

Best (overlooked) books 2010

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WE ASKED *Inside Story* contributors to write a paragraph about a book they'd read during the year that mightn't have had the recognition it deserved, and immediately the question became more complicated than we'd anticipated. We'd decided that the books didn't strictly need to have been published in 2010 – which opened up the field considerably but makes the headline a little misleading. More importantly, “overlooked” turned out to be harder to define than expected. So the selection includes books that might or might not have been overlooked by some or most of us but probably (with one notable and belated exception) haven't received any literary awards, or not yet anyway. With those caveats, here's the list, with new entries added at the top...

Nicholas Farrelly

Barbara Demick's [Nothing to Envy: Love, Life and Death in North Korea](#) haunts us with its intimate account of life in a North Korean town. Political and economic mismanagement means that famine stalks the bleak country during years when Demick's informants seek opportunities for advancement, education and escape. Their loves and lusts require risk-taking that might shock those who assume that captives of dictatorship surrender their wits or emotions. This consistently eye-opening and often confronting book skewers our preconceptions about a country that is too often coloured by caricatures of its leaders. Demick masterfully reconstructs the experiences of her informants in ways that give voice to the frustrations and tragedies, hopes and achievements, of ordinary women and men in North Korea today.

Sylvia Lawson

One of the books I've loved most in the past year is the brilliantly named [Not Entitled](#), a memoir by the great essayist Frank Kermode, who died in August at the age of ninety. In 1979 he was the chief instigator of the *London Review of Books*, the most substantial and durable of three journals that came into being when the *TLS* temporarily disappeared; thereafter, as a frequent contributor, he was one of the *LRB's* liveliest and most authoritative voices. In the September issue the editor, Mary-Kay Wilmers, and seven other contributors paid him extensive tributes, some from personal friendship as well as professional regard. They referred to his many books of creative criticism – the best-known of those are *The Sense of an Ending* and *Forms of Attention* – and to his wide-ranging editorial and journalistic roles. Karl Miller commented that Kermode wouldn't have agreed with those who thought that scholar and journalist had to be two different people: “He did once refer to the ‘lighter exercises’ pursued by the journalist. But he was very much a writer, and his writings were a single, undivided source of enlightenment.” No one said anything much about *Not Entitled*; it is as though the writer's memoir must be marginal to more privileged works, and draw its validity from them. But there's a storytelling impulse in all of Kermode's work, so far as I know it, and *Not Entitled* is a truly gripping yarn. It was preceded in my holiday reading by two very different novels, Colm Tóibín's splendid *Brooklyn* and Garry Disher's Mornington Peninsula thriller *Blood Moon*, both of them unputdownable in their ways. Moving on to this eminent critic's memoir, I found another kind of page-turner; the story grips even when, after early life on the Isle of Man, and wartime years in the navy (“My Mad Captains”), Kermode attains the heights of literary academe. Along the way he was a co-editor of *Encounter*, and was naively surprised to find himself entangled in Cold War cultural politics; here James McAuley and *Quadrant* make brief appearances. In the humanities academy, not least in Cambridge, the factional wars late last century were notorious; as one participant remarked, feelings became so bitter because the issues were so small. This chapter is called “Errors.” Kermode pulled out, to concentrate on writing; in that metropolitan place, he could make a living from it. The irony and self-deprecation signalled in the title work through the story, and sometimes I thought he was too sane and sober for his own good. But the book's a treat, with a kind of horrific comedy in the long chapter on life in the merchant navy, and a rogues' gallery of certain departed colleagues.

Jennifer Doggett

Do you suddenly seem to be the only one in your social circle not obsessed with growing your own vegetables

and becoming more “sustainable”? If so, [The Rational Optimist](#) by Matt Ridley will make you feel less like a social outcast or at least give you some arguments to pull out when called upon to defend yourself at dinner parties for buying bags of pre-washed salad greens at the supermarket instead of harvesting them from your backyard vegetable patch. Ridley argues that human beings enjoy the many benefits of civilisation precisely because we (or at least most of us) have spent the past millennium or so *not* digging in our gardens for potatoes but instead have focused on specialising in other activities and leaving the potato growing to those who do it best (or, technically speaking, for the lowest opportunity cost). Economists will recognise this as Ricardo's law of comparative advantage; non-economists will just be relieved to hear that they can sit on their patios at the weekend reading the paper instead of trying to grow enough food for a small village from three planter boxes and a worm farm.

Danielle Chubb

The fascinating mind of Amartya Sen is revealed in all its pluralistic masterfulness in his most recent work, [The Idea of Justice](#). In a volume that gives the sense of containing within it the culmination of a lifetime spent pondering the abstract notion of justice, Sen draws from the classic work on the subject - *A Theory of Justice* (1971) - by his former colleague, John Rawls. He critiques Rawls for his tendency to appeal to an ideal of justice achieved through perfectly just social institutions. Sen's style is characteristically relaxed and polite, as he attacks the very tenets of the work of Rawls, whom he describes as a major influence on his own philosophical development. He argues for a comparative, rather than transcendental, approach to justice. Public reasoning and its role in democratic societies lie at the heart of his conceptualisation. Sen takes the reader through his philosophy step by step, grounding philosophical argument in practical examples and showing respect to the great philosopher whose work is central to this critique. Whatever your philosophical inclination, this is a book that will both warm your heart and excite your mind. Perhaps philosophers and economists can change the world, after all.

Andrew Lynch

With a cover that would do a Blue Note album proud, Paul Berman's [The Flight of the Intellectuals](#) challenges head-on the moral dissembling of many Western liberals and the media in their willingness to identify and defend “moderate” Islamism. Expanding considerably on his earlier essay in the *New Republic* in response to the controversial refusal to admit Tariq Ramadan to the United States to take up an academic post, Berman deftly captures broader facets of the West's complex relationship with Islamic values. Australia has hardly been immune from these, with fairly crude discussions about “banning the burqa” hinting at the tensions that may arise between freedom of religious practice and a secular society's commitment to feminist equality. How such thorny matters are to be sensibly, rather than cravenly, discussed is at the core of this book. Berman is fiercely contemptuous of the expediency with which some leading commentators and public intellectuals have sought to accommodate deeply troubling viewpoints in their desire to be inclusive. Towards his conclusion, Berman highlights the very different reception afforded by those who have championed Ramadan to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a woman whose criticism of Islam necessitates her round-the-clock protection, as a particularly stark illustration of just how muddled some have become. Readers may not agree with Berman's assessment on every point he takes up in this dense little book, but it addresses hugely important questions that show no sign of abating.

Nicholas Gruen

My favourite book for 2010 was John Kay's [Obliquity: Why Our Goals Are Best Achieved Indirectly](#). John Kay is a great economics columnist and this little book is dedicated to the proposition that many of the most important things in life, including economic life, are best done obliquely. As Kay illustrates, not only are the most successful in business those who've pursued some passion (rather than simply sought to make as much money as possible) but the converse is also true – some of the biggest corporate disasters have arisen directly from a reorientation away from the founding or established mission for the company (which, obviously enough, included profiting from that mission) towards a more single-minded pursuit of profit. A great antidote to all the usual idiocies of “scientism,” whether in business (as managerialism), broader professional and disciplinary matters, or life itself.

Julian Thomas

In the lead-up to 2010's Delhi Commonwealth Games, the big media story was the familiar one of a disaster waiting to unfold. Crisis and collapse are the fates often foretold for the huge new cities of the developing world — but what actually happens rarely lives up to the catastrophes we vividly imagine. Ravi Sundaram's contemporary history of Delhi, [Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism](#), tells an extraordinary story of postcolonial planning, the travails of liberal civic reform, the rise of "non-legal" economies, and the reshaping of everyday urban life around new cultural technologies and new kinds of social networks. His voice is a fresh, alternative take on contemporary urbanism, owing nothing to Mike Davis's cataclysmic hyperbole, and no more than necessary to Rem Koolhaas's well-rehearsed reflections on Lagos.

Melissa Sweet

Fiona Capp's [My Blood's Country](#) is billed as "a journey through the landscapes that inspired Judith Wright's poetry." It is also an intimate exploration of Wright's life and work as poet and activist. We travel from her childhood on the New England tablelands of New South Wales, to Mount Tamborine and Boreen Point in Queensland, where Wright lived with her "soul-mate," the writer Jack McKinney, and then to the bush block outside Braidwood that she shared with her second great love, Nugget Coombs. The journey ends in a bedsit in Canberra. Moving to the suburbs after a lifetime in the bush "almost broke my heart," Wright tells the author. Capp was seventeen when she first met Wright, and they became long-term correspondents. This is a tender and perceptive exploration of country and humanity, a journey into the interior in all senses. It is a lovely read, especially if you care for the bush and poetry.

Jock Given

The hotel in Cristina García's [The Lady Matador's Hotel](#), the glamorous Miraflores, is in an unnamed Central American capital. The matadora is one of six guests we follow for seven days. She's Japanese-Mexican, brought up in Los Angeles, visiting for "the inaugural Battle of the Lady Matadors in the Americas." It turns out to be "a long afternoon of killing and derision... The whole city is here, hungry for violence — the one language without rules." By then, the stories of the other five guests — a murderous colonel, an ex-guerrilla waitress, an adoption lawyer recruiting surrogate mothers, a Cuban poet and a suicidal Korean textile manufacturer — have spread and split and connected like a Robert Altman movie.

Jill Kitson

Set in a huge decaying hotel on the coast of Ireland in 1919 at the beginning of the IRA's guerrilla struggle for independence, J.G. Farrell's [Troubles](#) was published in 1970, just months after the eruption in Northern Ireland of the Troubles that were to tear the country apart for the next thirty years. A euphemism for bloodshed and civil war, the title was enough to put me off reading *Troubles* until this year, when it was awarded the belated 1970 Booker Prize, ahead of Shirley Hazzard's *The Bay of Noon* and Patrick White's *The Vivisector*. To my delight, I found the novel at once comic and grimly bizarre: Fawcett Towers in the hands of J.G. Ballard. The shell-shocked Major Brendan Archer (retired) arrives at the 300-room Majestic, an Anglo-Irish retreat, to claim as his bride Angela, the proprietor Edward's daughter, whom he has met only once before, in 1916. After their brief reunion, Angela mysteriously disappears. Amid the whist-playing genteel old ladies, the multiplying cats, the proliferating foliage in the Palm Court, the tumbling masonry and cast-iron, the Major lingers on through the summer, taking on the duties of sidekick to the increasingly manic Edward. Across Ireland the violence escalates, while these embattled remnants of the Ascendancy await their fate in the doomed hotel.

Ben Eltham

Paul Greenberg's [Four Fish: The Story of Fishing and What's Left to Eat](#) is a lyrical exploration of the state of our oceans. Using four microstudies of emblematic table fish, Greenberg's book combines first-person literary non-fiction with authoritative science writing to produce a book that helps us understand why famous fish like the bluefin tuna are disappearing from the seas. In part an elegy for the simple pleasures of recreational fishing, *Four Fish* is also a vivid dissection of the economic structures underlying industrial fishing. Featuring interviews with Mark Kurlansky, who wrote the 1997 bestseller *Cod*, *Four Fish* also extends the narrative of vanishing wild fish

into the new and underregulated practice of fish farming. This is also a travel memoir: Greenberg journeys from Alaska to Greece as he chronicles the declining bounty of aquatic wildlife. Beautifully written but never overstated, *Four Fish* is one of the best books on sustainability, the environment and the economy this year.

Richard Johnstone

Thanks to the magic of the search engine we can, if we are feeling a lack of culinary inspiration, put a near random pair of ingredients into Bing or Google and up will come a raft of recipes to choose from. But will the resulting dish really be greater than the sum of its parts? What makes one food go with another? In **The Flavour Thesaurus: Pairings, Recipes and Ideas for the Creative Cook**, Niki Segnit explores with wit and enthusiasm – and a great deal of background knowledge, lightly worn – the world of culinary compatibility. She brings order and logic and an imaginative eye to the practice of culinary pairing, using as a guide her own “flavour wheel” of sixteen major categories, to which she gives names like “marine” and “mustardy” and “woodland.” If this sounds both complicated and twee, it isn’t. It adds up to a highly original set of musings on the interconnectedness of flavours, a quest to “reconcile the science with the poetry” of food.

James Scamby

Michel Foucault and André Breton read and admired him. Jean Cocteau called him “Genius in its pure state... the Proust of dreams.” Yet the work of Raymond Roussel has not been sighted in any Australian bookshop for a decade or more. **Locus Solus**, arguably the best-known of Roussel’s works, is the story of a scientist who invents a serum that can animate the dead. In one experiment, an aquatic, shaved Siamese cat, wearing an electrified metal funnel on its head, stimulates the semi-decayed skull of Danton to mouth snatches of stirring speeches from the heady days of the French Revolution. Written in 1914, *Locus Solus* is still fresh and still way ahead of its time. It could provide a pungent antidote to the arid mediocrity of McEwen, Amis, Carey et al if only it were still in print. Roussel himself, in his typically understated style, predicted that his fame would outshine that of Hugo and Napoleon. Sadly, this hasn’t been the case.

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Stephanie Younane Brookes

Anne Tyler’s **Noah’s Compass** takes us inside an ordinary life in transition, and pulls apart what it means to feel connected; to the world around you and to identity, experience and memory. In the story of Liam Pennywell, a sixty-one-year-old schoolteacher forced to take early retirement, Tyler opens up the smallest details of the human experience for her readers. Her prose has the quiet confidence of seventeen previous novels, and there is not a word misplaced or unnecessary phrase. This is a gentle, unassuming novel, so much so that you don’t realise how deeply affecting it is until you turn the final page.

Peter Mares

In **Transport for Suburbia: Beyond the Automobile Age** the Melbourne-based transport academic and activist Paul Mees mounts a convincing argument that public transport in Australian cities could be dramatically improved without re-engineering our sprawling suburbs or massive new investment. His mantra is that “density is not destiny.” Using data from around the world, Mees debunks the widespread Australian assumption that public transport only works well in continental Europe because cities there are compact. While acknowledging that it is easier to create a mass transit system in Hong Kong than in Houston, Mees shows that the key ingredients for urban transport success are good planning and coordination. This can create a system in which a single ticket can be used on all forms of transport, with no cost for transferring from one to the other, with arrival and departure times coordinated so that there is no wait between getting off a train or ferry and onto a bus or tram. Frequent services on the spoke-like transport networks that radiate out from our CBDs would be linked laterally with bus lines running across suburbs, so that it would be easy to go anywhere, anytime. Mees argues that if we get the simple things right – so that it doesn’t require an act of heroism to get where you are going on public transport – then Australians too will leave their cars at home.

David Hayes

The illusions and conceits of cultural exchange across political boundaries offer rich material to the debunking historian. Patrick Wright's [Passport to Peking: A Very British Mission to Mao's China](#) takes a very different approach from (for example) David Caute and Paul Hollander's studies of Cold War fellow-travelling. The author's focus is on a half-buried moment of the era, three visits by eminent English cultural, scientific and political figures to "Red China" in the mid-1950s. It is an exuberantly rich chronicle teeming with personalities, stories, encounters and ideas, filled with the strangeness and wonder of colliding worlds at particular moments of late-imperial and early-revolutionary history, threaded by Wright's trademark style of lucid, humane, embracing panopticism. In the guileless yet compelling figure of the painter Stanley Spencer, the book finds its quiet hero: the man who could tell that Zhou Enlai that China and his beloved Thames-side village of Cookham needed to know each other better. This is a work of anti-amnesia that (as with its predecessor work *Iron Curtain*) reaches over E.P. Thompson's "enormous condescension of posterity" to restore the past's complexity and thus open new perspectives on the present.

Graeme Orr

[Fields of Glory](#) (*Les Champs d'honneur*) was Jean Rouaud's first novel. It weaves an intimate tapestry of portraits of grandparents and great aunts, through a child's reverential and tangential memory. The Loire Valley's soft, incessant rain suffuses the book with "powdered water, a bit of meditative music, an homage to ennui." Completed as Rouaud worked in a sidewalk tabac, the novel's minute and reverential recreation of family and faith presages Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, yet with a lighter touch. A Prix Goncourt winner twenty years ago, *Fields of Glory* has since grown into a quintet of related stories.

Lesley Russell

[My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Family's Past](#), by Ariel Sabar is a beautifully written story about language and a vanishing family history. Yona Sabar, the author's father, was born into an enclave of Kurdish Jews so isolated in the northern mountains of Iraq that they still spoke Aramaic. It was a community that had, for centuries, lived in relative harmony with its neighbours, both Muslim and Christian, and its language survived as the key means of handing on history, culture and religion in people who were mostly illiterate. As the country fell into war, the Sabar family managed to escape to the United States where, against all the odds, Yona became an esteemed university scholar, dedicated to safeguarding his people's language and traditions. The author grew up in Los Angeles, and spent much of his life rejecting his father's immigrant heritage – until he had a son of his own. Only then was he able to make the epic journey back to his father's lost homeland, where he found little material evidence of his father's past, but much to reconnect him back to it.

Scott Ewing

My favourite of the year was Andy Beckett's [When the Lights Went Out](#), which I bought at Heathrow Airport – as good a place as any to get the feel for a system in decline. The book is a rollicking ride through seventies Britain with Beckett seamlessly combining his historical account of major political events with interviews with major figures. The book is oddly joyous, nostalgic, sentimental and, in places, hilarious. These are people and events with which I am vaguely familiar (particularly the latter period when Mrs T. comes on the scene) and I loved the opportunity to relive some stories and remember the craziness, read new stories and hear the present-day accounts of key figures. If you only buy one book about British decline this Christmas make it this one. (This is not entirely fair - as Beckett says, "If Britain was so sickly in seventies, where did people get the money at the time to buy so many records and bold pairs of trousers?")

Peter Browne

Atul Gawande is a surgeon at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and a staff writer with the *New Yorker*, enough work for two people, but on the evidence of his articles for the magazine he does each of them superbly well. Informed by his medical experience, his articles about thorny diagnostic and treatment problems, the changing culture of the medical profession and American health policy are carefully researched, beautifully written and often very moving. His latest book, [The Checklist Manifesto](#), published this year, is a longer exposition of an argument from the *New Yorker*, and well worth reading, but if you haven't come across him before then it's best to start with either of his previous books, *Complications* and *Better*. (In *Vital Signs: Stories*

from *Intensive Care*, Sydney-based doctor Ken Hillman uses the same techniques in an Australian setting, without the benefit of a *New Yorker* paycheck but with considerable success.)

Glenn Nicholls

Snowed Under is made up of thirteen stories by the German writer Antje Rávic Strubel, translated by Zaia Alexander. All of the stories are set in the same week in a ski village on the Polish–Czech border following the fall of the Berlin Wall. During that week Evy and Vera are on a skiing holiday from Germany. Their relationship is disintegrating, and around them social relations and exchanges are changing as the free market replaces communism. Then everything is snowed in. Strubel packs an enormous amount into only 113 pages, subtly weaving the stories together to form a highly successful episodic novel.

John Langmore

Norman Davies's **Europe: A History** was published in 1996. I bought it then but have been daunted by its 1170 pages. But a forthcoming month in Norway motivated the start of a profoundly enriching reading experience. Innumerable puzzles of origins, structure, politics and society are explained in this astonishing synthesis. Davies's modest first sentence – "This book contains little that is original" – is immediately displaced by the fresh insight which an authoritative, comprehensive overview provides. He gives every region fair attention, teaching much to English-speakers about Eastern Europe. His commitment to accuracy is obvious yet his rigorous analysis leads to striking conclusions. The vivid prose is packed with incidents that illuminate trends. The power of nearly forgotten events is clarified, such as the enormity of the consequences of the Black Death. It is certainly a masterpiece, with astonishing breadth and depth, and I was impressed to see it on display in the bookshop of the Art Gallery of NSW after viewing an exhibition of nineteenth century British painting in July.

Terry Lane

Who would have thunk it? A new biography of El Auren. By some counts Michael Korda's **Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia** is the sixtieth or more book by or about Lawrence. I have read several of them and seen the film (more fiction than fact) several times and can whistle Maurice Jarre's theme – but I am still up for a new Lawrence book whenever one comes along. So what does Korda bring to the history and myth? He has a few themes. One is to provide the background history for the current never-ending war in the Middle East and to describe Lawrence's part in the post–first world war carve up of the Ottoman empire. That's not exactly new. Another theme is that Lawrence taught Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Osama, suicide bombers and IED makers all they know. And the third is that T.E. Lawrence self-consciously set out to make himself a Hero in the Arthurian sense. Or perhaps he was just a naughty boy who ran away from his manipulating mum – reverse Oedipal, Korda suggests. Not only does he not want to have sex with his mum, he doesn't want it with anyone else, either. Elegantly written and a worthy addition to Aurenography. But badly mangled typographically in the Kindle version.

Frank Bongiorno

Andrew Rawnsley's **The End of the Party** received its share of attention in Britain – especially for its portrait of the singular personality of Gordon Brown and his rivalry with Tony Blair – but there's an understandably smaller niche in Australia for big chunky books on British politics. The work of the *Observer's* chief political commentator, and a sequel to an earlier book on the making of New Labour, *The End of the Party* traces the history of the Blair and Brown governments from 2001 through to the end of 2009 in 700 pages of vivid prose. Rawnsley, of course, has impeccable sources, and it shows – but it was the book's literary qualities that most impressed me. Rawnsley has a wonderful ability to write a sentence of just a few words that is dripping with irony if you pause for just a moment. Perhaps predictably, the highlights for me were the account of Blair's ill-fated commitment to the Iraq war, his increasingly rancorous relations with Brown, and the efforts of Brown as prime minister and his chancellor, Alistair Darling, to deal with the financial crisis in October 2008. It's a wonderfully absorbing contemporary history of the unravelling of the New Labour experiment, driven by the telling anecdote and rich evocation of personality.

Savitri Taylor

The purpose of Amartya Sen's [The Idea of Justice](#) is to present a theory of justice – not a transcendental theory for a society designable from scratch and conveniently populated by individuals who can always be relied on to behave exactly as they ought to behave (*à la* Rawls) but a theory which takes as its starting point a world that already exists and is populated by thoroughly ordinary people like you, me and Julia Gillard. I have to confess I haven't got to the end of it yet because it's currently the book I pull out to stave off boredom while I'm waiting for something to start or someone to turn up. But I can recommend it with a clear conscience because I haven't yet read anything by Amartya Sen that wasn't worth reading.

Norman Abjorensen

Peter Golding's [They Called Him Old Smoothie](#) is the long overdue biography of a remarkable political leader, Joe Cahill, premier of New South Wales from 1952 until his death in 1959. With little formal education and often in trouble in the workplace for his union activities, Cahill rose to the top during the long Labor ascendancy that began in the state in 1941. A hard-nosed politician with little time for sentiment, Cahill was a decent man with a simple but deeply held belief in a fair go for all people. His political skills were extraordinary, as we see when he risks his career for the Sydney Opera House, first winning over a sceptical party and then selling it to the electorate. But perhaps his greatest achievement, alone of Australian Labor leaders, was the personal diplomacy that kept his party in a relationship with the Catholic church during the great split of 1954–55, which ripped apart Labor governments in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia and tore the heart out of federal Labor. Cahill deserves to be better remembered, and Mr Golding does his memory proud.

Sara Dowse

Iraq isn't in the news much now – we've been there, done that. And though it's generally agreed that the invasion was a grievous mistake, there isn't much interest in the extent of the damage. By 2009-10, according to Michael Otterman, Richard Hil and Paul Wilson's [Erasing Iraq: The Human Costs of Carnage](#), over a million Iraqi citizens had been killed, over three million injured, over a million women widowed and five million children orphaned. The destruction of the country's civil society, its economy and cultural heritage has been incalculable, though it's been estimated that rebuilding its infrastructure alone could run into the trillions of dollars. Compulsory reading of *Erasing Iraq* – a thorough investigation of all aspects of its suffering, published by Pluto Press with the help of Australia's Plumbing Trades Employee Union – just might give governments and their media claqueurs pause before we bloody our hands again. But that's the optimist in me speaking – WikiLeaks has already exposed the military's doubts about winning the war in Afghanistan. Not to mention the "collateral damage" from our efforts in that country too.

Brian McFarlane

Michael Blakemore's [Arguments with England](#) was published in 2005 but came my way only this year. It seems to have received very little attention in Australia, which is surprising since its wonderfully acute account of an Australian determined to make it in England in the 1950s must surely have struck a lot of sparks of recognition. Blakemore's first intention was to pursue a career as an actor but he then went on to become a very distinguished stage director, including of – among many successes – a great production of *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1971) starring Laurence Olivier and Constance Cummings, later filmed for TV. But it is not just the chronicle of theatrical (and a few film) triumphs that makes the book so rewarding. There is a potent sense of social history and change, and of contrast between his native and his adoptive countries, as well as an unillusioned self-dissection from which he emerges not always likably but with what seems invariable honesty, and in prose of compelling precision.

John Besemeres

Christopher Caldwell's [Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam and the West](#) is probably the best of a number of books that have been written since 9/11 exploring the demographic, economic and cultural background to the emergence of militant jihadism in Europe. Paradoxically, though 9/11 and hatred of America remain the hallmarks of the phenomenon, most of these books have been written by North Americans rather than Europeans but focus on Europe rather than the United States, which the authors usually see as less threatened by mass Muslim immigration. European writers on the subject tend to be less foreboding in tone,

though the appearance in recent years of rapidly increasing anti-Islamic and anti-immigration parties in Western Europe might lead one to expect otherwise. Some of the writing on the subject strikes defenders of Islam or multiculturalism as extremist, but Caldwell is harder to disqualify. He writes frequently for the reputable *Financial Times* of London, and his book is an impressive work of scholarship as well as reportage. Though he does not shrink from trenchant comment, his analysis is subtle and not easy to pigeon-hole and the style witty, epigrammatic and immensely readable. He does not so much offer a prognosis or prescribe cures as diagnose, define and explain what he sees as the main social pathologies involved and why the symptoms have developed such virulence in Western Europe. Australian readers might find much of the content of more than European interest. Some may be indignant, others unsettled. All should be stimulated by this troubling but very important book.

Dennis Altman

A book by a young Australian author that was totally overlooked back here was US resident Alistair McCartney's [The End of the World Book](#). It's an apparently random collection of entries, organised alphabetically, through which McCartney reflects on his life as a gay man, growing up in Western Australia and now living with performance artist Tim Miller in Los Angeles. An enterprising Australian publisher should grab this – and sign him up for his next.

Tom Griffiths

Jim Davidson's exemplary biography of the historian W.K. Hancock, [A Three-Cornered Life](#), offers a deeply rewarding intellectual journey. It is the product of a serious, engaged conversation between two captivating minds – Keith Hancock's, the man of whom Stuart Macintyre has aptly said, "If there were a Nobel Prize for History, Hancock would surely have won it," and Jim Davidson's, himself a gifted historian, former editor of *Meanjin* and independently acquainted with most parts of Hancock's world: Britain, Europe, South Africa, Australia – and even Canberra! This is not to say that Davidson is personally present in the text, but rather that his own rich scholarly insights into history, politics and empire constantly inform his curiosity about, and assessment of, his subject. They ensure that this superb biography is also a fascinating window on the discipline of history in the twentieth century. I'll also slip in a mention of Peter Goldsworthy, a brilliant writer of fiction who is already well known, but deserves to be celebrated. Novels like *Three Dog Night* and *Everything I Knew* are compelling, tense and beautifully observed dramas of Australian life, and his 2010 collection of short stories, *Gravel*, is just as it suggests: gritty, abrasive and under-your-skin. Goldsworthy combines literary grace with vernacular realism and captures the beauty, subtlety and darkness of Australian culture.

Chris Bonnor

[More Than Luck: Ideas Australia Needs Now](#) is a first from the progressive think tank, the Centre for Policy Development. It's a collection of policy essays produced for the 2010 federal election – an election in which populism beat policy at every turn. For this reason *More Than Luck* will remain a topical read for years to come: we aren't likely to see the ideas implemented anytime soon, yet in years to come we'll see the ideas in this book as a missed opportunity. A good read, the chapters include health policy, immigration, Indigenous affairs, climate change, school education, urban renewal and much more. Read it and weep.

Christina Crossley Ratcliffe

[Against the Odds](#) is the English title of a hugely popular children's book by prolific Dutch author Marjolijn Hof. Now translated into a dozen languages, the book is soon to be a film. The narrator is Kiki, a girl whose medico father goes missing overseas, and the story grows from her attempts to ensure his safe return. Hof's brilliance at minimalist depiction conveys the anxiety of child, mother and grandmother (Oma) entirely credibly from Kiki's point of view – all with the whimsical logic and quirky sense of humour that has made this little book an irresistible read for all ages.

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