered how the compulsive wisecracking of her style would work over a longer haul, and the answer is: beautifully, lending a hectic observant wit to a darkening story. And I really enjoyed Richard Powers's *Generosity* (Atlantic, £16.99), a book succeeds in making sense of the information the human genome is giving us.

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