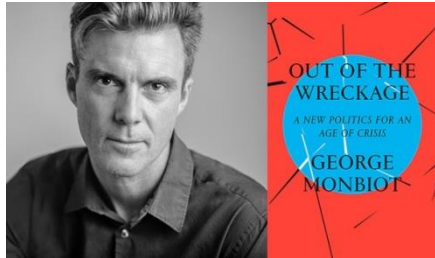


Top Authors Pick Their Favorite Books of 2017

By Gabe Habash |
Dec 08, 2017

We asked the authors of our [top 10 books of 2017](#) to share their favorite titles published this year.

Ashley Dawson



In the eye-opening *Extreme Cities* (Verso), Dawson reveals just how unprepared we are for potential future climate disasters and calls for a reconceptualization of city living. Dawson's pick is another urgent call to action.

Dawson's Pick: *Out of the Wreckage: A Politics for an Age of Crisis* by George Monbiot (Verso)

In the notebooks he drafted while imprisoned in a fascist jail, the great Italian radical Antonio Gramsci wrote, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

His words perfectly reflect our present situation: the two great organizing narratives of 20th-century economics and politics—social democracy and neoliberalism—are both bankrupt, and no new narrative has arisen to mobilize meaning and social transformation. Into this void have stepped various forms of demagoguery, characterized by vacuous simplifications, false promises, and strident antagonisms.

In his book *Out of the Wreckage: A Politics for an Age of Crisis*, George Monbiot offers a diagnosis and set of prescriptions for our present crisis-ridden age. He argues that we need a new story to make sense of the world and to open the gates for more practical proposals for transformation. We can gain a sense of transformational possibility by remembering that we are profoundly social beings, that human beings gain a sense of meaning through social connection and community. We long, Monbiot insists, to belong.

Monbiot suggests that we can realize this fundamental human desire to belong—and vanquish the atomization and alienation that corrode societies around the world today—by rebuilding our local communities through participatory projects that create thick networks of social cohesion. As these networks are strengthened, we can begin to reassert our collective control of common assets, from land to food to the environment.

Monbiot proposes a variety of ingenious mechanisms to effect these changes, including taxing land holders to create common wealth trusts, participatory budgeting, and redistribute mechanisms like a universal basic income. In addition to tackling economic inequality, he lays out proposals for overcoming the rampant corruption of democracy by big money today.

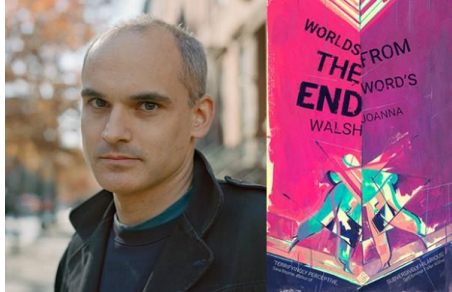
Monbiot's proposals are often visionary but never disconnected from pragmatic realities, and are delivered in prose that is always pithy and elegant. This is a book that should be read by everyone who hopes we can find a way out of the wreckage of the present to a better tomorrow.

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Hernán Díaz



Díaz's novel, *In the Distance* (Coffee House), not only reinvents the western but also provides a memorable immigration narrative and a brilliant depiction of loneliness. Díaz's pick is a similarly multifaceted and daring work of fiction.

Díaz's Pick: *Worlds from the Word's End* by Joanna Walsh (And Other Stories)

Joanna Walsh's fascination with hotels—she has published a book dedicated to them—pervades, in plain and ciphered ways, her latest collection of short stories, *Worlds from the Word's End*. Most of the stories are about lonely beings in transient situations: someone waiting by the side of the road trying to get rid of a cumbersome charge, a traveler with an ever-eroding package, a spectral doppelgänger conjured up by unread books, a man kidnapped by a small girl, a woman becoming a resident of Berlin's central train station. Temporary circumstances—just as life itself is, in the end, temporary.

With one exception, all the texts are in the first or second person, soliloquies or addresses to a remote interlocutor. Endless waits, hopeless trips, and senseless endeavors may remind some of Kafka and Beckett; I submit Homer, Daniil Kharms, Silvina Ocampo, and Anna Kavan.

As the title of this collection suggests, some of these pieces describe calm cataclysms and discreet dystopias. The world has quietly decided to erase itself: whole countries give up language, and there are nations of Bartlebys who simply would prefer not to: "There was enough stuff already.... We knew in our hearts it was time to stop making any more. It was time to sit back and look at what we'd got."

Worlds from the Word's End puts narrative conventions and linguistic codes under great stress, and we finish the book feeling both have cracked here and there. We also feel, strangely, that Walsh's private language has somehow become ours, as if we were suddenly fluent in a tongue we didn't even know existed.

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Sujatha Gidla

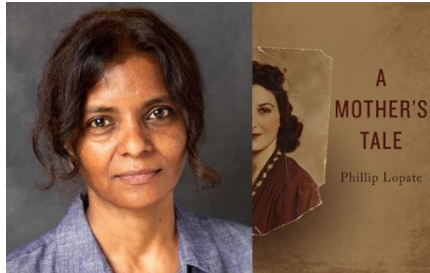


Photo by Nancy Crampton

Ants Among Elephants (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) is Gidla's spectacular memoir about her family's life in India as untouchables, the lowest group in the country's caste system. Gidla's pick is also a personal family memoir.

Gidla's Pick: *A Mother's Tale* by Phillip Lopate (Mad River)

A Mother's Tale by Phillip Lopate is a collection of the stories his mother, Frances, told of her childhood in Brooklyn in the 1920s and her life as a wife and mother, as well as a wartime factory worker, candy store owner, file clerk, singer, dancer, and actress. The book is based on taped conversations with her made when she was in her 60s, just as my own book is based on taped interviews of my mother and her brother.

Frances was a larger-than-life character who dominated Phillip's life until he left home, and to some extent even afterward. The recurrent theme of her stories is that she was destined for great things but had been "thwarted, thwarted, thwarted" at every step. First by her tyrannical and prudish older sister, into whose care she fell after her parents' early death, and later by her "useless" husband, Alfred Lopate.

Listening to her bitter complaints about Alfred, Phillip is frequently moved to take his father's side. When she finds fault with her husband for listening to the radio every evening, Phillip defends him. If he came home after an exhausting day at the factory and wanted to relax with a ballgame, was that a crime?

I felt exactly like that when interviewing my mother about her marriage. She insisted that my father's love of tea and cigarettes was the sole cause of our family's financial ruin. I would think, "What kind of finances could be ruined by cigarettes and few cups of tea a day?"

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Gail Godwin



Photo by Dion Ogust

Godwin's stellar coming-of-age novel, [Grief Cottage](#) (Bloomsbury), is about an 11-year-old boy who, after his mother dies, goes to live with his reclusive aunt on a small South Carolina island. Godwin picks John Banville's sequel to Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Godwin's Pick: [Mrs. Osmond](#) by John Banville (Knopf)

It came late in the year, this book I never dreamed I'd one day have the pleasure of reading: *Mrs. Osmond*, by Irish novelist John Banville.

Years ago, Banville's wife finished Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and said, "You should write a sequel to this." Banville replied, "That would be like feeding on the corpse of a great lion... and the critics would tear me to pieces." Nevertheless, approaching his 70s and having become a great novelist himself, Banville decided to try his hand at adding a few crucial months to Isabel Archer's fascinating story. James had left his American heroine in London, heading back to her treacherous husband in Italy, leaving us with no clue to her ultimate fate other than her having accepted "that life would be her business for a long time to come."

In a rich prose that meshes with James's own, Banville not only imagines the satisfying steps Isabel might take to extricate herself from her deadly marriage (and treat herself to a little revenge!) but also hints at a future large enough for her means and aspirations.

Banville's tour de force, however, is what he does with Gilbert Osmond, that sinisterly charming manipulator who has puzzled readers for more than a century. James ultimately chose to stay outside Osmond's mind: in his 1908 New York edition of *Portrait*, he excised two pages from the 1881 edition which gave us a glimpse of Osmond's inner workings. But in *Mrs. Osmond*, Banville, who has fleshed out some Osmondlike creatures in his own novels, doesn't stint. He takes us even to the threshold of their marriage bedroom, where Osmond is quick to discover that he can use Isabel's great passion to increase his powers over her.

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Hari Kunzru

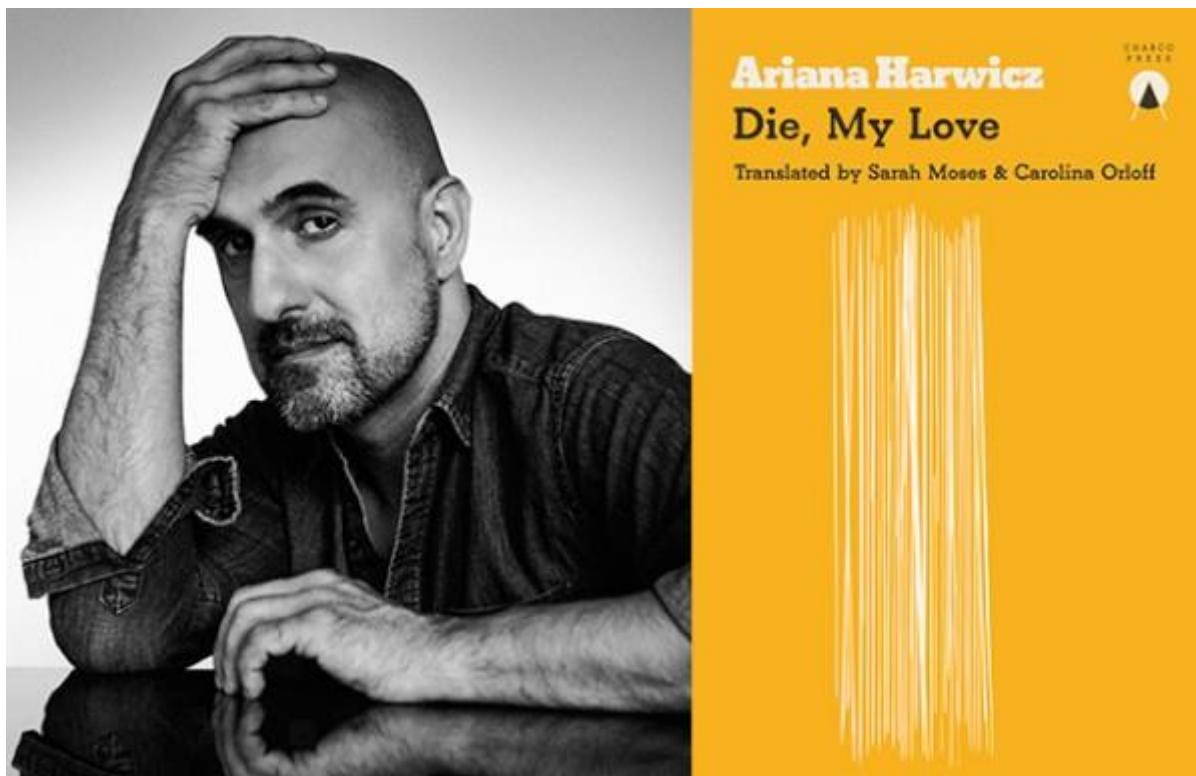


Photo by Clayton Cubitt

Ambitious and unsettling, *White Tears* (Knopf) follows two white audiophiles who record a chess player singing in the park and remix it into a counterfeit blues song by an invented black singer, only to be pursued by his ghost. Kunzru's pick is a daring, dark novel.

Kunzru's Pick: *Die, My Love* by Ariana Harwicz (Charco)

There has always been something uncanny about Argentina, at least if you believe its fiction writers. Into a brew of Bioy Casares, Borges, and Cortazar, contemporary Argentinian writers have sprinkled a very modern strain of psychological horror.

I've read several novels in the last couple of years, all short, all with an atmosphere of queasy disturbance. The best known is probably Samanta Schweblin's masterful *Fever Dream*, and Ariana Harwicz's unsettling, lyrical *Die, My Love* is in similar territory. We hear the voice of a woman "who dreams of a knife in her hand," someone who may or may not be about to do something terrible. She is a wife and a mother who wants to burn her whole house down.

In English-language fiction, we are used to female narrators who occupy one of several familiar niches: blandly "likeable," "flawed" (preferably by something simple like alcohol), or pathological; murderers or abusers who are profiled with just enough sympathy to make us feel humane as we judge them. Harwicz takes us somewhere more profound and forces us to confront the thought that these easy fictional "explanations" are specious. Lurking inside all of us is the potential for horror.

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Peter Manseau

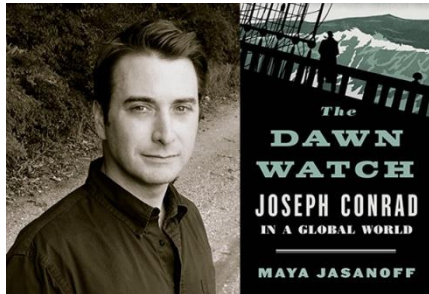


Photo by Gwenann Seznec

The Apparitionists (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) is Manseau's page-turning account of the trial for fraud of William H. Mumler, who took "spirit photographs" of people with their ghostly loved ones in the late 19th century. Manseau picks a biography of Joseph Conrad.

Manseau's Pick: *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* by Maya Jasanoff (Penguin Press)

Maya Jasanoff's *The Dawn Watch* is a surprising and engaging exploration of the life and works of Joseph Conrad, the Polish-born English novelist whose tales of imperial misadventure provided his earliest readers with views of far-off lands and subsequent generations with an enduring critique of the darkness at the heart of colonial ambitions.

A Harvard historian with the soul of a natural storyteller, Jasanoff uses equal parts character-rich, scene-driven narrative and trenchant literary criticism to create a portrait of a troubled, broke, peripatetic seaman-turned-writer who anticipated our globalized world like no other. In Jasanoff's hands, the strands of Conrad's biography and the fiction it inspired form a web of human hope and tragedy, providing insights into historical figures and moments as wide-ranging as anticzarist revolutionaries, the epoch-altering shift from sailing vessels to steam ships, the horror of the rubber trade in the Belgian Congo, and the building of the Panama Canal.

These elements may not sound like they should hold together as a coherent whole, but they do—in the haunting, evocative way that dreams and memories commingle in any life. By weaving Conrad's creations with his lived experience, *The Dawn Watch* renders history as both grand and intimate, made up not just of nations and empires but millions of messy lives, from the famous and the infamous to the forever unknown.

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Kim Phillips-Fein



Phillips-Fein's *Fear City* (Metropolitan) is a riveting chronicle of the 1970s fiscal crisis in New York—and how its effects are still felt today. For her pick, Phillips-Fein highlights a biography of Elizabeth Bishop.

Phillips-Fein's Pick: *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast* by Megan Marshall (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

Marshall's elegant and concise treatment of Bishop's difficult life draws on a trove of never-before-used archival sources that help her to frame some of Bishop's most famous poems, such as "One Art," the heartbreaking short poem about loss. Although Bishop's childhood was hard—her father died when she was an infant; her mother was hospitalized for mental illness when she was a young child—and the rest of her life was characterized by myriad challenges and setbacks (she was an alcoholic and suffered from paralyzing sadness throughout her life), Marshall's book is far from depressing. Through careful readings of Bishop's letters, notes, and poetry, she shows a mind constantly at work observing the world, suggesting that, while Bishop's acute self-consciousness was painful, it was also inextricably connected to her "existence as a poet."

The book juxtaposes Marshall's own life with that of her subject's, mixing Bishop's biography with the story of their brief interaction when Marshall was a student in Bishop's poetry class in the 1970s. The result is a biography that is at heart about the art of writing, the way that scholarship and research (as much as poetry) can offer a way to integrate losses that might be otherwise too overwhelming and painful to bear.

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Richard Rothstein

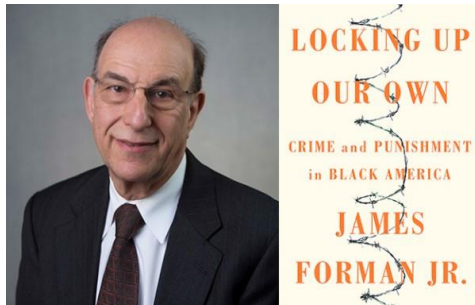


Photo by Judy Licht

Cogent and engrossing, Rothstein's *The Color of Law* (Liveright) maps how the U.S. ended up with the racial segregation found in present-day metropolitan areas, through decades of government actions at federal, state, and local levels. Rothstein's pick is another study of American racial inequality.

Rothstein's Pick: *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* by James Forman Jr. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

James Forman Jr., in *Locking Up Our Own*, empathizes with both victims and perpetrators of crime in the racially isolated, low-income neighborhoods where our most serious and potentially explosive social conflicts fester. As the book progresses, a reader can't help but wonder, when will Forman throw one of these groups overboard? But the author's integrity remains unblemished to the end, where he recounts his efforts to enlist crime victims in sentence-reduction pleas for their victimizers.

In 2010, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* challenged our shameful inattention to the indefensible incarceration rates of young African-American men. Forman pays Alexander the tribute she is due, while explaining that the origins of mass incarceration are a bit more complicated.

The tough-on-crime policies of the last third of the 20th century were not simply the imposition of a new racial hierarchy by cynical white politicians (although there was that, too); they were also, and initially, a response to the demands of middle-class residents of urban black neighborhoods for greater safety. And then zero tolerance became a runaway train—a thoughtless process in which we hold young men in prison for terms lasting far beyond the ages when criminal activity remains likely.

None of this, of course, could have happened if we weren't locking up young African-American men in neighborhoods where there were no good jobs (or transportation to them) and no access to schools that could prepare them for success in the mainstream.

Forman's own heroic career—as a public defender in Washington, D.C., and leader of a charter school for young men on probation—inspires this work, and the reader as well. Now a law professor at Yale, he volunteers to teach classes in nearby prisons. What could be more telling than that?

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Jesmyn Ward



Photo by Beowulf Sheehan

Ward's remarkable *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Scribner) tracks a mother's drive with her daughter and son (who sees the ghost of his grandfather) to pick up her husband upon his release from prison in Mississippi. Andrew Krivak's novel about a family shaped by place is Ward's pick.

Ward's Pick: *The Signal Flame* by Andrew Krivak (Scribner)

I had a quiet reading year, with a new baby and a new book, and, like many people, I have been distracted by the news and my Twitter feed. Aside from reading for research for my next book—and parenting books—my rate of consumption has not been what it usually is. But the year started with a book that really resonated with me.

I initially came to Andrew Krivak's work in 2011, when he and I were both National Book Award Finalists. His second novel, *The Signal Flame*, was published this year, and it is the perfect antidote to the insanity happening in the larger world.

Andrew and I share a project of sorts with our current novels. We're both exploring place through the struggles of one family. In *The Signal Flame*, Bo Konar and his immediate family have been shaped by the largest external forces—war throughout the 20th century—as they await the return of Bo's brother, who is MIA in Vietnam.

Bo is a member of the third generation in his family to go to war. But the war is in the wind and in their minds, not on the ground in rural Pennsylvania. What informs their days are their relationships, doing good work in vocation and avocation, and doing right. The family priest is one of the best characters in the book.

Somehow, with self-interest screaming from the national stage, this thoughtful, beautifully written novel has an old-fashioned feel, in the best way, and was a balm and an inspiration to this weary reader.