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BOOKSHELF

The Best Nonfiction of 2012

The Wall Street Journal's books editors pick the best nonfiction from the past year.

Updated Dec. 14, 2012 4:06 p.m. ET

Iron Curtain

By Anne Applebaum (Doubleday)

A decade ago, Anne Applebaum wrote a magisterial history of the Soviet prison-camp system. Now she shows how the Soviet Union imposed its totalitarian will upon Eastern European nations ravaged by World War II. It was an age of forced migrations and state suspicion of every activity. Our reviewer called this an "epic but intimate history" of a region whose troubles barely lessened with the cessation of war.

THE BEST OF THE YEAR IN BOOKS

The Best Fiction of 2012

The Best Non Fiction of 2012

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The Endgame

By Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor (Pantheon)

Some 1.5 million Americans fought in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. Their story is told in monumental detail in "The Endgame," which despite its title is a full narrative—from early

victories to civil war, the success of
the surge and the American
withdrawal. The authors, Michael R.

Gordon and Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, had access to the highest levels of military and civilian command, and our reviewer judged the book "likely to stand for decades as the definitive account of the Iraq war."

The Founders and Finance

By Thomas McCraw (Harvard)

Three immigrants put the early Republic on sound economic footing: Robert Morris (from Liverpool), Alexander Hamilton (from St. Croix) and Albert Gallatin (from Switzerland). Their very rootlessness, in Thomas McCraw's telling, helped them see the value of strong money, credit and banks at a time when the political class was dominated by a landed aristocracy. Each year is replete with books about the Founders; Mr. McCraw's is the rare one that, as our reviewer put it, has "hit on something new."

Sincerity

By R. Jay Magill Jr. (Norton)

Sincerity is an old idea—and not one always appreciated, as we often find "straight talk" too much honesty. R. Jay Magill Jr. shows how our search for plainspoken wisdom in politics and "authenticity" in food is in fact part of a desire for something deeper: the sincere. An ideal example of a popular genre—the short book on a cultural idea—"Sincerity" stands out for what our reviewer called the author's "wit, erudition and powers of observation."

The Lion Sleeps Tonight

By Rian Malan (Grove)

Two decades after his gripping memoir of what it was like to be an anti-apartheid Afrikaner, "My Traitor's Heart," Rian Malan is finally back with this collection of his epic investigative journalism, from his account of the first rock band to hit South Africa (in 1969) to a disturbing exploration of Africa's AIDS industry. Mr. Malan is a modern prose master, and "American readers should treasure this chance to get to know him again," our reviewer declared.

The Wives

By Alexandra Popoff (Pegasus)

If "no man is a hero to his valet," what must he be to his wife? Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Osip Mandelstam, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vladimir Nabokov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn each had a long-suffering and immensely gifted spouse. Alexandra Popoff uses their lives to tell the tale not only of Russian literature but also of Russia's turbulent modern history, in a book, our reviewer wrote, that "buzzes with both literary insight and gossipy intrigue."

The Astaires

By Kathleen Riley (Oxford)

Fred Astaire was our most elegant film star. But he danced in the shadow of a partner, his glamorous sister, Adele, until she retired from the stage in 1932 and he headed off to Hollywood. Kathleen Riley chronicles this sibling non-rivalry and gives us a broad portrait of a very American art form, the Broadway and Hollywood musical. "A salute to an America at ease with itself," our reviewer called it. This is cultural biography at its best.

The Signal and the Noise

By Nate Silver (Penguin Press)

Numbers don't, in fact, speak for themselves. Much has been made of Nate Silver's electoral predictions. But his impressive book explores the principles of prognostication in fields from sports and politics to Wall Street and the weather. His "breezy style makes even the most difficult statistical material accessible," our reviewer said, as Mr. Silver gently reveals how too often we color data with our hopes and biases.

Connectome

By Sebastian Seung (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

More books on neuroscience have been published in 2012, perhaps, than on any other serious topic. Sebastian Seung's goes far deeper than most, describing a new approach that aims to map precisely how neurons connect to one another. Why you like Brie and I like cheddar is as much a product of our brains' neural wiring as our genes. Mr. Seung's book brings readers up to speed on present science and hints tantalizingly at the future. Our reviewer called it "the best lay book on brain science I've ever read."

A Man and His Ship

By Steven Ujjifusa (Simon & Schuster)

William Francis Gibbs (1886-1967) was one of the master builders of the ocean liner, obsessed with winning the Blue Riband for fastest Atlantic crossing. The design and construction of his greatest ship, the SS United States, is at the heart of this book, which like the best bioographies becomes the portrait of an entire age. Steven Ujjifusa's work, our reviewer noted, is ultimately a compelling "history of the passenger ship, whose great days coincided with Gibbs's lifetime."

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