

Great Nonfiction

Zeitoun by Dave Eggers

Through the story of one man's experience after Hurricane Katrina, Eggers draws an indelible picture of Bush-era crisis management. Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a successful Syrian-born painting contractor, decides to stay in New Orleans and protect his property while his family flees. After the levees break, he uses a small canoe to rescue people, before being arrested by an armed squad and swept powerlessly into a vortex of bureaucratic brutality. When a guard accuses him of being a member of Al Qaeda, he sees that race and culture may explain his predicament. Eggers, compiling his account from interviews, sensibly resists rhetorical grandstanding, letting injustices speak for themselves.

Columbine by Dave Cullen

"The tragedies keep coming. As we reel from the latest horror . . ." So begins a new epilogue, illustrating how Columbine became the template for nearly two decades of "spectacle murders." It is a false script, seized upon by a generation of new killers. In the wake of Newtown, Aurora, and Virginia Tech, the imperative to understand the crime that sparked this plague grows more urgent every year.

What really happened April 20, 1999? The horror left an indelible stamp on the American psyche, but most of what we "know" is wrong. It wasn't about jocks, Goths, or the Trench Coat Mafia. Dave Cullen was one of the first reporters on scene, and spent ten years on this book—widely recognized as the definitive account. With a keen investigative eye and psychological acumen, he draws on mountains of evidence, insight from the world's leading forensic psychologists, and the killers' own words and drawings—several reproduced in a new appendix. Cullen paints raw portraits of two polar opposite killers. They contrast starkly with the flashes of resilience and redemption among the survivors.

The Boys in the Boat by Daniel James Brown

For readers of *Unbroken*, out of the depths of the Depression comes an irresistible story about beating the odds and finding hope in the most desperate of times—the improbable, intimate account of how nine working-class boys from the American West showed the world at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin what true grit really meant.

It was an unlikely quest from the start. With a team composed of the sons of loggers, shipyard workers, and farmers, the University of Washington's eight-oar crew team was never expected to defeat the elite teams of the East Coast and Great Britain, yet they did, going on to shock the world by defeating the German team rowing for Adolf Hitler. The emotional heart of the tale lies

with Joe Rantz, a teenager without family or prospects, who rows not only to regain his shattered self-regard but also to find a real place for himself in the world. Drawing on the boys' own journals and vivid memories of a once-in-a-lifetime shared dream, Brown has created an unforgettable portrait of an era, a celebration of a remarkable achievement, and a chronicle of one extraordinary young man's personal quest.

The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander

Once in a great while a book comes along that changes the way we see the world and helps to fuel a nationwide social movement. *The New Jim Crow* is such a book. Praised by Harvard Law professor Lani Guinier as "brave and bold," this book directly challenges the notion that the election of Barack Obama signals a new era of colorblindness. With dazzling candor, legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that "we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." By targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control—relegating millions to a permanent second-class status—even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness. In the words of Benjamin Todd Jealous, president and CEO of the NAACP, this book is a "call to action."

Called "stunning" by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Levering Lewis, "invaluable" by the *Daily Kos*, "explosive" by *Kirkus*, and "profoundly necessary" by the *Miami Herald*, this updated and revised paperback edition of *The New Jim Crow*, now with a foreword by Cornel West, is a must-read for all people of conscience.

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

On November 15, 1959, in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas, four members of the Clutter family were savagely murdered by blasts from a shotgun held a few inches from their faces. There was no apparent motive for the crime, and there were almost no clues.

As Truman Capote reconstructs the murder and the investigation that led to the capture, trial, and execution of the killers, he generates both mesmerizing suspense and astonishing empathy. *In Cold Blood* is a work that transcends its moment, yielding poignant insights into the nature of American violence.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius by Dave Eggers

At the age of 22, Eggers became both an orphan and a "single mother" when his parents died within five months of one another of unrelated cancers. In the ensuing sibling division of labor, Dave is appointed unofficial guardian of his 8-year-old brother, Christopher. The two live

together in semi-squalor, decaying food and sports equipment scattered about, while Eggers worries obsessively about child-welfare authorities, molesting babysitters, and his own health. His child-rearing strategy swings between making his brother's upbringing manically fun and performing bizarre developmental experiments on him. (Case in point: his idea of suitable bedtime reading is John Hersey's Hiroshima.)

The book is also, perhaps less successfully, about being young and hip and out to conquer the world (in an ironic, media-savvy, Gen-X way, naturally). In the early '90s, Eggers was one of the founders of the very funny *Might Magazine*, and he spends a fair amount of time here on *Might*, the hipster culture of San Francisco's South Park, and his own efforts to get on to MTV's *Real World*. This sort of thing doesn't age very well--but then, Eggers knows that. There's no criticism you can come up with that he hasn't put into A.H.W.O.S.G. already. "The book thereafter is kind of uneven," he tells us regarding the contents after page 109, and while that's true, it's still uneven in a way that is funny and heartfelt and interesting.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot

Her name was Henrietta Lacks, but scientists know her as HeLa. She was a poor black tobacco farmer whose cells—taken without her knowledge in 1951—became one of the most important tools in medicine, vital for developing the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, and more. Henrietta's cells have been bought and sold by the billions, yet she remains virtually unknown, and her family can't afford health insurance. This phenomenal *New York Times* bestseller tells a riveting story of the collision between ethics, race, and medicine; of scientific discovery and faith healing; and of a daughter consumed with questions about the mother she never knew.

The Emperor of All Maladies by Siddhartha Mukherjee

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and now a documentary from Ken Burns on PBS, *The Emperor of All Maladies* is a magnificent, profoundly humane “biography” of cancer—from its first documented appearances thousands of years ago through the epic battles in the twentieth century to cure, control, and conquer it to a radical new understanding of its essence.

Wild by Cheryl Strayed

A powerful, blazingly honest memoir: the story of an eleven-hundred-mile solo hike that broke down a young woman reeling from catastrophe “and built her back up again.

At twenty-two, Cheryl Strayed thought she had lost everything. In the wake of her mother's death, her family scattered and her own marriage was soon destroyed. Four years later, with nothing more to lose, she made the most impulsive decision of her life: to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon to Washington State “and to do it alone. She had no experience as a long-distance hiker, and the trail was little more than an idea, vague and outlandish and full of promise. But it was a promise of piecing back together a life

that had come undone.

Strayed faces down rattlesnakes and black bears, intense heat and record snowfalls, and both the beauty and loneliness of the trail. Told with great suspense and style, sparkling with warmth and humor, *Wild* vividly captures the terrors and pleasures of one young woman forging ahead against all odds on a journey that maddened, strengthened, and ultimately healed her.

***Dead Wake* by Erik Larson**

It doesn't matter how interested (or uninterested) you are in learning about such a pivotal moment in American history, you'll want to savor Erik Larson's latest read. He's proven himself as one of the best nonfiction authors of the last 20 years, specifically for his talent to forge an infectious readability onto some of history's overlooked episodes and unknown actors. Larson had his work cut out for him in *Dead Wake* with the sinking of the Lusitania, the act of hostility that brought the United States into World War I. The details of the suspected torpedoing of this British ocean liner have long been debated and disputed, but Larson profiles the crew of the Lusitania and highlights the German U-boat that pursued it, slipping between both sides of the event in his cinematic style of enticing narration.

***Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* by Sarah Vowell**

You can't truly blame yourself for not paying attention in history class; even the most interesting material is challenging to engage with on a regular basis. But Sarah Vowell has developed a career out of making American history fascinating. Her new book, *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, focuses on the young French aristocrat who assisted the revolutionaries in their war for independence. Through humor and a healthy injection of her own personality, Vowell makes the founding fathers and the French nobles alike read like the sort of people you're getting to know, and adore, for the first time at a party.

***Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Between the World and Me is the personalization of what, for many people, has been merely political for too long. Of course, racism in this country is political, is historical, is the very foundation on which the American Dream was built, and Ta-Nehisi Coates weaves these important historical narratives into this short text. But it's his insistence on the small things that often get overlooked in public discourse that makes this book so terribly powerful. It's not just in

the form of the piece—a letter to his teenage son Samori—but in the more intimate content which requires that tragedies be contextualized. A victim of police brutality, like Freddie Gray, Rekia Boyd, Laquan McDonald, Sandra Bland or Coates' own Prince Jones, is not just a body or a representative of his/her race. No, a victim of police brutality is a person whose life was filled with minor, beautiful details that are also plundered in their killing. Every music lesson, every check written for family photos and every soccer practice weighs as much, under Coates' text, as every mother that has to bury a child and every child that has to bury a mother or father.

In the same way that Claudia Rankine's most powerful moments in *Citizen* were the personal narratives—those intimate reflections on being a black body and mind in America—and in the same way that a great Toni Morrison novel is not “about” race as much as it is about the small things that make up great characters of color, *Between You and Me* is, simply, a love letter to a son; or a eulogy for a friend; or an ode to Paris. Its brilliance lies in the fact that it is all of these things at once (and more) in one of the most necessary reads for any person interested in what it means to be awake and still hopeful in America today.

***The Junction Boys: How 10 Days in Hell with Bear Bryant Forged a Champion Team at Texas A&M* by Jim Dent and Gene Stallings**

The legendary Paul "Bear" Bryant is recognized nationwide as one of the greatest coaches ever. So why did he always cite his 1-9 A&M team of 1954 as his favorite? This is the story of a remarkable team--and the beginning of the legend.

The Junction Boys tells the story of Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant's legendary training camp in the small town of Junction, Texas. In a move that many consider the salvation of the Texas A&M football program, Coach Bryant put 115 players through the most grueling practices ever imagined. Only a handful of players survived the entire 10 days, but they braved the intense heat of the Texas sun and the burning passion of their coach, and turned a floundering team into one of the nation's best.

***All Over But the Shoutin'* by Rick Bragg**

This haunting, harrowing, gloriously moving recollection of a life on the American margin is the story of Rick Bragg, who grew up dirt-poor in northeastern Alabama, seemingly destined for either the cotton mills or the penitentiary, and instead became a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for The New York Times. It is the story of Bragg's father, a hard-drinking man with a murderous temper and the habit of running out on the people who needed him most.

But at the center of this soaring memoir is Bragg's mother, who went eighteen years without a new dress so that her sons could have school clothes and picked other people's cotton so that her children wouldn't have to live on welfare alone. Evoking these lives—and the country that shaped and nourished them—with artistry, honesty, and compassion, Rick Bragg brings home the love and suffering that lie at the heart of every family. The result is unforgettable.

***The View from the Cheap Seats* by Neil Gaiman**

The View from the Cheap Seats, a collection of over 60 nonfiction works by Neil Gaiman, is best defined by the author himself: “This book is not ‘the complete nonfiction of Neil Gaiman.’ It is, instead, a motley bunch of speeches and articles, introductions and essays. Some of them are serious and some of them are frivolous and some of them are earnest and some of them I wrote to try and make people listen.” From fairy tales to the Syrian refugee crisis to Terry Pratchett, Gaiman discusses an impressive range of topics with his signature wit. This collection is a must read for Gaiman fans old and new alike.

***Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson**

What is the one commonality of people on death row? If the victim is white, the perpetrator is 11 times more likely to be condemned to die than if the victim is black. When Stevenson was a 23-year-old Harvard law student, he started an internship in Georgia where his first assignment was to deliver a message to a man living on death row. This assignment became his calling: representing the innocent, the inadequately defended, the children, the domestic abuse survivors, the mentally ill—the imprisoned. This fast-paced book reads like a John Grisham novel. One of those profiled, Walter, was at a barbecue with over 100 people at the time of the murder he was accused of, and spent more than six years on death row. The stories include those of children, teens, and adults who have been in the system since they were teens. This is a title for the many young adults who have a parent or loved one in the prison system and the many others who are interested in social justice, the law, and the death penalty. A standout choice.

***Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* by Sam Quinones**

In 1929, in the blue-collar city of Portsmouth, Ohio, a company built a swimming pool the size of a football field; named Dreamland, it became the vital center of the community. Now, addiction has devastated Portsmouth, as it has hundreds of small rural towns and suburbs across America--addiction like no other the country has ever faced. How that happened is the riveting

story of Dreamland.

With a great reporter's narrative skill and the storytelling ability of a novelist, acclaimed journalist Sam Quinones weaves together two classic tales of capitalism run amok whose unintentional collision has been catastrophic. The unfettered prescribing of pain medications during the 1990s reached its peak in Purdue Pharma's campaign to market OxyContin, its new, expensive--extremely addictive--miracle painkiller. Meanwhile, a massive influx of black tar heroin--cheap, potent, and originating from one small county on Mexico's west coast, independent of any drug cartel--assaulted small town and mid-sized cities across the country, driven by a brilliant, almost unbeatable marketing and distribution system. Together these phenomena continue to lay waste to communities from Tennessee to Oregon, Indiana to New Mexico.

***The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture* by Glen Weldon**

In this lively romp through 70 years of Batmania — from Gotham detective to camp sensation to raspy Dark Knight — NPR book critic and *Pop Culture Happy Hour* panelist Weldon explores what makes the iconic character tic, and what it all says about us, the fans. A perfect literary accompaniment to summer blockbuster season.

***The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* by Maggie Nelson**

Every bit as gripping as a true-crime book, but infinitely more complex and rewarding. Nelson's aunt was murdered before she was born, and the crime had long been thought to be the work of a serial killer convicted of a different murder. But in 2004, her family was informed that a DNA match had turned up a new suspect. Nelson, who'd already written of her aunt's death in a book of poetry, chronicles the trial and its aftermath, raising questions of truth, justice, and memory.

***Missoula* by Jon Krakauer**

Thanks to a certain magazine cover story earlier this year, rape on campus might have controversial connotations in the media, but *Missoula* by Jon Krakauer (*Into the Wild*, *Under the Banner of Heaven*) is that story's antithesis. This meticulously researched book unveils rape in the American college system...and examines why so few people are willing to report it.

Krakauer documents three separate accounts of campus rape in the city of Missoula, Montana—not merely through the horrifying experiences, but through the aftermath: police questioning, discussions with lawyers, family reactions. The pages that follow will stick with you for decades.

***Furiously Happy* by Jenny Lawson**

“A funny book about horrible things,” *Furiously Happy* is Jenny Lawson’s second bestselling memoir exploring her life with mental illness. You might recognize Lawson as “The Bloggess,” the creator of the [beloved blog](#) of the same name who has garnered a devoted following over the past decade. Her raw honesty and truly hysterical anecdotes translate flawlessly from the web to print, cementing *Furiously Happy* as a mandatory text for anyone seeking to understand the day-to-day realities of living with mental illness. Inspiring and ridiculous, this book insists that we “[embrace] everything that makes us who we are...and [use] it to find joy in fantastic and outrageous ways.”

***Gumption* by [Nick Offerman](#)**

In *Gumption*, humorist and actor [Nick Offerman](#) combs through American history in search of the country’s “gutsiest troublemakers.” He profiles 21 individuals, arguing for the traits that make for the greatest virtue, both of our nation and its luminaries. In a book that pairs self-deprecating humor with well-researched passages, Offerman first revisits the founding fathers (“magnificent sons of bitches”) to establish his thesis: Gumption is a fundamental ingredient of America herself and remains a guiding force in the lives of her most notable achievers. What emerges is a deep respect for both the men and women he profiles and the abiding egalitarian spirit that guides him and “gumptionators” everywhere.

***H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald**

Helen Macdonald’s book has captivated readers since its release in March, and it’s easy to see why. *H is for Hawk* chronicles Macdonald’s fascinating journey to train one of the most ferocious predators, the goshawk, while grappling with the grief of losing her father. An intertwined exploration of falconry and bereavement, the book deserves its equally accurate labels of nature writing and memoir. This extraordinary text will delight history enthusiasts, literary buffs and nature lovers alike, proving that *H is for Hawk* delivers a unique yet accessible story.

***Girl in a Band* by [Kim Gordon](#)**

Sometimes referred to as “the godmother of grunge” or “the poster girl of indie-rock,” Kim Gordon frames nearly 30 years of recording, touring and performing with Sonic Youth within the perspective of an artist, a mother and a wife. Gordon has been a role model to a generation of vocalists and instrumentalists, and this poetic book offers fans an intimate portrait of the band. There’s hype surrounding Gordon’s vitriolic barbs for her ex-husband (and co-founding member of Sonic Youth) Thurston Moore, as well as [Courtney Love](#). But you must read on to

learn of Gordon's youth in California before she escaped to New York and forged the spectacular creative mindset of Sonic Youth with her bandmates.