

LIBRARY JOURNAL

Ten Books for Fall

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With the change in season come the big fall books. Here *LJ's* Book Review editors pick our favorites, the ones we find personally exciting; the ones we don't want you to miss. [Steven Pinker](#) reconsiders what makes us human; [Christina Schwarz](#) transcends the feared sophomore slump following her Oprah-picked debut; [Diane Ackerman](#) bares her soul in a new collection of poetry; and more. But beyond books from big hitters we also include [Daniel Mason's](#) musical first novel and several titles that are themselves unique cultural artifacts: a record of moving conversation between [Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim](#) and the celebrations of two births, New York's [Chrysler Building](#), and photography's groundbreaking publisher, [Aperture](#). Ten books in all, they're all compelling.

Science of Human Nature

Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Viking. Oct. ISBN 0-670-03151-8. \$26.95) Every once in a while, a book comes along that compels us to change our minds about the world. What better example than one that reconfigures our understanding of mind itself? Such is *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* by Steven Pinker, author of such best sellers as *The Language Instinct*.

Here, Pinker neatly skewers three 'official theories' that have shaped our assumptions for centuries, starting with Locke's notion of the mind as a blank slate that simply takes in experience. He also counters claims that we are noble savages, pristine until touched by civilization, and that we are ruled by what Gilbert Ryle called the ghost in the machine, which stands apart from the body and operates without regard to scientific laws. Together, argues Pinker, these three theories have led to the denial of an innate human nature, a belief now being overthrown by scientific research.

Whatever research finally discovers, the existence of a universal complex human nature grounded in the principles of biology has far-reaching implications—beginning with our longstanding tendency to distinguish mental from physical as two different entities. 'The distinction holds, but it is not a fundamental division between two radically different kinds of stuff. It holds in terms of levels of analysis,' explains Pinker in an e-mail interview from his office at MIT, where he teaches. More significantly, the reassertion of human nature forces us to rethink what we have been taught about everything from education to criminal behavior.

Take, for instance, that urgent issue of child rearing. 'Research shows that parents cannot shape the personalities of their children,' asserts Pinker. 'They can teach them skills and knowledge, make their childhoods happy or miserable, and build satisfying or hostile relationships with [them]. But they cannot mold the kind of person their child is; that depends much more on genes, peers, culture, and chance. This does not mean that parents don't matter, but it does mean that parents should relax a bit and not think that they are engineering how their children will turn out.'

Thus, it is not a question of choosing between nature and nurture but of recognizing that they work together—though not in a fixed proportion. 'There is no 'nature-nurture' debate whose answer is going to be '27 percent nature' or '37 percent nurture,' explains Pinker. 'The answer is not a point on a continuum; it's a description of a learning mechanism.' Indeed, the mind is sufficiently complex that asking how learning works is too simplistic. 'It's like asking a doctor, 'How does the body work?'' advises Pinker. 'The answer is going to be different for different faculties of the mind, and it's not something that can be summed up in a sentence.'

Yet Pinker does succeed in summing up a staggering number of complex scientific concepts from many different fields, and one doesn't have to venture very far into his text to become alarmed at the persistent misuse of such concepts to shape social and political programs. Isn't he worried that his current work will likewise be twisted to meet somebody else's agenda? 'That is what the entire book is about,' he exclaims. 'I take enormous pains to point out what scientific findings do and don't imply. If people still misuse the arguments about how people should not misuse arguments, then I give up!' Readers, however, should not be so inclined. They'll find it worth every effort to take on Pinker's exhilarating text; it will, literally, blow their minds.

Summer Passage

Michael Chabon's *Summerland* (Talk Miramax/Hyperion. Oct. ISBN 0-7868-0877-2. \$22.95)

Though his latest novel, *Summerland*, is billed as a departure into fantasy, there is magic at the edges of much of Michael Chabon's work. Golems and escapists appear in Nazi-era Prague in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, for instance, and even the comparatively straight *Wonder Boys* begins with a Lovecraftian horror writer. In *Summerland*, Chabon's first novel for 'all ages,' two Little Leaguers, the error-prone Ethan Feld and the quick-batted Jennifer Rideout, experience a passage into a New World Narnia. Here they encounter Graylings, Skrikers, goblins, and ferishers under the kindly guidance of a ghostly Negro League baseball star named Ringfinger Brown.

It is fantasy but grounded in the plausible world of Clam Island, WA, where the novel takes place. 'Honestly, I really was not very strongly aware of a great difference between writing *Summerland* and writing anything else that I've done,' Chabon says. 'It took a much greater stretch for me to imagine what it would be like to be Joe Kavalier living in the Antarctic than to imagine what it would be like to be an 11-year-old boy or girl stepping from one world into another.'

In writing for children, Chabon tried to shorten his snaking, exuberant sentences and to use fewer exotic words. 'You can actually set your Microsoft Word to flag you when your sentences get too long—something that I normally would have turned off or ignored,' he says.

The new book had a double inspiration: 'It originated in part with the experience of reading to my kids. A big turning point for me was rereading *Charlotte's Web* and just being blown away again by how beautiful that book is.' Chabon decided at age ten that he wanted to be a writer, but 'I didn't imagine I'd be the kind of writer who'd write books [*Wonder Boys*] about overweight, pot-smoking, philandering English professors.' In fact, he adds, 'one of the seed ideas of *Summerland*, the idea of a kind of American faery, is one I had when I was a kid. I thought someday I'd write about these American faeries and the world of American folklore in the way that my favorite writers at the time—C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien—used British folklore as the backdrops for their works.'

Chabon's faery tale takes place on the sunlit fields of American childhood, in a deceptively familiar baseball setting: 'It seemed natural to me that if I was going to be writing about American mythology I would write about baseball. I also had a long-term dissatisfaction with the books about baseball that were out there for kids, which tended to either be sports books or books that sort of used baseball as a backdrop or furnishing scheme.'

In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, two cousins used a child's medium—comic books—to fight the adult menace fascism. (The book has even recently inspired a side deal to create comic books based on Kavalier and Clay's fictional creations.) *Summerland*, while mostly for a younger audience, starts with a very grown-up printing of 250,000 copies and a ten-city author tour. The publisher is clearly hoping for a sizable crossover. Whether writing *Summerland* or his more earthbound fiction for adults, Chabon concludes, 'It's all fantasy, and you're making up the rules and the physics of the world that you're writing about. It's a question of degree more than anything else. Even something like *Wonder Boys* is still made up, a miniature kingdom in your imagination, and you're inviting people to come visit.'

Fifty Years and Counting

Photography Past/Forward: Aperture at 50 (Aperture. Oct. ISBN 0-89381-996-4. \$50)

In 1952, nine people gathered in Ansel Adams's living room to discuss the idea of creating a journal for photography. Among those present for the founding of *Aperture* were kindred spirits Dorothea Lange, Minor White, and Barbara Morgan—some of our best-known photographers to this day. Since then, Aperture has grown from a nonprofit organization putting out a quarterly journal to become the publisher of over 400 artfully produced books. It continues to be the home for photographers worldwide, displaying a vast range of aesthetics and ideals alongside a common devotion to the art of photography. Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Cindy Sherman, and Sebastião Salgado are just a few of its collaborators.

Michael Hoffman, who had once been a student of White's, took over publishing responsibilities in 1965 and devoted himself to Aperture's survival and prolific growth until his death in November 2001. Another tragedy befell the organization when Paul Gottlieb, who was scheduled to take on the job this August, died suddenly in June. Interim director Janice B. Stanton has agreed to stay on until the right person is found. 'There will never be another Michael,' says Melissa Harris, *Aperture* magazine's editor since 1989. 'What we're looking for is someone who believes in Aperture, who can see its potential.'

Before Hoffman's illness, he and his staff had decided to commemorate Aperture's first 50 years with an anniversary publication. 'We decided very early on that we wanted to do a book that was not just retrospective. At the same time it was important to Michael that we put the history of Aperture out there,' says Harris. When Hoffman died during the early stages of the project, Harris and longtime Aperture designer Wendy Byrne decided to go ahead with the project and began the daunting task of selecting the images.

'We went through every issue of *Aperture*,' she says. 'We went Post-it happy, marking up all the issues. We didn't want the book to be chronological. That's too linear, too simple.' Instead they lined up the images on the floor, making connections and tracking the visual relationships as they arose. In order to bring the book up to the present and even look toward the future, they asked all the living artists who had worked with *Aperture* for input. Some, like Sally Mann, gave them new works, while others, like Eugene Richards, selected images that had special significance to them in relation to the organization. The resulting book is a tribute to photography's continual evolution, with familiar, iconic images butting up against new innovations.

The text of the book evolved separately. R.H. Cravens, who had written for numerous *Aperture* publications, did extensive interviews with Hoffman and other significant figures in the organization's history. 'We wanted it to be anecdotal,' says Harris. 'Aperture's history is a wonderful story, and mostly it had been passed down orally. Nothing in-depth had ever been written about *Aperture* before.'

'Some say Minor White would be rolling in his grave if he could see what we were doing at *Aperture* now,' Harris says. But a closer look reveals some uncanny connections between past and present. These energize the anniversary book, where *Aperture*'s founders convene with newer artists to present a portrait of what photography can be. The title's 'Past/Forward' only hints at the vitality of the book and the organization behind it.

Auster, Incorporated

Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions* (Holt. Oct. ISBN 0-8050-5408-1. \$24)

Paul Auster's last two novels, *Mr. Vertigo* and *Timbuktu*, introduced admirers of the 'New York Trilogy' to some hitherto unexplored subjects and unlikely heroes, proving that Auster's imagination can stretch far beyond what has become known as 'Austerian.' While Auster found writing those works to be a liberating experience, *The Book of Illusions*, his tenth novel to date, was a different story. 'I stumbled all the way through while writing it,' he says. 'It was like being locked in a dark room, groping my way toward the switch to turn on the light.' In it, the author has turned in a tale that both echoes and deepens the work for which he's most praised.

Like most of Auster's novels, this one begins in a moment of crisis. After losing his wife and two sons in an airplane crash, David Zimmer, a professor of comparative literature, is ready to cope with the pain by succumbing completely to alcohol and narcotics until he finds a reason to continue his research on the work of comedian Hector Mann.

The character of Zimmer has been Auster's 'internal comrade' for a long time; readers may remember him from *Moon Palace*. Although Zimmer is possibly the most Austerian character in the novel, the idea for the book started with Hector Mann, inspired by Marcello Mastroianni and his movie *Divorce, Italian Style*. 'In every scene of that movie,' says Auster, 'Mastroianni is dressed in a funny white suit and flutters his mustache. I was very amused by that.'

The challenge began when Auster sat down to write three years ago. 'I first imagined it would be brief and centered around Hector Mann's films,' says Auster, 'but as I started living through the story, it became something completely different.' What emerged was a complex tale of two grief-stricken, seemingly incongruent characters whose personal quests bring them together in a profound way. There also emerged an unusual but thrilling mystery, reminiscent of those in the trilogy, especially its first installment, *City of Glass*.

In a nutshell, *The Book of Illusions* incorporates everything for which Auster receives kudos: clever plot twists, premeditated accidents, characters whose ill fortunes won't quit, and dubious but satisfying endings. And although some readers may appreciate this book because it reminds them of the inscrutability of the 'New York Trilogy,' the humanity of *Leviathan*, or the suspense of *The Music of Chance*, Auster insists that he had no intention of echoing his previous work. 'You can't escape yourself,' he says. 'My prints are all over everything I do, and I will continue to follow my nose where it takes me.' (LJ 8/02)

Second-Time Charm

Christina Schwarz's *All Is Vanity* (Doubleday. Oct. ISBN 0-385-49972-8. \$24.95)

In the as-yet-unpublished handbook for MFA students in creative writing, there should be an axiom that says something like 'You never, ever want to have a huge first novel. Period.' Those who do, it will continue, 'buckle under the enormous pressure of producing a second blockbuster, never to write again.'

Of course, every truism contains a bit of exaggeration. In reality, assured second novelists like Christina Schwarz feel pressured but then get on with it. Schwarz was in a particularly tight spot: her debut *Drowning Ruth* had the (mis)fortune of being chosen by Oprah and becoming a best seller.

'The success of my first novel was such a fluke that I didn't think it was fair for me or anyone else to expect something just as big,' Schwarz says. 'I knew if I tried to write something like *Drowning Ruth*, it would be forced, so I didn't. I had this other idea clamoring in my head.'

While Schwarz struggled in New York with *Drowning Ruth* (a five-year effort), a close friend was leading a seemingly more interesting life as a mother on the West Coast. The two corresponded a great deal via e-mail, leading Schwarz to joke, 'What if we wrote a novel 'together,' where the writer starts taking the friend's life for her book?'

All Is Vanity is a polished, contemporary tragicomedy of friendship. Although it may not satisfy fans hungry for another historical mystery, it will impress with the careful crafting of its deeply flawed protagonists, who could have come off despicable in less able hands. Desperate to make her mark on civilization, Margaret quits her teaching job to write a novel, which stalls until Letty and her young family start spiraling into debt. Slowly, Margaret begins to base her novel on her friend's foolish decisions, which she often encourages to make for more interesting plot developments. The reader, however, is still drawn to both women.

'I had to focus on making Margaret honest all the time for her to be tolerable,' Schwarz says of her riskier character. 'I like her because a lot of the things she feels are what people feel but won't admit. People have ungenerous thoughts, and they wish they didn't.' Though they would never admit it, plenty of novelists are probably having some ungenerous thoughts about Schwarz herself, who has managed to pull off a second novel that's distinctly different from her first but will still satisfy her thoughtful audience. (*LJ* 8/02)

Artistic Solutions

Daniel Barenboim & Edward Said's ***Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*** (Pantheon. Oct. ISBN 0-375-42106-8. \$24)

An accomplished pianist and music director of both the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, Daniel Barenboim was born in Argentina of Russian Jewish parents and now claims Israeli citizenship. Edward Said, university professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and the author of numerous influential books in literature and culture, is a Palestinian American. Together they share a remarkable friendship based on a passion for music and a conviction that it can bridge otherwise unbridgable gaps—a conviction borne out by their splendid new book, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*.

The book began as a conversation before an audience at Columbia's Miller Theater in October 1995 during an academic conference on Richard Wagner. Such was their pleasure in the exchange that Barenboim and Said decided to continue it privately and tape-record their efforts. 'We thought that it would be a good thing to explore the ideas we had broached in public conversation and with the students at Weimar,' explains Said, referring to yet another joint venture (now in its fourth year) that has brought together young Israeli and Arab musicians. Throughout, the authors freely explored issues of performance and interpretation and the use of music as a tool for understanding culture. Eventually, they brought in Ara Guzelimian, senior director and artistic adviser at Carnegie Hall, to shape the conversations and prepare them for publication.

Although some musicians feel that discussing music is inappropriate or even impossible, these conversations show, as Said maintains, that 'music can be talked about intelligently; you give it more dimension since we experience music not by talking but by performing.' The book's aim is to reach beyond the trained musician to a larger, more general audience interested in music and literature but not expert in either. 'There is so much specialization these days and a certain jargon you must get beyond,' Said avers. 'Our conversations aim at lessening differences.'

The differences that most concern the authors are of course those that have been causing bloodshed in the Middle East for half a century. They do not see these differences as insurmountable—we live in a small area and have so much in common that separation is futile,' observes Said—and as they talked they hit upon a refreshing approach to the problem. As Barenboim neatly summed it up, 'It requires the courage of everybody to use, as it were, artistic solutions.'

Just what would an artistic solution to the Middle East crisis look like? With Barenboim in Argentina playing a complete cycle of Beethoven sonatas, Said speaks for them both. 'The political and propaganda spaces have been occupied, but artists can provide an alternative space, with goals that have very little to do with political solutions but with cooperation.' Working together to achieve a common goal, an orchestra's musicians offer a 'perfect model' for such cooperation; they can reach across barriers to make beautiful music together, as Barenboim did when he recently became the first Israeli to perform in the Palestinian West Bank. A utopian dream? Perhaps. But what good has ever come without a dream? This passionate, articulate, and iconoclastic little book could be the start of something big. (See review in the print issue, p. 178.)

Alternate Readings

Dave Eggers & Michael Cart's ***The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2002*** (Mariner: Houghton. Oct. ISBN 0-618-24693-2. \$27.50; **pap.** ISBN 0-618-24694-0. \$13)

According to recent *Wall Street Journal* statistics, the under-25 population is buying books at three times the rate of the population as a whole. Aimed at this new market, the highly eclectic assemblage of fiction and nonfiction in this latest addition to Houghton's 'Best of' series may not represent typical reading assigned for a literature class. But it certainly encourages anyone's growing interest in exploring alternative approaches to writing. Edited by Dave Eggers, author of the wildly popular *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and Michael Cart, a recognized expert of young adult literature, this first installment in the 'Best American Nonrequired Reading' series features everything from satires and comics to investigative journalism and multicultural fiction. All the pieces originate from mainstream and alternative periodicals in an effort to introduce younger readers to publications they wouldn't normally read.

As a whole, the assorted mix of genres and voices bears the stamp of Eggers's own artistry. Many of the stories echo the wit and the 'heartbreaking' irony of his writing style. 'They read as dispatches from the front' of young America, says Deanne Army, senior editor at Houghton, who acquired the project. 'They are not really about young people but about high school, bad family, and the politics that concern youngsters, and they are funny in a way that not everyone over 30 will even get.' Equally influential is the input from 826 Valencia/Youth Speaks, a San Francisco writing lab for city youth founded by Eggers. High school students and teachers from 826 Valencia helped the two editors read through some already sorted material, and they suggested sources of their own.

Eggers, who served as the inaugural guest editor, has just agreed to serve as the series' editor. 'He has brought such passion to the project,' says Army. 'Each year, we'll invite a new writer, a graphic artist, or a musician to write a foreword, but Eggers will be permanent.' Which should make this work required reading for everyone. (See review in the print issue, p. 175.)

From Medicine to Music

Daniel Mason's ***The Piano Tuner*** (Knopf. Sept. ISBN 0-375-41465-7. \$24) After graduating from college, Daniel Mason spent a year on the Thai-Myanmar border studying mixed-species malarial infections. One blazing day, while visiting a small town upriver, he heard the unmistakable sound of a piano across the water. This may or may not have been the genesis of his mesmerizing first novel, *The Piano Tuner* óas the author confesses, 'I'm not really sure where the idea came from' óbut the image sums up perfectly the clash of cultures and power of music that figure so prominently in the narrative.

Mason's short stories won contests in high school, and he continued writing in college, but though he scribbled down impressions while in Thailand, he wasn't planning anything so ambitious as a novel. When he returned home to medical school, however, he found that he had 'an idea I thought I could carry through to the end.' While in Thailand, Mason had become fascinated by neighboring Burma and particularly the 19th-century Shan revolt, which serves as the novel's backdrop. The image of a piano in the midst of that revolt led him to his central character, a piano tuner named Edgar Drake who is sent to Burma by the British army to tune an instrument belonging to renegade army surgeon Anthony Carroll.

Mason was intrigued by Drake as 'someone pulled out of life to do something different.' Throughout, he surrounds Drake with exquisitely detailed descriptions of everything from Burmese street theater to the Shan leaders ('colorful beyond anything anyone could imagine') to the art of equal temperament. Turning this voluminous knowledge into a novel could have tripped up any writer, especially a first-timer, but Mason accomplished the task by having the book describe a journey. 'Anyone's experience of a new place is personal,' he argues, 'and that is how you make a transition from history to what is more novelistic.'

Mason's lush language serves not only to evoke his setting but to connect his writing and medical careers. 'I love vocabulary,' he enthuses. 'I think it is one of the things I love most about medicine, where you must describe things very specifically.' Words can be dangerous, of course, and Mason was careful not to use foreign or medical terms that might put off readers. Not trained as a pianist, he instead relied on painstaking research. In fact, he observes, 'Writing the book got me interested in the piano, and I learned to love Bach,' whose music Drake plays at a critical juncture. As one of Mason's characters asserts, 'in every piano a song lies, hidden.' In his luminous debut Mason has discovered that song. (*LJ* 8/02)

Constructing New York

David Stravitz's ***The Chrysler Building: Creating a New York Icon, Day by Day*** (Princeton Architectural. Oct. ISBN 1-56898-354-9. \$45)

'I've always felt it was visiting the planet from a peculiar place,' David Stravitz says of the Chrysler Building, which was, for a few months in 1929, the world's tallest building. Stravitz's interest in the Art Deco skyscraper turned into a

passion in 1979 when he purchased five dusty boxes of 8 x 10 negatives that were about to be scrapped for silver. 'When I held the negatives up to the light, I saw familiar images of the city,' he says, and bought the whole lot. Among them were over 100 images of the Chrysler Building under construction. He held onto the negatives until he had the time and the know-how to assemble them into his new book, *The Chrysler Building: Creating a New York Icon, Day by Day*. The photographs were taken by stock agencies with large-format cameras, the same kind Ansel Adams used for his photos of Yosemite. 'The detail is magnificent,' Stravitz says. No digital enhancement was required, but some 80-year-old fingerprints and dust had to be removed. In addition to showing the construction, the book pictures a flurry of activity on Depression-era Lexington Avenue. With its oversized reproductions and introduction by architectural historian Christopher Gray, Stravitz's treasure restores a part of New York's history that had very nearly been lost.

Inner Workings

Diane Ackerman's *Origami Bridges: Poems of Psychoanalysis and Fire* (HarperCollins. Oct. ISBN 0-06-019988-1. \$22.95)

Poetry plumbs our deepest fears and desires. So does psychoanalysis. In her corrosive new collection, *Origami Bridges: Poems of Psychoanalysis and Fire*, award-winning poet and nature writer Diane Ackerman combines them both. In the midst of her analysis, conducted largely over the telephone, Ackerman wrote daily. The resulting poems show her moving painfully from the 'struggle to cut truth/ from life's herd of milling fibs' to a state of 'Grace,' as her penultimate poem is called. In this, from the final poem, she comes out of herself at last, reaching across the divide to grasp the shared humanity of her analyst.

I'm curious about deep self:
your dreams and stratagems,
how your mind fidgets,
what makes your heart quiver,
the fictions that brace you
and truths on which you rely
curious not simply as a wish
for more, but because kinship
is the way of our kind.

Author Information

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