

*There's a good reason why the three daily book critics for **The New York Times** don't make 10-best lists at the end of the year: we can't. None of us has read everything. Our reviewing assignments don't overlap. None of us has an objective overview of the year's best and most important books, but this is what we do have: favorites. They are books we have not only admired in the abstract but also enjoyed, recommended and given to friends.*

Michiko Kakutani's Top 10 Books of 2009

'Che's Afterlife: The Legacy of an Image' By MICHAEL CASEY

This keenly observed book traces how Che Guevara went from being a symbol of resistance to the capitalist system to one of the most marketable and marketed brands around the globe, how the guerrilla fighter became a logo as recognizable as the Nike swoosh or McDonald's golden arches. (Vintage Books, \$15.95)

'The Good Soldiers' By DAVID FINKEL (956.7)

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for The Washington Post provides a harrowing chronicle of the Iraq war as experienced on the ground, day by day, moment by moment, by members of an Army battalion sent to Baghdad during the surge in 2007. (Sarah Crichton/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$26.)

'The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon' By DAVID GRANN

At once a biography, a detective story and a wonderfully vivid piece of travel writing, this entertaining book retraces the footsteps of an Indiana Jones-like explorer named Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett, who never returned from a 1925 expedition into the dark heart of the Amazonian wilderness. (Doubleday, \$27.50)

'Lit: A Memoir' By MARY KARR (B)

This searing volume, fueled by the author's lyrical gift for language, recounts the story of her addiction and recovery, a failed marriage and her efforts to escape the Texas childhood she delineated with such ferocity in her acclaimed 1995 memoir "The Liars' Club." (Harper, \$25.99)

'True Compass: A Memoir By EDWARD M. KENNEDY (B)

The late Massachusetts senator writes movingly in this deeply felt autobiography about his privileged but pressured upbringing, the assassinations of his brothers Jack and Bobby, his own career as one of America's foremost legislators, and the role that sheer will and perseverance played in his life. (Twelve, \$35)

'A Gate at The Stairs' By LORRIE MOORE (F)

By turns heartbreaking and funny, sobering and wry, this novel chronicles the coming of age of a young woman in the year after 9/11 and her initiation into the adult world of loss and grief. (Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.95)

'Lark and Termite' By JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS (F)

Like the author's 1984 classic "Machine Dreams," this incandescent novel creates an emotionally piercing portrait of a family in West Virginia and the fallout that a war -- in this case, the Korean war -- has on all their lives. (Alfred A. Knopf, \$24)

'Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong' By TERRY TEACHOUT (B)

This important new biography restores the great Satchmo to his deserved place in the pantheon of American artists — as a dazzling innovator and pioneer, who indelibly shaped the emergence and evolution of jazz. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$30)

'Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned' By WELLS TOWER (332.11)

An arresting debut collection of stories that establishes the author as a writer of uncommon talents - a writer with Sam Shepard's radar for the surreal, Frederick Barthelme's ear for slang and David Foster Wallace's eye for the often hilarious absurdities of contemporary life. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$24)

'In Fed We Trust: Ben Bernanke's War on the Great Panic' By DAVID WESSEL

A lucid -- and riveting -- account of the financial meltdown of 2008 and the frantic efforts of the Fed chairman, the Treasury Secretary and a small group of associates to shore up the U.S. economy, as they tried to catch and stabilize one toppling fiscal domino after the next. (Crown Business, \$26.99)

Janet Maslin's Top 10 Books of 2009

'The Age of Wonder' By RICHARD HOLMES (509.41)

With a bracingly original premise and a wealth of information, this author chronicles the eureka-moment adventurousness of scientific progress during the Romantic era. (Pantheon Books, \$40)

'Await Your Reply' By DAN CHAON (F)

A strange and stunning novel of eerily shifting identities, ingeniously manipulated by a writer with a gift for ghostly tricks. And the story's mysteriously separate parts align for a crystal-clear ending. (Ballantine Books, \$25)

'The Cradle' By PATRICK SOMERVILLE (F)

A slim, enchanting, unsentimental debut novel in which a young father-to-be's journey to retrieve his wife's stolen cradle sends him on an unexpectedly important journey. (Little, Brown & Company, \$21.99)

'How It Ended' By JAY McINERNEY (F)

A career-spanning short story collection reveals something unexpected about the author of "Bright Lights, Big City": the self-confidence was legit. He's become as good as he always thought he was. (Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.95)

'The Imperial Cruise' By JAMES BRADLEY (359.4)

The author of "Flags of Our Fathers" takes a startling, revisionist look at what besotted Theodore Roosevelt biographers prefer to ignore, arguing that Roosevelt's dismissive racial attitudes led him to make disastrous long-range foreign policy miscalculations in the Pacific and Asia. (Little, Brown & Company, \$29.99)

'The Lineup' Edited by OTTO PENZLER

The ultimate How-dunit: two dozen writers of popular mystery series explain who their famous crime-solving characters are and how they got that way. (Little, Brown & Company, \$25.99)

'Lords of Finance' By LIAQUAT AHAMED (332.109)

A knowledgeable, colorful and very prescient account of the global economy in Depression-era meltdown, presented so winningly that this monetary horror story feels like a labor of love. (The Penguin Press, \$32.95)

'Passing Strange' By MARTHA A. SANDWEISS

A true story that would strain most novelists' imaginations: the tale of how Clarence King, a blue-eyed, white Newport-bred explorer and cartographer spent part of his life as a sought-after luminary— and part of it calling himself a Pullman porter, living as the patriarch of a black family that knew nothing of his other life. (The Penguin Press, \$27.95)

'Under the Dome' By STEPHEN KING (F)

A mysterious, invisible barrier drops down upon a small Maine town— and within its confines, a fully-formed flesh-and-blood community comes to life. A rollicking good page-turner and one of this author's most realistic human dramas, dome and all. (Scribner, \$35)

'Zero at the Bone' By JOHN HEIDENRY

No crime writer this year conjured anything as malevolent as this stark, chilling, unembellished true-crime account of kidnapping, corruption and murder. Evil schemes don't get any more hard-boiled than this. (St. Martin's Press, \$25.99)

Dwight Garner's Top 10 Books of 2009

'A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster' By REBECCA SOLNIT

From the gifted social critic, an offbeat investigation of an offbeat emotion: the fleeting, purposeful joy that fills human beings in the face of disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes and even terrorist attacks. (Viking, \$27.95)

'Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath' By MICHAEL NORMAN and ELIZABETH NORMAN

This is stirring and humane military history, often readable only through the spaces between your fingers. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$30)

'Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer ' By NOVELLA CARPENTER
(630.9173)

Fresh, funny and jagged around the edges, this memoir is about the author's attempts to start a busy farm on a deserted lot in an Oakland ghetto. (The Penguin Press, \$25.95)

'When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir of a Political Childhood' By SAÏD SAYRAFIEZADEH

This delicate, discerning memoir is about growing up with parents who were committed members of the Socialist Workers Party; it reads like a peculiar bedtime story. (The Dial Press, \$22)

'The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt ' By T.J. STILES (B)

A mighty -- and mighty confident -- biography, one that moves with force and conviction and imperious wit through Vanderbilt's noisy life and times. (Alfred A. Knopf, \$37.50)

'Family Properties: Race, Real Estate and the Exploitation of Black Urban America' By BERYL SATTER

A panoramic and often personal retelling of Chicago's race-driven real-estate wars during the middle of the 20th century. (Metropolitan Books, \$30)

'Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human' By RICHARD WRANGHAM
(394.12)

A new theory of human evolution -- "the cooking hypothesis" -- is related in plain-spoken, gripping language. (Basic Books, \$26.95)

'Tall Man: The Death of Doomadgee' By CHLOE HOOPER

A haunting, morally complicated examination of the death of an aboriginal man in a small-town Australian prison. (Scribner, \$24)

'Cold: Adventures in the World's Frozen Places' By BILL STREEVER
(910.91)

A flinty and tough-minded look at a vanishing world, with just enough humor glowing around the edges to keep you toasty and dry. (Little, Brown & Company, \$24.99)

'Lords of the Sea' By JOHN R. HALE

This sea-level view of Athens during its Golden Age is a novel, and very compelling, way to approach a story that's been told many, many times before. (Viking, \$29.95)