



## **Books of the Year—As Chosen by Verso**

By Huw Lemmey / 19 December 2013

In a now-yearly ritual, Verso's hard-working team of staff — editors, publicists and other assorted book-elves — have taken a moment away from their busy schedules to give a run down of the books they've found most moving, interesting and inspiring over the last year.

### ***On the Nature of Things***

**Lucretius, translated by Rolfe Humphries, IUP**

A deft, lucid translation of the likable epic poem of the ancient world. Forget the sanguinary Homer or the tub-thumping Virgil. *On the Nature of Things* is an exhilarating account of how science can lift mankind out of superstition and fear.

### ***The Patrick Melrose novels***

**Edward St Aubyn, Picador**

This five-volume roman-fleuve is something to return to in old age, when there won't be time for reading anything but perfect tens. I've heard it said that the dialogue is a bit stagey, but personally I prefer my fictional characters eloquent and epigrammatic. I really can't stand too much reality.

### ***A Day in the Life of Ancient Rome: Daily Life, Mysteries and Curiosities***

**Alberto Angela, translated by Gregory Conti, Europa Editions**

How many times have you read a book of history only to forget all about the battles and struggles for succession the moment you put it down, retaining only a handful of piquant minor details? Perhaps you'll recall the short lifespans; the alien diet (garum sauce anyone? It's made from rotting fish); the massacres in the Coliseum; the daily struggles of the slaves. Well, this book is nothing but those fascinating nuggets. Not a people's history, but a history that brings ordinary

people to life, *A Day in the Life of Ancient Rome* is a tour of the city during Trajan's reign, a series of vignettes that recreates the ancient world with all the immediacy of an excellent travelogue.

### ***Socialist Register – 50th anniversary issue***

The legendary journal founded by John Saville and Ralph Miliband in 1963 has been the home for many debates on the left over the years, including E.P.

Thompson's controversial rejoinder to the Nairn-Anderson theses. It's latest issue is one of the strongest yet, with essays by Vivek Chibber and Colin Leys on the dynamic of class in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

### ***9.5 Theses on Art and Class***

#### **Ben Davis, Haymarket**

Radical critique of the art market, creative labor, aesthetic political output, curating, and criticism--with teeth.

### ***The Art of Cruelty***

#### **Maggie Nelson, W.W. Norton**

Nelson is such a pleasure to read. Here she expands on suffering, sexism, melancholy, and meanness, working in allusions from Paul McCarthy, Ana Mendieta, Ranciere, Hegel, Brittany Spears, Francis Bacon, and *To Catch A Predator* along the way.

### ***Drown***

#### **Junot Diaz, Riverhead**

One from far back but a gem nonetheless.

### ***Where'd you go Bernadette***

#### **Maria Semple, Back Bay Books**

Shortlisted for the Woman's Prize, this book is imaginative, funny, moving, clever and brilliant.

### ***girlchild***

#### **Tupelo Hassman, Picador**

A brilliant debut novel. As shocking as it is intense, but written beautifully with great subtlety.

## ***Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism***

Edited by **Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis**, Haymarket

One of our best books of 2013 was Razmig Keucheyan's brilliant analysis and history of the past 60 years of theory, *The Left Hemisphere*. For another brilliant overview of the various multiple strains of Marxism we turned to this huge fat book packed with short essays on most of the key issues.

***A Death in the Family*** by **Karl Ove Knausgaard**, **Harvill Seeker**, is the first part of the six book series: My Struggle. It is the moving story of the death of the author's father; powerfully written, it attempts to find a new place for the novel, and succeeds brilliantly.

There has been a lot of short form ebook/pamphlets that have shown that size isn't everything and is a really exciting future for ideas. In particular, the **Strelka Press** list produced by the Strelka Institute in Moscow is always engaging, especially *The Action is the Form* by **Keller Easterling**, *The Dot Com City* by **Alexandra Lange** and *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* by the ever brilliant **Metahaven**.

**Adam Greenfield's** self published ebook *Against the Smart City* is fascinating, cutting through the myths around how technology will transform our cities.

**Danny Dorling's** short essay on inequality and the city along the Central Line: *The 32 Stops*. The book includes the shocking statistic that between Marble Arch and Mile End – no more than 11 stops – there is an 12 year drop in life expectancy for local residents.

## ***Rape New York***

**Jana Leo, Book Works**

At turns devastating and inspiring, *Rape New York* is Leo's powerful real life account of being the victim of a sexual assault in her Harlem apartment. Leo writes movingly about how the attack changed her understanding of the city and its inhabitants, making her question her own politics and position within the city. It's a very humane book analysing violence, gentrification and development through a personal lens.

### ***Endnotes Issue 3***

The Endnotes collective return with their best issue yet, tackling gender. It also has a superb account of the UK riots in 2011, incorporating a nuanced analysis of the social make-up of the riots and the triggers and dynamics that sustained and spread them across the country.

### ***Times Square Red, Times Square Blue***

**Samuel Delany, NYU Press**

A gem of a book, *Times Square Red...* combines two essays; the first, a personal remembrance of 40 years worth of gay cruising and public sex that Delany took part in in the sex cinemas of Times Square from the mid-60s. In it he tells a of the remarkably touching moments of intimacy he shared with strangers, as well as the long relationships developed with men he met in the dark. The second essay is a more analytic examination of cross-class contact, and the difference between contacts and networks, which has interesting repercussions in the time of flourishing social networks online. It also examines how a sexual world was silently destroyed with the redevelopment of Times Square in the early 90's.

### ***The Forest Passage***

**Ernst Junger, Telos Press**

The publication of the first English translation of *The Forest Passage* is an invaluable contribution to the rediscovery of one of the greatest authors of the 20th century, and a fundamental step towards introducing the theory of the anarch to an English audience.

### ***Stand Up Tall: Dizzee Rascal and the Birth of Grime***

**Dan Hancox**

As well as an account of the early days of Dizzee Rascal's rise and an appraisal of his early music this book serves as an excellent introduction to the beginning of the grime scene. Dan Hancox, the author of our *Village Against the World*, was there from the beginning and has interviewed numerous key figures involved. He also offers a detailed account of the social world that the scene evolved in, making telling comments on the political situation that spawned one of the UK's most vibrant music genres. (For an introduction to the best of the music see Simon Reynolds' excellent article in our *Wire Primers*). The scene is still in rude health – see this, this and this.

## ***Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture***

**Simon Reynolds, Faber**

Speaking of Simon Reynolds, the third edition of his dance music bible was published this year. Simply the best place to find out everything you need to know about the development of dance music and its various off-shoots across the world, from Kraftwerk to Detroit to Jungle (again, see Simon's piece in our Wire Primers) to IDM to dubstep – now completely updated.

## ***The Cyrenaics***

**Ugo Zilioli, Acumen**

This is the first book-length attempt to examine the ultra-hedonist philosophy of the Cyrenaic School, which flourished in modern-day Libya during the Hellenistic period. Ugo Zilioli provides both a detailed account of Cyrenaic thought, and a bold reinterpretation of its unique ontology and epistemology.

## ***Ringolevio***

**Emmett Grogan, NYRB Classics**

Rollicking door-stopper of a memoir from the founder of the Diggers (radical Haight-Ashbury group in the 60s that may have been the precursor to Food Not Bombs), beginning from his childhood in a street-gang-ruled NYC and subsequent escape to Italy (after disappropriating the Upper East Side elite of their jewelry), and winding up at the center of 60s counterculture, both before its rise and after its fall. Fantastic repository of insights about the scene's radical core (alongside the tweaked-out hippies and false prophets that eventually overran it), and filled with so many unbelievable stories that ones is never sure where self-aggrandizement slips into myth.

## ***Women and Revolution***

**Lydia Sargent (Ed), South End Press**

1981 roundtable on Heidi Hartmann's seminal 1979 essay "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism" and how/whether feminism can be part of a broader Left project, including insights from Iris Young, Sandra Harding, Carol Brown. Though over 30 years old, it's particularly refreshing in the era of Lean In.

## ***The Feminist Porn Book***

**Edited by Tristan Taormino, Constance Penley, et al., Feminist Press**

An easy-read collection of essays surveying the politics of porn and sex work—from labor rights and film studies, to censorship, queer and race politics—written by academics, "sex radicals" and performers. Wastes no time engaging with "the other side" of the interminable debates. Bonus: a bright orange cover you can't miss on the train.

### **We, The Drowned**

**Carsten Jensen, Vintage Books**

A beautiful, slow unfolding of a hundred years of world history, this novel follows generations of sailors from the Danish port town of Marstal, on land and at sea, through technological innovation, colonialism, monarchy, Danish independence, and two world wars. Quiet, quirky and unflinching.

### **An Impossible State**

**Wael Hallaq, Columbia University Press**

In this age of sprawling Islamic regimes, Wael Hallaq's book reminds us that the Islamic state is an impossibility: the versatility and adaptability of Islamic societies, ruled according to a flexible and humane shari'a, is incompatible with the rigidity of a monolithic modern state and law. Shari'a governance, in its modern definition, is a sham. Beyond that crucial reminder, Hallaq calls for a reinterpretation of modernity on moral grounds, finding that we can rethink the modern condition outside the state, to fashion a subject whose 'technologies of self' transcend consumerism. Absolutely fascinating!

### **Lost Illusions**

**Balzac, Penguin Classics**

Balzac's *Lost Illusions* will speak to the scores of graduates who find they have to wrestle between their political or intellectual ideals and a living wage. It follows Lucien, an aspiring but weak-minded poet, through his social ascension as a journalist in Paris, as he gains entry to the most exclusive circle of Parisian high society, while unhappily trampling his friends, family and ideas in the process, accumulating more and more debt as he strives for money. Brilliantly, wittily, written. Balzac's mocking depiction of high society and multifaceted depiction of lower classes make him more radical perhaps, than most of his counterparts.

### ***The Map and the Territory***

**Michel Houellebecq, Vintage International**

In his most accomplished novel Houellebecq tackles several crucial topics: the affection he feels towards consumer society despite its overwhelming brutality, art in a mercantile world, violence, and the Disneylandization of a society striving towards 'authenticity'. Should be read, despite Houellebecq's untenable political views, if only to see the vision Houellebecq offers of himself.

### ***Speedboat***

**Renata Adler, New York Review Books**

Like a lot of people, I discovered Adler's fiction this year thanks to NYRB's reissues. Registering the psychological textures of life in the midst of the 1970s' socioeconomic ruptures in icy, pointillist prose, Adler--an aristocrat whose politics have most often been reactionary--captures the queasy isolation that still, as the novel's renewed popularity attests, typifies life under neoliberalism.

### ***The Last Night: Anti-Work, Atheism, Adventure***

**Federico Campagna, Zero Books**

From the excellent Zero Books, Federico Campagna examines how we have exchanged the worship of God for the beatification of work. Guided by the spirit of Max Stirner he introduces new subjectivities and a new atheist ethics for overcoming the tyranny of the clock, the circularity of economic relationships and the rule of law.

### ***The Martin Duberman Reader***

**Martin Duberman, The New Press**

Duberman's Stonewall is one of the richest political and cultural histories published in the last thirty years. This collection of his writing--including political essays, memoir, excerpts from his histories and miscellany--has nothing to match its historical imagination or stylistic grace, but together these pieces offer a complex portrait of thinker and activist who has never stopped insisting that sexual politics should not be divorced from other radical demands for justice.

### ***Red.Doc>***

**Anne Carson, Cape**

This follow-up to the (slightly superior) Autobiography of Red re-joins Geryon (G) and follows him on a bizarre picaresque road-trip of sorts. Fairly silly but

plenty-erudite classics-wise. Full of awkward line breaks and gloriously glitchy verse.

### ***The House of Journalists***

**Tim Finch, Cape**

The house of the title offers residency to asylum-seeking writers and reporters. It is a national institution and the extant glossy emblem of an erstwhile state of tolerance. In his first novel, set in subtly askew but very conceivable reality, Tim Finch illustrates how even the noblest of projects can suffer under the burden of representation and personal interest.

### ***The Flamethrowers***

**Rachel Kushner, Harvill Secker**

Italy, New York, social unrest and the late '70s art scene. And motorcycles.

### ***Ranter Writings***

**edited by Nigel Smith, Pluto**

Next year we're looking forward to a reissue of Nigel Smith's superb collection of writings from the mid-17th century radicals, a notorious amorphous network of utopian part-atheist part-religious millennialists that were immortalized in the works of leading historians Christopher Hill and A.L. Morton. E.P. Thompson argued that they were a major influence on William Blake, and it's tempting to anachronistically impute a modernist dynamic to their gripping and emotive writing. Abiezer Coppe's *Fiery Flying Roll* is a thrilling manifesto for equality and revolution (Overturn, Overturn, Overturn!), while Laurence Clarkson's biography is a fascinating portrait of the journies through religion that many were taking in the aftermath of the Civil War.