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Recommended Books 2010

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Fiction

The Big Bang Symphony: a novel of Antarctica
Bledsoe, Lucy Jane.

This is the story of three women working in Antarctica whose lives quickly become entangled. Alice is working as a cook, Mikala is an artist, and Alice is embarking on graduate work. This is a compelling tale of their challenging and emotional time in the epic setting of the bleak Antarctic.

My Name is Memory
Brashares, Ann

Daniel has lived many lives over many centuries and unlike most other people, he recalls all of his lives and is haunted by his one love, Sophia. Sophia has also had many lives but doesn't recall them so Daniel must try to find her in each incarnation and convince her that she is truly his soul mate. It's a wonderfully entertaining romantic story with an intriguing premise.

Remarkable Creatures
Chevalier, Tracy

Elizabeth Philpot and her sisters are unmarriageable but well-educated and take up the unlikely hobby of fossil hunting. When a local woman they have sought to educate makes an extraordinary find, the women find they are excluded from recognition by the scientific community. Based on a true story, Remarkable Creatures shines a light on the lives of strong, intelligent women. We find it both fascinating and satisfying

The Passage
Cronin, Justin

In the near future, a secret government experiment goes awry when the subjects escaped, taking their super-human and vampire-like powers with them. A hundred years later, an enclave of humans hides out, awaiting their extinction when a child enters the fortress, bringing with her some powers that just may save them all. Think Stephen King and Michael Crichton when considering this unputdownable post apocalyptic tale

Room
Donoghue, Emma.

A finalist for the Man Booker Award, Donoghue gives us the perspective of a five year old boy who, with his mother, is held captive. Since the boy was born there and knows no other life, he doesn't understand that their tiny prison is unusual. When his mother comes up with an idea for escape, she must balance the question of their safety with the knowledge that her son must experience the larger world.

Eye of the Red Tsar
Eastland, Sam

Once a close aide to Tsar Nicholas II, Pekkala is held prisoner in the decade after the assassination of the Romanov family. Now Pekkala is offered his freedom if he can find the Romanovs' killers, find the royal child reputed to have escaped, and help Stalin change history. This is a riveting historical thriller, and even better, it's a debut novel.

Fall of Giants
Follett, Ken

Best known for his thrillers, Follett entranced us with a story with containing significant historical detail in Pillars of the Earth and its sequel. Now he brings us an entirely new historical saga dealing with five families as they struggle through events of the early 20th century. This hefty novel is the first in a trilogy, and the critics loved it!

Juliet
Fortier, Anne

Julie's beloved adoptive mother, Aunt Rose, died without leaving Julie a penny. Instead, Julie's twin inherited Rose's estate while Julie received only a key to a safe deposit box in Siena, Italy that had belonged to Julie's mother. What Julie finds in Italy involves a quest to solve a historical puzzle, as well as an unexpected romance. Fortier marvelously weaves together the contemporary and historical stories.

Freedom
Franzen, Jonathan

This is the book of the year. The critics all raved about it. Touted as the great American novel, Franzen's latest is the story of a once-perfect family that is now coming unglued. Patty and Walter were envied. They did all the right things, made the right choices, fed their child granola, and did their part to save the earth, so what went wrong? Franzen twists this family in a darkly humorous fashion as he explores the meaning of freedom and the choices we make.

The Lady Matador's Hotel
Garcia, Cristina

Six people's lives intersect in surprising and sometimes explosive ways over the course of a week in the Hotel Miraflor, located in the capitol city of an unnamed Central American country. The internal and external battles of these characters take place against the turbulent political backdrop of the country. Vibrant, rich, and detailed, the characters are well-developed and the atmosphere is sultry and immersive.

The Cookbook Collector
Goodman, Allegra

A collector of rare books in the Silicon Valley finds herself at odds with her tech-savvy highly motivated and successful sister. Goodman's latest is part character study and part exploration of the choices we make and the resultant trade-offs. It's got humor, romance, a multi-layered plot, and deals with larger issues. It's a notable and appealing story.

Ape House
Gruen, Sara

Sara Gruen wowed us with Water for Elephants, a wildly entertaining story. She's done it again with her latest, the story of a woman in charge of an ape research center and her relationship with the apes. Human-animal communication is a fascinating subject, and Gruen's bonobos are all-too-human and are better people than many humans who populate the novel. With thriller elements, this one is a page turner.

Horns
Hill, Joe

Son of author Stephen King, Joe Hill doesn't trade on his father's success and he truly doesn't need to. In his latest, a murder suspect who was never convicted wakes up one morning after cursing God to discover that a pair of horns has sprouted on his forehead. Everyone meets is subsequently compelled to confess all of their darkest thoughts and desires to him. Using his new abilities, he tries to track down the real murderer and take his own special revenge. Hill has a hit with this exploration of good and evil.

Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War
Marlantes, Karl.

This is the story of a marine lieutenant and his fellow soldiers who are dropped into a mountainous area of Vietnam. They quickly find that not only are they fighting the enemy, but also nature in the form of terrain, weather, insects, and tigers. This is a gritty look at young men coming of age under terrifying circumstances and is a memorable novel of war.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet
Mitchell, David

Mitchell presents a vividly detailed historical romance that takes place in 18th century Japan. Jacob, a clerk, has come to Japan to earn his fortune so he can return to Europe to win the hand of his beloved. When he falls instead for a Japanese woman, everything changes. This novel rotates perspective between several characters, giving us a fuller view of this fascinating historical era.

The Invisible Bridge
Orringer, Julie

There were many excellent debut novels out this year, and this one is notable for its unique view of the Holocaust. Orringer shows us how Hungary treated its Jewish citizens In a gripping story of Hungarian brothers who go their separate ways just as war approaches. Many area book groups have covered his title over the past year and it is that type of book that you'll want to read and discuss. It's unforgettable.

The Scent of Rain and Lightning
Pickard, Nancy

Here's a change of pace. Call it a modern western, if you will; it's the story of a young woman whose father was murdered years earlier at the same time her mother disappeared. Living at her grandparent's cattle ranch, she is shocked to discover the convicted killer has been released pending a new trial and is on his way back to the small town in which both families reside. Pickard tells an entrancing story of secrets that haunt a small town

Portobello
Rendell, Ruth

Can we just say we all love Ruth Rendell and leave it at that? Rendell's artful crime fiction is not to be missed by readers of mystery or suspense. This latest story takes place in London and reveals a host of unusual characters brought together by bizarre situations that result in unintended consequences for them all. This is an excellent example of Rendell's brand of psychological suspense.

Private Life
Smiley, Jane

Pulitzer winning Smiley has shown us time and again the range of her talent. In Private Life, it takes us on the journey of an old maid who marries at age 27. Her husband is a successful and admired naval officer and scientist who has his enemies who also harbors a dark side. The historical elements of the novel, post-Civil War to World War II, provide a balance to this study of a woman's life as the wife of a difficult man in challenging times.

Once a Spy
Thomson, Keith

A former spy and now an Alzheimer's patient, Drummond, has wandered away from home. When his gambler son tries to return him, they discover the house has been blown up. Drummond remembers enough to know how to hotwire a car and begin a very long chase in which they must dodge spies from various countries while trying to figure out who is after them and why. This debut delivers.

Nonfiction

At Home: A Short History Of Private Life
Bryson, Bill.

This is serendipity at its best. Bryson takes us on a tour of his old house and along the way gives us historical and sociological lessons as they come to him from his observations of the rooms and the items they contain. It's not as much a story as a collection of thoughts as only Bryson can think them.

Let's Take the Long Way Home
Caldwell, Gail

Gail writes of her friendship with Caroline Knapp. Both single writers, they came to know each other through their love of their dogs and they quickly became best friends. Gail captures the meaning of their friendship as well as her grief as her friend struggles with and dies from lung cancer. Caldwell's writing evokes strong emotions as she explores the beauty of their friendship.

I Remember Nothing: and Other Reflections
Ephron, Nora

In essays, Ephron shares her outlook on contemporary life and her experiences with career, with men, and with being of a certain age. She's funny, forthright, and her stories strike a chord with all women.

The Good Soldiers
Finkel, David

Washington Post staff writer Finkel captures the daily life of soldiers in Iraq as he follows an American infantry battalion for one year. His detail in capturing not only the daily routines of combat soldiers but also the multitude of dangers they face is what makes this book especially memorable.

War
Junger, Sebastian

In another journalist goes to war tale, Junger follows a platoon through 15 months in the most dangerous outpost in Afghanistan. What makes this one stand out is the excellent companion documentary and Junger's engaging style. This author of The Perfect Storm, shows us again just how compelling nonfiction can be

The Big Short: Inside The Doomsday Machine
Lewis, Michael

Here's an examination of the financial crisis in clear language. Lewis takes the time to explain what happened in enough detail that it's very understandable, yet not so much that it becomes a textbook. This author of The Blind Side has another winner on his hands with this latest

Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard
Murray, Liz

With drug-addicted parents, Liz had to fend for herself by age 15, often riding the subway all night in an effort to stay warm. This inspiring story takes us from Liz's early unsettling days through her decision to make a better life for herself and culminates in her graduation from Harvard. Readers who enjoyed The Glass Castle will appreciate this similarly inspiring tale.

Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void
Roach, Mary

Roach has a way of taking unusual scientific subject matter and turning it into a humorous exploration of topics we may never have considered. In her latest, Roach takes us on a journey to Mars, exploring the ways that the human body is impacted by such a voyage. You'll find some amusement along with some truly indelicate descriptions. Roach makes science fun.

Making Toast
Rosenblatt, Roger

The Rosenblatts were empty nesters living in their dream home when their accomplished physician daughter died leaving young children behind. The Rosenblatts never hesitated in offering their assistance to their grieving son-in-law including moving into his home and helping care for his children. This book is about love and loss and grief and hope. It's a wonderfully written and touching story.

Cleopatra: A Life
Schiff, Stacy

This critically acclaimed biography captures the life and times of the last queen of Egypt. Although her life was short by modern standards, there's plenty to cover and Schiff looks to classical sources to discover the truth.

Baby, We Were Meant for Each Other: In Praise of Adoption
Simon, Scott

NPR host Scott Simon and his wife thought their life was complete, until they adopted two tiny infants from China and realized what they had been missing. Simon addresses the challenges and joys of adoption with humor and candor

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Skloot, Rebecca

Henrietta Lacks was a poor farmer who died more than sixty years ago. She lives on, though, through her cells which have been grown and used for scientific research ever since. Her family didn't know of the use of her cells until decades after her death and were never informed that they, themselves were used in testing. Although fortunes were made off of Henrietta's cells, her uncompensated family continues to struggle. Skloot presents a gripping story of bioethics

Just Kids
Smith, Patti

Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe were truly just kids in the New York art scene of the late 1960's. Amidst the craziness surrounding them, they formed a deep bond. More than just a portrait of a relationship, Smith takes us back in time and gives us the insider's tour.

The Autobiography of Mark Twain Vol. 1
Twain, Mark.

Don't let the heft of this volume or the fact that it's just part 1 scare you off. This is more than one brilliant man's story, it's also the story of how this autobiography came to be. The autobiography itself is a few hundred pages. The rest of the 700 plus pages consists of a long introduction and appendices that tell a lot more about the editors of this volume than about Twain. Any fan of Twain will be fascinated with his final thoughts 100 years after the fact

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration
Wilkerson, Isabel

Wilkerson researched this topic for many years before putting her pen to paper. It's the story of post-World War I migration of six million African Americans from the deep south to other large northern or western cities where they didn't have to live in fear. Wilkerson follows the trend as well as several individuals who made this journey into the uncertain and it's a look at a part of our history long overdue.

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