

Best Books of 2009

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Fiction

A Change in Altitude by Anita Shreve

A young doctor and his new wife set off for a year of adventure and work in Africa. Focusing on a climb of Mount Kenya and its tragic aftermath, Anita Shreve weaves a plot full of adventure, tragedy, grief and atonement.

--Jody

Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned by Wells Tower

A debut collection of short stories that range in topic from a disgruntled nephew fixing up his uncle's dilapidated cottage in "paradise" to a Viking raider questioning yet another attack on an island already stripped bare. While they are seemingly diverse in subject matter, all the stories are tied together by the author's wicked sense of humor and great sympathy for his characters.

--Richard

The Forgotten Garden by Kate Morton

Imagine, in 1913, being 4 years old and left alone on a wharf in a strange country with only a case that holds a book of fairy tales. Called Nell by the dock master who rescues and raises her, she immediately forgets her past. But at 21 when she's told how she became a part of his family, she knows she must find out who she really is. She starts to discover some of her background, but life intrudes and it is up to her granddaughter, Cassandra, to solve the mystery. This enchanting story, somewhat reminiscent of *The Secret Garden*, moves back and forth through several generations as the pieces of the puzzle come together.

--Sue

Get Real by Donald Westlake

"Film us pulling a heist? Cameras are exactly what we don't want," says Dortmund when his pal Stan tells him that a television producer wants to produce a reality show starring them as real criminals, pulling off a real job. The possibilities are intriguing, however, and soon the whole gang is assembled with a convoluted plan that includes a real robbery within a staged robbery which is an actual robbery of the film company. Known as the king of the comic crime caper, Westlake develops entertaining characters and witty dialog that make his latest and final novel a treasure to be savored.

--Theresa

Hot House Flower and the Nine Plants of Desire by Margot Berwin

Imagine working at an ad agency in New York City one minute and traveling through the jungles of southern Mexico to find mysterious tropical plants the next. Welcome to Lila Nova's life. The adventure begins when Lila meets a handsome plant seller and is then drawn into a Laundromat that doubles as a source for exotic plants. If you like plants, strong characters, or just a great story, you'll love this enchanting page turner.

--Kara

How I Became a Famous Novelist by Steve Hely

Pete Tarslaw is a good writer ... of other people's college applications. He decides to write a successful novel, mostly to show his ex-girlfriend what she's missing out on. As he writes, the reader is treated to excerpts from "The Tornado Ashes Club" (Pete's novel) as well as other faux best-sellers. This book will reshape how you think about literature.

--Ron

Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi by Geoff Dyer

By turns hilarious, vibrant, and patiently observed, this creative two-part novel deals with the voracious sensual appetites of a burned-out arts journalist who wins a junket to the Venice Biennale, and perhaps the same Jeff who takes a writing assignment in Varanasi, India, where he simply stays, gradually losing ambition and any sensual attachment. The Varanasi setting, with its cremation ghats, provides the perfect atmospheric backdrop for Jeff's renunciatory state of mind.

--Scott

Little Bee by Chris Cleave

Mystery and adventure ensue when a 16-year-old Nigerian orphan, nicknamed *Little Bee*, and a young British couple who spend a two-week holiday on the Nigerian coast cross paths. This is a moving story of friendship, post-colonialism and politics, and the modern travails of making your way in the world. Not to be missed.

--Kara

Prayers for Sale by Sandra Dallas

A compelling story of friendship between Hennie, who, at 86, contemplates leaving her home in Middle Swan, and Nit, a newlywed recent arrival. As their friendship deepens, Hennie shares stories of the people and the passage of time in that hard rock, hard luck area high in the Colorado mountains. Entertaining, interesting and surprisingly touching.

--Liz

The School of Essential Ingredients by Erica Bauermeister

Lillian, a chef and restaurateur, decides to start a cooking school to pass on her love of the art of combining ingredients into wonderful dishes. The eight students who gather each Monday night are all very different from each other, but each has a story to tell. Their dreams, fears and past lives are revealed as they get to know each other, brought together and nourished by Lillian.

--Sue

The Skating Rink by Roberto Bolaño

This novel, told from the perspective of three different men, revolves around a beautiful ice skater and an infatuated civil servant who uses government funds to build her a skating rink in a small Spanish town. In addition to the scandal, there are other infatuations and a murder, but what makes this short novel so enjoyable is the fluid, natural – one might say inevitable – way in which it is told. This is masterful storytelling and a perfect introduction to Bolaño's superb style.

--Scott

The Tourist by Olen Steinhauer

When an old enemy resurfaces with a message for his ears alone, Milo Weaver finds himself back in the world of spies and assassins he thought he had left behind for the comforts of family life and a CIA desk job. Steinhauer's intricate plot and deftly drawn characters make this a strong entry in the genre of LeCarre and Deighton.

--Eileen

Very Valentine by Adriana Trigiani

The Angelini Shoe Company, makers of exquisite wedding shoes since 1903, is struggling to stay afloat in our modern era of ready-made goods. As apprentice to her grandmother, 33-year-old Valentine Roncalli has hopes of winning a shoe design competition that will guarantee the future of their family-owned business. Set in modern Greenwich Village, this is the first of an eventual trilogy about the Roncalli family. (Also available in Large Print)

--Theresa

The Women by T. Coraghessan Boyle

With his vivid descriptive style, T. C. Boyle paints a fictional portrait of Frank Lloyd Wright's passionate affairs and dysfunctional marriages. We see each woman brimming with hopes and ideals, as if her devotion to this great man is the culmination of her life. But each woman discovers the dark side of Wright too—his egotism, his obsession with his work, and his distance from his children. And we see Wright at home in Taliesin, where he tried to create his own vision of utopia in Wisconsin in spite of the disapproval of the local residents. This novel captures the emotional turmoil that Wright seemed to thrive on as his relationships became the stuff of newspaper headlines.

--Esta

A Year on Ladybug Farm by Donna Ball

Three suburbanite friends work hard to repair and clean up an old mansion they've bought together. Pooling their financial and personal resources to attempt to make this joint venture fly, these women discover that good things can happen when everything seems to be going terribly wrong.

-- Margaret

Non-fiction

The Deadly Dinner Party & Other Medical Detective Stories by Jonathan Edlow

The detailed information about how the human body functions and the history of the discovery of that information may astound the reader almost as much as the real-life medical detective stories. This is an interesting book, even for the medically squeamish.

--Jody

Decoding the Heavens by Jo Marchant

Marchant's fascinating book explores the "Antikythera mechanism," an ancient shoebox-size computer found on the ocean floor off Greece in the early 1900s. In the process of learning about this 2,000-year-old device that could chart relative solar, lunar and planetary motions (including eclipse prediction and the 19-year lunar cycle), you'll also pick up interesting details about scuba diving, clock making, maritime trade practices in antiquity and advanced archaeological imaging techniques. This is popular science writing at its best.

--Scott

The Farm Chicks in the Kitchen: Live well, Laugh Often, Cook Much by Teri Edwards and Serena Thompson

This is a delightful collection of yummy recipes, creative crafts, and entertaining accounts of the Farm Chicks junking adventures and thriving Spokane business. A must look-at cook-and-craft-book!

--Debbie

Goners: the Final Hours of the Notable and Notorious by Gordon Kerr

More than just a compilation of final exits, this book lays out alternative versions of what may have happened and examines the impact of each person's demise. Whether read from cover to cover, or cherry picked for those that you are interested in, this book is hard to put down. It may seem morbid at first, but your curiosity will win out in the end.

--Richard

James Lovelock: In Search of Gaia by John & Mary Gribbin

This book is an intimate biography of a most creative and compelling man. During James Lovelock's almost 90 years of life, he has been a chemist, a medical researcher, inventor, and has helped NASA look for life on Mars. He is one of the leading proponents of the Gaia Theory – that Earth's biosphere is a living self-regulating system. His ideas offer us hope as we face the current crisis of climate change.

--Steve

Liberty and Tyranny by Mark Levin

In this strongly felt and powerfully written book, talk radio host and author Mark Levin explains where we are, how we got here, and what we must do to take back and preserve our freedoms for future generations. This book is essential reading for those concerned about government encroachment on individual freedoms and our descent into soft tyranny.

--Sherilyn

The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon by David Grann

In 1925 British explorer Percy Fawcett mysteriously disappeared on a mission to discover the mythical El Dorado, an ancient civilization buried deep in the Amazon jungle. Grann skillfully blends Fawcett's biography—and his final zealous quest—with history, anthropology, science, geography and mystery, to create a gripping adventure tale. If you're not careful, you too may disappear deep into the book's beguiling pages.

--Melinda

No Angel: My Harrowing Undercover Journey to the Inner Circle of the Hells Angels by Jay Dobyns

"Jay Davis, AKA 'Bird.' Do not contact. Armed and dangerous." He was doing so well in his undercover role for ATF that he was featured on a local law enforcement bulletin! Dobyns recounts his time spent infiltrating the Hell's Angels, giving a rare inside picture of the most notorious outlaw motorcycle club as well as insight into what it takes to live two lives at once.

--Theresa

Shakespeare's London on 5 Groats a Day by Richard Tames

This book is written in the style of a modern travelogue, but set in Shakespeare's day. Readers will discover life in Elizabethan London in this entertaining work of real history.

--Steve

Stitches: A Memoir by David Small

A 14-year-old boy went in for a "harmless operation" and woke up mute. Only later did he discover the truth his family had hidden from him: he suffered a potentially fatal cancer. *Stitches* tells this true story of illness and family dysfunction in the form of a poignant graphic novel memoir.

--Melinda

Strength in What Remains by Tracy Kidder

A spellbinding story of a young Tutsi medical student who rises out of the ashes of genocide in Rwanda and Burundi and comes to America. Kidder recounts the life of Deogratias [Latin, meaning "Thanks be to God"] as he arrives in New York, takes up residence in Central Park, and delivers groceries, before finally encountering benefactors who help him achieve his dream. Deo later returns to Burundi to build and staff a medical center open to both Tutsi and Hutu patients, and become a conciliating force between the people and governments of Burundi and Rwanda.

--Mary

Kids & Teens

Catching Fire by Suzanne Collins

Katniss survived the annual gladiatorial fight-to the death in *Hunger Games* only to find herself on the edge of a revolution, not only in her society, but also in her own life. In this sequel, Collins' characters mix fierce loyalty to family and friends with action and heroism when threatened. Although answers are revealed about the nation of Panem, tantalizing questions remain to be answered in the next and final installment.

--Julie

Crocodile Tears: An Alex Rider Novel by Anthony Horowitz

Alex Rider is a teen secret agent with high-tech training and weapons provided by M-16, a British government agency. This is the latest in the series about Alex, as he battles a terrorist who seeks to use genetically engineered viral weapons. A James Bond-style thriller that bursts with action and details about spying and combat.

--Esta

Jan Brett's Snowy Treasury by Jan Brett

Brett's new collection of magical stories is set in wintertime, and her vibrant and detailed pictures will surely fascinate children. Stories from the Ukraine, Switzerland, Denmark and the Arctic feature these favorites: "Gingerbread Baby," "The Mitten," "The Three Snow Bears," and "The Hat." They are filled with delightful animal antics.

--Esta

Oceanology by Emily Hawkins, Ferdinand deLessups and Dugald Steer

An undersea voyage in a submarine begins this fantastic story, with superb artwork that includes pop-ups, envelopes and fold-outs. Kids will discover facts about sharks, undersea volcanoes, coral reefs and marine biology as they turn the pages of this colorful and amazing book. They will also learn about the legends of sea monsters and the lost city of Atlantis. Other books in this "ology" series such as "Dragonology" and "Egyptology" have been children's best-sellers.

--Esta

Skippyjon Jones, Lost in Spice by Judith Byron Schachner

Skippyjon (aka Kitty Boy), the Siamese who thinks he's a Chihuahua, embarks on yet another adventure in his closet, this time to the Red Planet (red because it's covered in spicy red pepper)! On Mars Skippyjon meets Uno Ojo, a one-eyed green Martian who could be Skippyjon's twin. This book, like the other Skippyjon books, contains catchy Spanglish tunes and is entertaining for both children and adults.

--Susan

Music CDs

21st Century Breakdown by Green Day

Yet another highly influential band in my formative years, Green Day has long held a fond place in my heart. One of their songs, called “She,” has been what I always considered to be my personal anthem. While their earlier songs were more about personal angst and turmoil, Green Day has switched to protest songs and political rock opera. Were you one of the 74 people to check out *American Idiot*? This album follows in that direction, almost like a sequel. Whether you love Green Day or are just in the mood for some political rebellion, you really need to listen to this CD.

Favorite tracks: *Before the Lobotomy* and *East Jesus Nowhere*

American Saturday Night by Brad Paisley

I love country music! I’m originally from the Midwest and back in the cornfields you can’t turn on the radio without hearing Brad Paisley. He’s one of country’s most talented stars, and this album doesn’t disappoint. This disc has many upbeat, fun country songs, and a few heart-warming—or heart-wrenching—love songs. If you like country music, you have to check this out.

Favorite tracks: *American Saturday Night* and *Catch All the Fish*

Check Your Head, Hello Nasty, and Licensed to Ill by The Beastie Boys

The Beastie Boys formed originally as a hardcore punk group in 1981, the same year I was born. Eventually they established their hip-hop sound, and that’s the style of music reflected in these three classic Beastie CDs. Like everyone else born between Gen X and Gen Y, I was enamored with “Fight for Your Right.” I grew up listening to these guys and was excited to see re-releases of some of their best albums. Packed with never before heard tracks and alternate takes, these CDs will definitely bring back memories for fans like me.

Favorite tracks: *So Whatcha’ Want*, *Fight for Your Right*, *Body Movin’*

Hot Mess by Cobra Starship

The best way I can describe Cobra Starship is “pop-rock with a frat boy twist.” I was initially surprised to learn there is a woman in this otherwise all-male group. The lyrics tend to be from the guy’s point of view, saying exactly what he’s thinking. Hint: it’s not romantic, but it’s always fun.

Favorite tracks: *Good Girls Go Bad* and *Hot Mess*

It’s Not Me, It’s You by Lily Allen

Have you ever wanted to tell someone off, but were too polite to do so? Lily Allen has probably never felt that way. Her soft, almost gentle voice disguises some seriously charged, cleverly explicit lyrics. Most of the songs focus on the dysfunction and rebellion that comprise a typical

twenty-something's life. If you're at that awkward stage between being a teenager and being an adult, you're truly Ms. Allen's intended audience and will appreciate her quirky storytelling. Favorite tracks: *I Could Say* and *Everyone's at It*

La Roux by La Roux

Admittedly, I've only recently become obsessed with dance music. I'm not that familiar with the big names, but I know what I like. And I like La Roux. If you've been looking for something fun, upbeat, and full of energy, this CD is for you. And who knows? Maybe it'll tempt you to get more familiar with the genre.

Favorite tracks: *Bulletproof* and *Tiger Lily*

Nothing Personal by All-Time Low

If you like Boys Like Girls, you'll love All-Time Low. The group's second CD is filled with catchy lyrics, upbeat tempos, and even a couple of slow ballads. Looking for auto-tuned vocals? You won't find them here! You'll only find good emo-pop and some incredibly clever song titles.

Favorite tracks: *A Party Song* and *Hello, Brooklyn*

The Boy Who Knew Too Much by Mika

Mika sounds like a modern-day Freddie Mercury. His music is full of swelling piano, falsetto vocals and quirky lyrical arrangements. This is the perfect CD for a road trip, no matter if you're travelling to Portland or just commuting to work. It's difficult to resist singing along and dancing in the driver's seat. Mika is a cult favorite among staff members and is sure to be a hit with you, too.

Favorite tracks: *Good Gone Girl* and *Blame It on the Girls*

~ All music selected by Carol ~