https://aggsliterature.wordpress.com/100-best-books-of-the-decade-and-the-5-worst/

100 best books of the decade …and the 5 worst

Descriptions by Nicholas Clee, Kate Saunders, Tom Gatti, Erica Wagner, Rachel Campbell-Johnston, Paul Dunn, Richard Whitehead Compiled by Erica Wagner with assistance from Anjana Ahuja, Lisa Appignanesi, Nicola Beauman, Marcel Berlins, Celia Brayfield, Ian Brunskill, Sarah Churchwell, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Amanda Craig, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Howard Davies, Matthew Dennison, Iain Finlayson, Philippa Gregory, Christina Hardyment, Mark Henderson, Thomas Lynch, Derwent May, Peter Millar, Neel Mukherjee, Rebecca Nicolson, John O’Connell, Stephen Page, Libby Purves, Margaret Reynolds, Ziauddin Sardar, Peter Stothard, Peter Straus, Lisa Tuttle.

100 [The Position](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article551697.ece) by Meg Wolitzer (2005) - An hilarious, serious novel about sex and love and family. Paul and Roz Mellow publish Pleasuring (think of *The Joy of Sex*) in 1975 — it’s a bestseller, but what do you think their four children make of this?

99 [The Lost Leader](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/poetry/article4178810.ece) by Mick Imlah (2008) - In his first collection for almost two decades, Mick Imlah takes up the challenge to forge poetry from the folk legends of his Scottish past.

98 [Half of a Yellow Sun](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article618633.ece) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie(2007) - The Biafran War of the late 1960s is seen through the eyes of Ugwu, a 13-year-old peasant houseboy, and the beautiful, passionate twin sisters Olanna and Kainene. This stunning piece of writing won the 2007 Orange Prize.

97 [The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article3371219.ece) by Junot Diaz (2007) - Oscar is a sweet, fat nerd, who lives in New Jersey with his Dominican family and dreams of being the next Tolkien and finding true love; a funny, charming and totally original take on the US immigrant experience.

96 [The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda’s Road to 9/11](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article2363180.ece) by Lawrence Wright (2006) - Western writers’ responses to the most important international event of the Noughties were hindered by a shortage of insight and authority. But Wright brings both qualities to this powerful and compelling account of the prelude to 9/11.

95 The Emperor’s Babe by Bernardine Evaristo (2001) - Until this appeared, we had no idea about the lively club scene in 3rd-century London. Zuleika is an exotic African who catches the eye of the Emperor Septimus Severus. Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* crosses over with *Heat* magazine.

87 [The Carhullan Army](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article2192466.ece) by Sarah Hall (2007) - *The Handmaid’s Tale* meets *The Children of Men* in the third novel from a rising star in British fiction, a brilliant dystopian fantasy set in a radical feminist commune.

86 District and Circle by Seamus Heaney (2006) - The first volume from the Nobel prize-winner in five years, this leads the reader back via the London Underground to the world of Irish bogs and barnyards where Heaney’s imagination was first bred.

85 Berlin: The Downfall, 1945 by Antony Beevor (2002) - Readers from Allied countries may have thought of Berlin in 1945 simply in terms of a war ending. They could do so no longer after reading Beevor’s telling recreation of the horror and brutality that devastated the city.

84 Unless by Carol Shields (2002) - In Shields’ last completed novel, a successful writer questions her whole life when her oldest daughter takes to sitting on the street in Toronto with a placard saying “Goodness” around her neck. Soaked with an anguished awareness of mortality.

83 This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War by Drew Gilpin Faust (2008) - A profound, moving book, relevant to all nations and their histories of war. Faust, now the President of Harvard University, writes: “The war’s staggering human cost demanded a new sense of national destiny, one designed to ensure that lives had been sacrificed for appropriately lofty ends.”

94 [Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article510196.ece) by Suketu Mehta (2005) - Bombay found a chronicler to do justice to its teeming spirit in Mehta, a New York-based writer who portrayed the city through the stories of the people who live there.

93 [The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article5053834.ece) by Niall Ferguson (2008) - Ferguson, an historian with an eye for an attention-grabbing subject, was particularly alert here, offering a survey of the influence of financial systems just as the extent of that influence was becoming painfully apparent.

92 [Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article6111725.ece) by Wells Tower (2009) - Set in contemporary America and Viking Denmark, this often blackly comic short-story collection tackles damaged masculinity, violence and fear, in sentences so good you want to cut them out and pin them to the wall.

91 [My Father and other Working-Class Football Heroes](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article567027.ece) by Gary Imlach (2005) - Nick Hornby paved the way for sport to be considered proper memoir territory, but where *Fever Pitch* partly played it for laughs, Imlach’s wonderfully sensitive trawl through the career of his late father, a former professional footballer, triumphantly explored bigger themes.

90 [Twilight](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article4675002.ece) by Stephenie Meyer (2005) - Meyer’s books about the schoolgirl Bella Swan and her passion for Edward Cullen, the tortured “vegetarian” vampire (doesn’t bite humans), have taken the world’s pre-pubescent females by storm. Basically, he’s a fanged Mr Darcy, with all sexual threat surgically removed.

89 [The Enchantress of Florence](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article3728200.ece) by Salman Rushdie (2008) - She is a mysterious, beautiful woman in Renaissance Florence, believed to possess magical powers. Large in scale, epic in tone, Rushdie’s rich story also features Machiavelli and the Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great.

88 [Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_reviews/article1591180.ece) by Ruth Scurr (2006) - How does an idealistic young man become a tyrannical monster? It is a question that has rarely been addressed with such panache as in this colourful account of Robespierre and his revolutionary era.

82 [Born Yesterday: The News as a Novel](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article3731587.ece) by Gordon Burn (2008) - Burn’s last novel takes the events of the summer of 2007 — Madeleine McCann, Gordon Brown, a touching glimpse of a frail Margaret Thatcher — and transforms them into a fictional collage, rejected by some critics as a stunt but applauded by others as a dissection of our media-saturated society.

81 [The Emperor’s Children](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article618596.ece) by Claire Messud (2006) - A sharp, elegant, sophisticated portrait of three smart New Yorkers about to hit 30, just before 9/11. Danielle is a TV producer, Julius is a freelance critic and poor “Bootie” has hopelessly dropped out. A meditation on modern morality.

80 [The White Tiger](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article3677773.ece) by Aravind Adiga (2008) - Winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2008, Adiga’s first novel takes the form of letters to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier, from Balram Halwai, the Bangalore businessman who is the “White Tiger” of the title. A penetrating and ebullient portrait of the “new India”. Aravind Adiga on The White Tiger “The White Tiger is set in one of the fastest-changing societies on Earth — modern-day India — but the story it tells is an old one: of a man’s quest to be free. One afternoon I was in the zoo in New Delhi, and saw a white tiger in its cage, and I thought, ‘A man who is prepared to do anything for his freedom — sacrifice his family, kill another man — would be as rare as that animal”

79 Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth by Chris Ware (2000) - The bleak, beautiful story of an awkward middle-aged man’s trip to meet his father for the first time is told in painstaking, diagrammatic strips, rewriting the linear comics rule-book. *The New Yorker*called it the “first formal masterpiece of [the] medium”.

78 [Giving up the Ghost](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article874568.ece) by Hilary Mantel (2003) - At last, with the awarding of the 2009 Man Booker Prize to her novel *Wolf Hall*, came widespread recognition for one of our finest novelists. She is no less accomplished in nonfiction, as this evocative, moving and often painful memoir demonstrates.

77 Collected Poems by Michael Donaghy (2009) - A posthumous collection of the formally brilliant but naturally playful poems of the Bronx-born Irishman who made his literary reputation in Britain. His premature death in 2004 deprived the world of poetry of one of its most charismatic and ardent advocates.

76 England in Particular: A Celebration of the Commonplace, the Local, the Vernacular and the Distinctive by Sue Clifford and Angela King (2006) - From Abbeys to Zigzags, this compendium is more than just a celebration of the English landscape; it is also a manifesto for opposing the forces that threaten local diversity and distinctiveness.

75 The Damned Utd by David Peace (2006) - A serious novel about the Beautiful Game, set in the dark days of the 1970s. The late, great Brian Clough takes over at Leeds United, pitting his wits against an ageing, warring team — it’s them or him. Members of Cloughie’s family complained about his fictionalisation.

74 War Music by Christopher Logue (2001) - An action-packed poetic adaptation, *War Music* brings the bravura imagery and fast-paced drama of the cinema to Homer’s great classic. As *The Iliad* is brought to idiomatic modern life, Logue encourages readers to reconnect with their deepest literary heritage.

73 [Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article675157.ece) by Haruki Murakami (2005) - The stories of this Japanese master are sometimes little more than glimpses of a single image, a single moment — but so loaded with meaning that it speaks volumes.

72 True History of the Kelly Gang by Peter Carey (2001) - Carey skilfully retells the story of this mythological Australian gangster in his own rough words, put down for his baby daughter so that she may know “the injustice we poor Irish suffered”.

71 Experience by Martin Amis (2000) - Amis’s memoir had an emotional charge not always associated with his writing. At its heart were two wrenching losses: of his father, Sir Kingsley Amis, and of his cousin, Lucy Partington, a victim of the serial killer Frederick West.

70 The PowerBook by Jeanette Winterson (2000) - Winterson sports with the multiple realities of cyberspace, threading playful notions of virtuality into history. Deborah Warner adapted it for the National Theatre’s stage in 2002.

69 My Name is Red by Orhan Pamuk (2001) - Pamuk won global stardom with this seething portrait of 16th-century Turkey, centre of the Ottoman Empire as it starts to decay. It’s a love story, and a murder mystery, while ripples from the European Renaissance question the old traditions.

68 Out Stealing Horses by Per Petterson (2005) - An ageing loner recalls a childhood summer in Norway. In 1948, 15-year-old Trond is staying in a remote cabin with his father. His friend invites him to “borrow” a neighbour’s horses — but he’s keeping a frightful secret. Superb Scandinavian noir.

67 [The Kindly Ones](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article5772123.ece) by Jonathan Littell (2009) - This huge, brilliant book about an incredibly nasty SS officer named Maximillian Aue won the super-prestigious Prix Goncourt, but offended some who felt that it was too soon to enter such a mind.

66 [Cloud Atlas](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1028485.ece) by David Mitchell (2004) - An awesome work of ventriloquism in which six separate narratives, in six different genres — from the circuitious journal of an American notary in the 1850s to the clone rebellion of a dystopian future — form intricate, interlocking patterns.

65 [Peeling the Onion](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article1904921.ece) by Günter Grass (2007) - The conscience of postwar German letters describes his early years, during which he joined the Hitler Youth and fought with the Waffen SS. Some could not forgive him, while others applauded his honesty; no one questioned his literary stature.

64 Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times edited by Neil Astley (2002) - Offering poetry as a form of therapy, this varied and versatile anthology compiled by Neil Astley led thousands to discover in contemporary poetry a source of rapture and solace that was of relevance to their modern life.

63 The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature by Steven Pinker (2002) - No science writer can match Pinker for verve and wide-ranging erudition. In *The Blank Slate*he brings those gifts to bear on the nature v nurture debate, providing an exhilarating demolition of ideologically blinkered theories.

62 Fingersmith by Sarah Waters (2002) - You sometimes feel that Waters is busking the period detail but her world of Victorian thieves’ kitchen, Gothic houses and lunatic asylums becomes wholly convincing. The illicit passion between the two heroines grows stealthily while the plot twists keep you surprised right up to the final page. Sarah Waters on Fingersmith “Fingersmith grew out of my mania for a certain kind of Victorian novel: namely, the ‘sensation’ novel, with its madly convoluted plots and melodramatic characters. It was a wonderful book to write, and seems to be the novel of mine that readers most enjoyed. I wish I could have the pleasure of writing it all over again”

61[The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1056586.ece) (2004) - A brilliantly plotted tale of an outsider who finds himself sitting at the high table of Thatcherism. His young turks have a high — and gay — old time while the twin shadows of Aids and of being found out loom over them.

60 Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed by Jared Diamond (2005) - In the decade of 9/11, the credit crunch and environmental anxieties, we all began to worry about our futures. This is the book that explained most learnedly why previous societies had come unstuck.

59 [Moondust: In Search of the Men Who Fell to Earth](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article383053.ece) by Andrew Smith (2005) - Smith set out to meet all the men who had travelled to our nearest neighbour in the solar system, weaving a deft and moving story, reflecting on his own life, and the astronauts’ lives, lived in the shadow of the Moon.

58 Dart by Alice Oswald (2002) - Hailed as an heir to Ted Hughes, Oswald throws the windows of the imagination wide open to the freshness and feeling of her wild Dartmoor world as she traces the course of the River Dart from its source to the sea.

57 [Fleshmarket Close](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article485176.ece) by Ian Rankin (2004) - Rankin’s dark, gothic Edinburgh is as much the star as his hero, the endearingly seedy Inspector Rebus. A murdered illegal immigrant draws Rebus into a centre for asylum seekers, while his sidekick is forced to get friendly with a rapist.

56 If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things by Jon McGregor (2002) - McGregor’s portrait of a London street over the course of a single day invests the ordinary with magic, and builds to a cataclysmic ending that makes surprising sense of everything.

55 [Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad’s Green Zone](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_reviews/article1513222.ece) by Rajiv Chandrasekaran (2007) - One of the most telling critiques of the US strategy in Iraq was not a political exposé but this portrait of a US haven in Baghdad. Chandrasekaran showed, in appallingly comic detail, a regime in chaos.

54 [Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1010365.ece) by Lynne Truss (2003) - Every so often there comes along a book that we all feel we have to read to be better educated. Rarely are such books as beguiling as Truss’s punctuation guide, which, amazingly, made us laugh while we learnt about semi-colons.

53 [Wolf Brother](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article470838.ece) by Michelle Paver (2004) - The first volume of a children’s series set in the woods and waterways of a superbly realised Stone Age Europe, in which a boy and wolf who have learnt to communicate with each other are thrust into all sorts of corporeal and magical danger.

52 Youth by J. M. Coetzee (2002) - It has been called “portrait of the artist as a young drudge”. The protagonist leaves his native South Africa for London and gets a dull job. It’s a wonderful reconstruction of the powerlessness and frustration of youth, and the making of a writer’s mind.

51 Home by Marilynne Robinson (2008) - A sequel to the acclaimed *Gilead*, and winner of the 2009 Orange Prize, this tells of the Rev Robert Boughton and his adult children, the devoted daughter Glory, and the “prodigal” son, Jack — now coming home to face up to the sadness of time passing.

50 No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies by Naomi Klein (2000) - As branding became the buzzword for every corporation, Klein bemoaned the corporations’ increasing influence and the commodification of so many aspects of our lives.

49 [The Ghost by Robert Harris](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article2548530.ece) (2007) - Harris’s tale of a ghostwriter digging too deep into a former Prime Minister’s past is a high-class thriller. The ending creates some distance between Harris’s couple and T. and C. Blair, but this is still an excoriating “Dear John” letter to a leader and a movement with feet of clay.

48 [A Short History Of Nearly Everything](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/science/eureka/article6901167.ece) by Bill Bryson (2003) - Bryson, author of bestselling comic travelogues, bravely journeyed beyond his familiar territory to attempt a layperson’s guide to science.He manages to convey such subjects as the origins of the Universe with integrity, and without sacrificing his familiar humour.

47 [Collected Poems of Ted Hughes](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6831226.ece) (2003) - The memorial tome of a great, raw talent, this volume remembers the magnificent, untamed presence that, perched alone on its crag, brooded over the landscape of postwar British poetry.

46 [Middlesex](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1161941.ece) by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002) - An American epic concerning three generations of the Greek Stephanides family and their lives in Detroit. Calliope is a girl with no breasts and a forest of unwanted hair who finds that s/he is a hermaphrodite — raising questions about sexuality and gender.

45 London: The Biography by Peter Ackroyd (2000) - London’s past and present intermingle in much of Ackroyd’s work; the present is merely an overlay on a past that still breathes amid the city landscape.

44 [Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_extracts/article6879237.ece) by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner (2005) - One formula for bestsellerdom is to coin a new term that defines looking at a subject in a surprising and stimulating new way. It’s much easier to describe than to achieve, but the economist Levitt and the journalist Dubner manage it in this witty exploration of economic forces.

43Thursbitch by Alan Garner (2003) - In 1755 Jack Turner freezes to death in the snow near Macclesfield, the print of a woman’s shoe beside him; Sal, a geologist, explores that land two centuries later.

42 [Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article639274.ece) (2006) - Bechdel, previously known for her cult comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in 2006 produced a memoir about her relationship with her father, a funeral director and closet homosexual. Intricately and elegantly written and drawn, it was a further milestone in the triumphant march of the graphic novel. Alison Bechdel on Fun Home “Of course I’m delighted that Fun Home has met with such success, but it still strikes me as very unlikely that an odd, cerebral story about a lesbian and her closeted gay suicidal mortician father would have struck a chord with anyone but me”

41 [The Secret Scripture](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article3857416.ece) by Sebastian Barry (2008) - Roseanne McNulty — the Irish centenarian who tells her heartbreaking story of struggle and exile in the prejudice-riven Sligo of the 1930s — is one of literature’s great narrators; a bright, beautiful, living voice. Sebastian Barry on The Secret Scripture: “The book had its origin in the forgotten and occluded fate of a great-aunt. The central joy of the progress of the book for me, now with over 500,000 sales in the UK and Ireland, is that a woman who had no friends at all, now rather wonderfully has thousands, one reader’s letter describing her thus: ‘…I count her now a friend, as close a friend as ever I had”

40 [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6335669.ece) *trans* Simon Armitage (2007) - One of the freshest and most spirited voices in contemporary poetry turns his attention to a Middle English text, forging a richly alliterative translation recalling the wonder of the original while adding a modern touch.

39 [Runaway by Alice Munro](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article510180.ece) (2005) - Munro’s tenth short story collection is a pitch- perfect meditation on circumscribed lives and the longing for escape.

38 The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression by Andrew Solomon (2001) - Soloman has referred to his book as an “atlas of depression”, for he travelled to see how different cultures treat this mysterious illness. It is wide-ranging, open-minded and useful.

37 William Trevor: The Collected Stories (2009) - Trevor’s prose-poems of love and loss, usually set in the provincial Ireland of the recent past, are our nearest equivalent to the short stories of Chekhov; each one is a pearl.

36 [How I Live Now](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/books_group/article536529.ece) by Meg Rosoff (2004) - A rich, spiky, teenage New York girl comes to visit her English relatives. When a bomb goes off in London and the coutryside is sealed off, the children are left to survive. A prescient, powerful coming-of-age love story — definitely not just for children.

35 The Arrival by Shaun Tan (2006) - The Australian illustrator Tan delineates the strange, sad experience of immigration in stunning, sepia-toned, exquisitely detailed, wordless panels. An imaginative triumph, and every home should have one.

34 Seabiscuit by Laura Hillenbrand (2001) - Nonfiction that reads like a novel — Hillenbrand gives a masterclass in how to pull off that notoriously difficult trick with her bravura account of the career of the horse that became a symbol of hope for those cut adrift by the Depression in the US.

33 Chronicles: Volume One by Bob Dylan (2004) - Dylans’s deadpan account of his breakthrough on to the Greenwich Village scene is told with all the verbal panache you would expect of the greatest lyric-writer of our era.

32 Everything is Illuminated by Jonathan Safran Foer (2002) - A story written in floridly broken English — the narrator is Ukrainian student Alex Perchov — is interleaved with the author’s own imagining of his grandfather’s origins. Moving, fantastical, ultra-ambitious.

31 The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel (2006) - Mortality haunts these extraordinary, blackly funny stories. Here 20 years’ worth of Hempel’s work is collected — four slim volumes only. She may not be a prolific author but she is a true artist of the story form.

30 The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini (2003) - Afghanistan before the Russian invasion is the setting for a timeless story of betrayal and redemption. Amir, the quiet son of a wealthy businessman, lets down his friend Hassan, the son of a servant, at a crucial moment. Years later he returns to Kabul to make amends.

29 [The Accidental](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article523700.ece) by Ali Smith (2005) - A mysterious, unknown woman crashes into the Norfolk holiday of the Smart family, straining the cracks already present in the golden bowl. Smith turns a well-worn story inside out, with her totally original and deceptively simple style.

28 [The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article3400110.ece) by Alex Ross (2007) - Even people who cannot listen to the work of any composer more modern than Brahms enjoyed this kaleidoscopic survey. Ross eloquently shows 20th-century composers’ works as vivid responses to their times.

27 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004) - Yours for £1,500, though available free to many library users, the new ODNB received a good deal of criticism at publication for alleged factual inaccuracies. Now that the fuss has died down, we can see these 60 volumes as an immense publishing achievement.

26 Bad Blood by Lorna Sage (2000) - This award-winning memoir recalls Sage’s isolated childhood in the Welsh borders during the 1940s and 1950s — a harrowing and humorous recreation of an isolated, austere and sometimes frightening world.

25 The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time by Mark Haddon (2003) - A runaway bestseller hailed as a successor to *The Catcher in the Rye* for its sensitive depiction of an autistic teenager. Christopher is 15, a maths genius with a terror of ordinary social situations, whose investigation of a dog’s death reveals truths about his parents.

24 [Never Let Me Go](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article514753.ece) by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005) - Hailsham appears to be a typical English boarding school, but the students are taught nothing about the outside world. Kathy, a former student, discovers that they are all clones, specially bred to provide spare organs.

23 The 9/11 Commission Report (2004) - Thanks to the internet, this report, a bestseller in book form, probably received wider dissemination than had any previous document of its kind.

22 The Amber Spyglass by Philip Pullman (2000)

The concluding volume of Pullman’s trilogy — *His Dark Materials* — is not the finest. But it is the culmination of a stunning achievement, and it was the first “children’s” book to win Whitbread Book of the Year.

21 [The Plot Against America](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article487910.ece) by Philip Roth (2004)

A peculiar, chilling fantasy. In an alternative America, the Aryan supremacist and aviator Charles Lindbergh becomes President in 1940 and persecution of the Jews begins — as narrated by an alternative Philip Roth.

20 White Teeth by Zadie Smith (2000) - This dazzling first novel became a classic as soon as it appeared. No voice like Smith’s had yet been heard — clever, wise, street-smart and riotously inventive.

19 The Corrections by Jonathan Franzen (2001) - Franzen is the author who famously turned down Oprah. He could afford to. The novel is a triumph, exploring the fragmentation of one middle-class family as they gather for a Midwestern Christmas — ailing, embittered parents and their unsatisfactory adult children.

18 Bad Science by Ben Goldacre (2008) - Goldacre, a hospital doctor, is a witty debunker of all forms of bad science: quack medicines, ropey dietary theories, incompetent reporting. At a time of increasing credulity, he is a tonic.

17 [Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/children/article2139573.ece) by J. K. Rowling (2007)

The final adventure in the most successful series of all time — Harry, now a teenager, helped by his Hogwarts mates Ron and Hermione, vanquishes the Dark Lord and his minions, avenges his dead parents and lives happily ever after.

16 Rapture by Carol Ann Duffy (2005) - An intimate and emotionally frank collection of love poems that, following the course of a love affair from first spark through ecstatic conflagration to final burn-out, probably did a lot to earn its author her appointment as first female laureate.

15 [The God Delusion](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article1779771.ece) by Richard Dawkins (2006) - Dawkins showed that you could be a bestseller with a book positing a negative. His witheringly argued treatise against the notion of divine creation made him the poster boy for atheists, the thinker whose arguments every religious person must address.

14 [Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6028341.ece) by Azar Nafisi (2003) - Nafisi’s reading group, set up in Tehran in the 1990s, was an assertion of identity and freedom. Her book offers a depiction of a society in a time of war and a celebration of literature. Azar Nafisi on Reading Lolita in Tehran “People often say, what can we do for Iranians? The point implicit in my book was: Look at what these young Iranians are doing for you. They are reminding you of the best in your own culture, and showing you how through imagination one can connect”

13 Austerlitz by W. G. Sebald (2001) - Sebald’s masterpiece: the story of a man’s search for his lost history. Austerlitz comes to England in 1939 on the kindertransport. Raised by a Welsh minister who tells him nothing about his real family, he returns to his birthplace 50 years later.

12 A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius by Dave Eggers (2000) - With this modestly titled calling card, the most influential young author of the decade announced his arrival. As well as writing books and screenplays, Eggers has been, as editor of the journal and imprint McSweeney’s, the centre of a literary coterie.

11 [War and Peace](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article2883435.ece) by Leo Tolstoy, in a new translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (2007) - The greatest novel in the world is given new life by the remarkable translating team who have already blown the dust off Dostoevsky; if there is one essential desert island book, this is it — the literary equivalent of digital remastering.

10 The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown (2003) - A murder in the Louvre, and the clues are all hidden in the works of Leonardo. Some love it, some hate it (see our worst of the decade article), but you can’t deny that its mix of conspiracy, riddles and action dominated the decade.

9 Atonement by Ian McEwan (2001) - A foolish act of bravado and a simple act of conceit at a 1930s house party combine to spoil three lives. Can amends be made? You either love or hate the postmodern twist at the end, but you cannot deny the brilliance of the descriptive set-pieces.

8 Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth by Margaret Atwood (2008) - From Scrooge to Faustus, the Canadian seer’s fascinating examination of debt, balance and revenge in history, society and literature is essential reading for those curious about the breeding ground for our current financial turmoil.

7 Life of Pi by Yann Martel (2002) - Martel was an unknown when his compelling, amusing, eerie fable won the Man Booker Prize: the novel remains the bestselling Booker winner yet, and deservedly so. With a hero named after a swimming pool and a tiger named Richard Parker, this a book like no other. Yann Martel on Life of Pi “I prepared Life of Pi in the quiet of my creative kitchen, thinking it was a delicious meal but worried that no one would join me. Were there readers out there willing to give animals and gods serious consideration? Well, Pi has proved to be a roaring feast. So many people have joined me at the table. And I’m grateful for that. It’s no fun cooking just for yourself. Food is to be shared”

6 The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference by Malcolm Gladwell (2000) - By identifying the points at which trends and goods graduated from specialist tastes to mass-market phenomena, Gladwell established himself in the lucrative role of anatomist of contemporary success.

5 Suite Française by Irène Némirovsky (2006) - Its astonishing rediscovery more than 40 years after Nemirovsky’s death in Auschwitz should not overshadow that the two novellas here are miniature masterpieces. In the first the veneer of civilisation is stripped from a group of Parisians fleeing the advancing Germans, while the second is a moving tale of forbidden love across the divide of war.

4 Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers *trans* Robert Bringhurst (2002) - One hundred years ago Ghandl and Skaay, two great native poets of the northwest coast of Canada, spoke their stories aloud; Bringhurst’s translations and analysis bring a lost world brilliantly to life.

3 [Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article2391537.ece) by Barack Obama (2004)
The book that revealed Barack Obama as not just an ambitious politician, but also as an eloquent writer and deep thinker. The fascinating story of his early life, first published in 1995, was reissued in 2004 and became a worldwide bestseller as momentum for the presidency built.

2 [Persepolis](http://www.google.co.uk/url?q=http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1134258.ece&ei=-ZX9SsK5EIGK4Qax2pSEDA&sa=X&oi=nshc&resnum=1&ct=result&cd=2&ved=0CAoQzgQoAQ&usg=AFQjCNH65UbwIldLSVkU0beTNLXsqn0kRQ) by Marjane Satrapi (2003) - With its feisty, irresistible heroine and shapely, naive style, Satrapi’s comic-book account of her childhood during the Islamic Revolution in Iran is hugely enjoyable — and an essential, humanising eye-opener on a little-understood country. *From an interview with Oprah Winfrey, 2007*

1 [The Road by Cormac McCarthy](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article6918902.ece) (2006) - Cormac McCarthy’s gripping, shattering novel walks in a long line of tradition. Mary Shelley tried her hand at the literature of post-apocalypse with The Last Man, published in 1826; Russell Hoban’s 1980 novel, Riddley Walker, sets the aftermath of doom in Canterbury. The Road’s wilderness — coming to the cinema in January — is an American one: blasted, ruined, destroyed by an unnamed calamity that has scorched the Earth with biblical fury and lit McCarthy’s prose with holy fire. In this awful landscape walk a father and his young son, treading towards a future where it would seem there could be none. McCarthy has always been a poet of extremity; his earlier novels stripped romance from the myth of the frontier. The Road is stripped back even farther, its father and son the near-sole survivors of what might be called humanity; the book’s narrative is simply that of their survival. There are respites from their suffering —- a cache or two of unspoilted tinned food —- but more often there is horror; this is existence pared to the bone. For this reason, it is McCarthy’s language that must carry the book, and so it does, triumphantly, its Hemingway-like concision shot through with cadences that sometimes recall the sprung rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins. The Road is our book of the decade; but it will outlast that judgment, too. It is a work of force and dark brilliance, a perfect expression of the early 21st-century’s terrors —- and of the hope we must all have that we shall not destroy ourselves, nor yet be destroyed. Erica Wagner Cormac McCarthy on The Road
Four or five years ago, [my son John] and I went to El Paso, and we checked in to the old hotel there. And one night, John was asleep, it was probably about two or three o’clock in the morning, and I went over and just stood and looked out the window at this town. There was nothing moving but I could hear the trains going through, a very lonesome sound. I just had this image of what this town might look like in 50 or 100 years. I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid to waste, and I thought a lot about my little boy. So I wrote two pages, and that was about the end of it. And then about four years later I realised that it wasn’t two pages of a book, it *was* a book, and it was about that man, and that boy.

The 5 Worst Books Of The Decade

The books that were, in the opinion of our panel, the most egregious examples of the author’s art

5. Dylan’s Visions of Sin by Christopher Ricks (2003) - It’s not that Dylan’s lyrics aren’t worth studying, or that Ricks lacks the intellect for the job. It’s just that this “love letter to Dylan” is as embarrassing to read as any adolescent epistle if you’re not in the relationship yourself.

4. Vernon God Little by D. B. C. Pierre (2003) - This ugly, lazy debut about a school massacre in Texas won the Man Booker Prize in 2003: the judges said that it was a “coruscating black comedy reflecting our alarm but also our fascination with America”; we beg to differ.

3. Being Jordan by Katie Price (2004) - The book that made possible not only her “literary” career, but also those of such figures as Jade Goody and Kerry Katona. Highly influential, but not in a good way.

2. The Secret by Rhonda Byrne (2006) - Telling us that we need to think positive thoughts, we could accept. But to dress up the advice with inadequately assimilated quantum theories, along with references to Jesus, Newton, Beethoven and Einstein: this was unbearable.

1. The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown (2003) - “Renowned curator Jacques Sauniere . . .” not the intro to a tabloid news story, but to the bestselling adult novel of the decade. The irrelevance of prose quality to sales has surely never been so starkly revealed.