For his 1959 life of the present queen’s grandmother, biographer James Pope-Hennessy compiled indiscreet and sharp-eyed interview notes, now edited by Hugo Vickers into The Quest for Queen Mary (Zuleika): very funny and astute, it provides a loathly feast for royal-watchers. Death and Nightingales by Eugene McCabe (Vintage), published in 1992 and now reissued, is set in rural Ireland in the 1880s: poetic and compelling, with a heart-stopping plot twist, it seems to me a perfect novel.

Jonathan Sacks

One of the most bracing reads of 2018 was Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure (Allen Lane). Confronting the ever-growing constraints on free speech in universities, the authors show how a generation of students is being encouraged to develop mindsets that will do them psychological as well as intellectual harm. Brilliantly written, forcefully argued and highly original in its approach, this report from the front line of student politics is an important warning and a powerful defence of the university as a place where we give a respectful hearing to views with which we disagree.

Jim Crace

Two books (both shortlisted for the 2018 Rathbones Folio Prize, for which I was a judge) reminded me this year of the raw power of well-written, unflinching non-fiction – and also provided an uncomfortable reminder of the emotional limitations of the novel. They were Richard Lloyd Parry’s Ghosts of the Tsunami (Vintage), a magisterial account of the devastating 2011 earthquake and floods, and Richard Beard’s heartfelt, heartbreaking and heartless The Day That Went Missing (Vintage). I also greatly valued and admired Mark Cocker’s wildlife alarm call, Our Place (Jonathan Cape). None of these books were cheerful but all were essential.

Andrew Marr

This year I’ve got particular pleasure out of two new novels. Andrew Miller, known to many of us for Pure, that extraordinary evocation of France on the edge of revolution, returns to roughly the same period in Now We Shall Be Entirely Free (Sceptre), about a cavalry officer on the run in Britain during the Napoleonic Wars. It’s scary, mysterious and thoughtful – the world of Jane Austen bespattered by mud, atrocity and driving rain. I also hugely enjoyed Putney by Sofka Zinovieff (Bloomsbury Circus), about sexual obsession in the freethinking 1970s, and the anti-paedophilia world of today. It is beautifully written and genuinely shocking; it’s as if Nabokov had given Lolita eyes and a very clear voice.

Nicola Sturgeon

Normally I’d steer clear of prize winners for my book of the year, figuring that they’re not short of recommendations. But this year’s Man Booker winner, Milkman by Anna Burns (Faber & Faber), is outstanding. It’s the story of a young woman, growing up in 1970s Belfast (though the city, like most of the characters, is not named), struggling to cope with the unwanted sexual attention of a paramilitary. It is an immersive and, at times, deeply unsettling read. It has been described as “difficult”, which is unfair. Rather it is rich and rewarding – and very timely. For those who prefer non-fiction, a quick plug for Leadership: Lessons from the Presidents for Turbulent Times (Viking), Doris Kearns Goodwin’s excellent portrait of the leadership traits of presidents Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

Stephen King

The novel that moved me the most this year (so far) is The Mars Room, by Rachel Kushner (Jonathan Cape). Romy Hall’s experience in the women’s correctional system makes Orange Is the New Black look like the sugar-coated situation comedy it is. The language is brilliantly honed, and there’s a thread of black humour running through a compulsively readable story of women who have fallen through the gaping cracks in American life. And I finally caught up with George Orwell’s Burmese Days (Penguin Modern Classics), a crackling good yarn of life in a British colonial station before the Second World War. This story of one man’s effort – weak but well-meant – to stand up to deeply ingrained racism serves as a kind of measuring stick. If you think we haven’t come a long way in matters of racial equality (there’s a long way to go, granted), this book offers both perspective and hope.
Taking wing: Gregor Törzs’s photograph of a butterfly is one of 300 striking images in Animal: Exploring the Zoological World (Phaidon)
Ed Smith

I greatly enjoyed Sarah Langford’s In Your Defence (Doubleday), an insider’s account of life as a barrister. Justice and the law provide the lens: the subject is really human nature. David Wootton is terrific company throughout The Invention of Science (Allen Lane). It’s an authoritative book on a huge subject, but full of intellectual sparkle and mischief. There is a sense of argument and discovery on every page.

William Boyd

Twentieth-century British painting – a bit like 20th-century British classical music – has always struggled somewhat to hold its own amongst more strident, fashionable and engaged European and transatlantic rivals. Martin Gayford’s magisterial account of British painting from the Second World War to the 1970s should go a very long way to setting the record straight. Modernists and Mavericks: Bacon, Freud, Hockney and the London Painters (Thames & Hudson) is a seminal work: limpidly written, replete with lightly-worn scholarship and unrivalled intimate knowledge, it should make us hold our artistic heads high.

Clive James

As busy as a moribund man can be with my latest book of memoirs, I am pleased that Anne Applebaum’s contribution to global political analysis has insisted on making a wreck of my schedule. Not least because she writes with such clarity, a brain-curdling wreck of my schedule. Not least because she political analysis has insisted on making a record straight. Modernists and Mavericks: Bacon, Freud, Hockney and the London Painters (Thames & Hudson) is a seminal work: limpidly written, replete with lightly-worn scholarship and unrivalled intimate knowledge, it should make us hold our artistic heads high.

Antonia Fraser

Everyone should read A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle by Julian Jackson (Allen Lane) whether they can remember the events concerned or not. It is a remarkable book in which the man widely chosen as the Greatest Frenchman is dissected, intelligently and lucidly, then put together again in an extraordinary fair-minded, highly readable portrait.

The painter and the brush: Lucian Freud features in Martin Gayford’s Modernists and Mavericks

Throughout, the book tells a thrilling story, while in its consideration of Algerian matters it also has significance for present-day events in the Middle East. In the Darkroom by Susan Faludi (Picador) is the remarkable description of one woman coming to terms with her relationship with her father – born a Hungarian Jew, who changes his sex in midlife. It combines reflections on identity with an account of Hungary in the war that is both vivid and horrifying.

Michael Sandel

In Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World (Knopf), Anand Giridharadas lays bare the jargon of ersatz change wielded by “change-making” elites, whose frictionless “win-win” solutions promise to improve the world without disturbing the market-friendly arrangements that keep the winners on top. In Radical Markets: Uprooting Capitalism and Democracy for a Just Society (Princeton), Eric A Posner and E Glen Weyl argue that radically free markets are the antidote for our sclerotic capitalism. Though antithetical to the moral limits of markets I favour, this bold book doesn’t flinch at the implications of truly competitive markets, including Henry George’s idea of a land tax. Finally, Jesse Norman’s splendid Adam Smith (Allen Lane) enlists the great moralist/economist as a critic of much that passes for economics these days.

Henry Marsh

I have reached an age where I tend to forget the books I have recently read, let alone their contents. But I particularly enjoyed Alan Rusbridger’s Breaking News (Canongate) – in places it’s as exciting as a thriller (and the good guys win) but it also gave me a new understanding of the difficulties that now confront good journalism. I did not exactly enjoy reading Mark Cocker’s Our Place (Jonathan Cape) – it filled me with sadness and shame at what has been happening to the English countryside during my lifetime, but it’s essential reading for anybody who cares about the future.

Jon McGregor

Maybe it’s only because I’ve been paying more attention, but this seems to have been a particularly good year for strange and brilliant fiction. (Hooray for Anna Burns!) Wendy Erskine’s first collection, Sweet Home (Stinging Fly Press), is every bit as good as her early stories in the always astute Stinging Fly magazine promised. Melissa Harrison took a 1930s pastoral tale
about the arrival of mechanised agriculture and turned it into a raging fable about the creeping threat of fascism in All Among the Barley (Bloomsbury). Katie Kitamura’s A Separation (Clerkenwell Press) was strange and eerie and stayed under my skin long after I read it. But the book that blew my head wide open this year was Jesse Ball’s Census (Granta), which was intimate and dislocated and funny and sad and like nothing else I have read before. Not enough people have read it. Go and read it.

Olivia Laing

I loved Evolution by Eileen Myles (Grove Press); poems that lope along, chatty, restless and limber. In 1992, Myles ran for US president, and the most heart-stopping poem here is the utopian “Acceptance Speech”: “We will occupy all government buildings and memorials housing and holding and loving the homeless and the sick and the starving. We’ll do what the statue says, you know liberty.” Wouldn’t that be nice than Brexit Britain and Trump’s America? I vote Myles, today and every day. As for rereading, I went on a post-TV binge of Edward St Aubyn’s magisterial Patrick Melrose quintet. I find it frankly terrifying that anyone can see so many shifts in consciousness and social nuance, let alone record them in sentences of such abiding majesty.

Neel Mukherjee

Michelle de Kretser’s The Life To Come (Allen & Unwin), won her a second Miles Franklin Award. Very few novels see through our times with such vision and perspicacity, such wit and compassion, and yet this profound book is thearthiest thing imaginable from that journalistic demand made of literature, that it should “make sense of our times”. It does, but not in any ways that you’d imagine. In non-fiction, I’ve enormously enjoyed and admired Alpa Shah’s careful, rich, sympathetic account of the Maoist insurgency in India, Nightmarch: Among India’s Revolutionary Guerrillas (Hurst); a brave and necessary work.

Sigrid Rausing

I was very taken by the effortless and inven-tive language in Daisy Johnson’s début novel, Everything Under (Jonathan Cape), but the most thought-provoking book I have read this year is probably Cathy Caruth’s anthology Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Johns Hopkins). It’s a 1995 collection of essays by a range of authors from the fields of psychoanalysis and literary and cultural criticism, including the film-maker Claude Lanzmann (Shoah). The frequently mechanical and lifeless nature of traumatised discourse, the question of how you listen and communicate, and the possible moral obligation to resist understanding the perpetrators are some of the themes, but there are others, too, as relevant today as they were then.

Tom Holland

I Am Dynamite!, Sue Prideaux’s biography of Nietzsche (Faber & Faber), achieved the estimable feat of measuring up to its title. A troubled, troubling man is brought brilliantly to life. I also very much enjoyed Sebastian Faulks’s Paris Echo (Hutchinson), a brilliantly plotted and occasionally hallucinatory novel, in which the author’s genius for literary ventriloquism is shown off to startling effect.

Francis Fukuyama

Jonathan Haidt’s The Righteous Mind (Penguin) was insightful on some of the problems we’re having: people aren’t that rational, they decide their affiliations first and then they use their cognitive abilities to justify them, rather than thinking first and deciding later. Larry Bartels’s and Christopher Achen’s Democracy For Realists (Princeton) uses empirical data to make a very similar point about the way that democracies choose policies.

Colin Kidd

Brexit, inevitably, is a central preoccupa-tion, but two brilliant books this year approached the topic indirectly. David Edgerton’s The Rise and Fall of the British Nation (Allen Lane) shows that since the Second World War Britain has dramatically reshaped its economy, though only once with conspicuous success. It can be – and has been – done, but Edgerton wouldn’t start from here. Robert Saunders in Yes to Europe! The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain (Cambridge) describes in sprightly detail how an apathetic and insular electorate was won round to the cause of Europe. Remainers and soft Brexiters have much to learn from both books; hard Brexiters seem resistant to fact.

AN Wilson

Over the past four years, we have been right to commemorate the First World War, and there have been some wonderful books to help us recognise the sheer horror of it all. It is timely, as we pass the centenary of the Armistice, to have a concise, briskly written survey, month by month, of the whole war, which is what Brigadier Allan Mallinson, who doubles as a military historian and historical novelist, does in Fight to the Finish (Bantam Press). If Mallinson fever grips you, he also published this year The Passage to India (Bantam Press), one of the best in the Matthew Hervey series, set in the post-Napoleonic world.

Kamila Shamsie

Sometimes the slimmest books deliver the heftiest emotional punch, and so it is with Donal Ryan’s From a Low and Quiet Sea (Doubleday). It tells the story of three men, holding back until the ending the connection between them. And in his creation of Farouk, the Syrian doctor wanting to escape from Isis-controlled territory, he shows that the finest novelists can wander far beyond their own lives to bring us intimately and heartbreakingly into the lives of others.

John McDonnell

Rightly so, literature about the First World War has dominated our reading this year. At last the veil was partially lifted on the engagement in the war of members of the armed forces drawn from the then British empire. I hosted in parliament the launch of the republication of the brilliant and moving novel Across the Black Waters by Mulk Raj Anand (Shalimar Books). My hope is that it will lead people to read his masterpiece of social conscience Untouchable. Equally explosive, my anarchist friend, David Graeber, yet again has thrown a hand grenade into the political economy debate with his Bullshit Jobs (Allen Lane), a call to strike out for freedom from meaningless work.

Melvyn Bragg

Pat Barker’s new novel The Silence of The Girls (Hamish Hamilton) is a tremendous achievement. From her novels set in the First World War we expect work of extraordinary power and this ranks alongside them. Achilles is wonderfully reimagined. Briseis, who tells the story, is an utterly convincing, clever creation. Battles, violence, tenderness and period detail of what is, in effect, a reworking of the Iliad are all completely convincing. It’s a triumph.

Marina Benjamin

I enjoyed strongly voiced work by women this year: Terese Marie Mailhot’s Heart Berries, Olivia Laing’s Crudo, Sarah Moss’s Ghost Wall. I’ve also been haunted by Ceridwen Dovey’s strangely overlooked In the ...
EVENTS

Cambridge Literary Festival 2018

The winter edition of the festival, in association with the New Statesman, is almost upon us. Here are a few highlights.

Saturday 24 November
The NS editor Jason Cowley is joined by the deputy editor of the Spectator, Isabel Hardman, and professor of politics David Runciman to discuss the condition of England and the state of British politics.
Old Divinity School, St John’s College, 10am

Jonathan Coe tells Helen Lewis about his novel of Brexit Britain, Middle England. Palmerston Room, St John’s College, 1pm

Rowan Williams and John Gray in discussion. Palmerston Room, 4pm

The bestselling novelist and activist Elif Shafak talks to Maureen Freely.
Old Divinity School, 5.30pm

The MP and memoirist Alan Johnson and the rock critic David Hepworth bring passion, politics and nostalgia to a discussion of their love of pop music.
The Babbage Lecture Theatre, 7pm

Sunday 25 November
Robin Robertson, the winner of the Goldsmiths Prize for his compelling verse novel The Long Take, talks to Elif Shafak, a judge on the prize, and Tom Gatti.
Old Divinity School, 11.30am

Melissa Harrison, author of the novel All Among the Barley, and Horatio Clare, author of The Light in the Dark: A Winter Journal, talk about nature writing, fiction and the changing seasons.
Old Divinity School, 2.30pm

Sarah Perry and Sarah Moss talk about the role of myths and history, secrets and lies, in their new novels. Chaired by Alex Clark
Palmerston Room, 4pm

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, authors of The Spirit Level and The Inner Level, talk about the curse of social inequality with Jonn Elledge of the NS.
Old Divinity School, 11.30am

Book tickets on 01223 357851 or visit: cambridgeliteraryfestival.com

THE CRITICS | BOOKS

Garden of the Fugitives (Hamish Hamilton), a complex novel about obsession, guilt, grief and loss, told entirely through epistolary exchanges between two characters who have not spoken in 20 years. I was also impressed by the inventive brio of Sonya Huber’s essays about living with an agonising autoimmune condition, Pain Woman Takes Your Keys (University of Nebraska Press).

Alan Ryan

Both of my books are by young American political theorists, but written for a wide audience. Mere Civility (Harvard) by Teresa Bejan is a work in the history of the limits of free speech. Its hero is Roger Williams, the 17th-century founder of Rhode Island, whose concept of “civility” permitted any amount of blunt speaking, but no persecution. Corey Brettschneider’s The Oath and the Office (WW Norton) is a timely reminder that the US constitution gives the president authority, and is not a series of obstacles to Potus doing just whatever he or she wants. It’s aimed at anyone thinking of running for president…

Geoff Dyer

No book published this year gave me more pleasure than Ben Fountain’s Beautiful Country Burn Again (Canongate), a wide-ranging collection of despatches about the Trump election campaign. Very much in the freewheeling tradition of Hunter S Thompson, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion, it’s a stylistic tour de force and very funny. The big rediscovery this year was Evan S Connell’s Son of the Morning Star (Pimlico), his extraordinary and sprawling account of Custer at Little Big Horn. First published in 1984, it’s every bit as good as – though could hardly be more different to – his classic novel Mrs Bridge.

Roy Hattersley

David Gilmour’s The British in India (Allen Lane) is a work of scholarship that is also a delight to read. The subject – the men and women who, for 300 years, abandoned Britain in favour of India – is, in itself, a guarantee of excitement and intrigue, but Gilmour writes about each character – fortune hunter, missionary or public servant – with a vivid familiarity. Readers who look for a vindication of the Raj or a condemnation of imperialism will be disappointed. What Gilmour offers is the story of extraordinary lives inspired, I suspect, by the same fascination that moved so many Britons to make India their home.

Claire Harman

In a year when several of my favourite novelists produced very disappointing books, it was great to discover Sally Rooney and her immensely skilful and absorbing second novel, Normal People (Faber & Faber). Yes, Rooney is still in her twenties and is writing about her own generation, but her freshness is artful as well as natural, and from the first page of her painfully truthful love story, I felt swept along by her technical mastery and controlling intelligence. Powerful feeling, no sentimentality, and she makes you notice so much, it’s amazing.

Steven Pinker

How many poor people are there in the world, and are their numbers increasing or decreasing? How many times do women have sex in a given week? What’s the proportion of Muslims in your country? How tolerant of homosexuality are your compatriots? How happy are they? Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong! Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think (Flatiron Books) by Hans Rosling, the late Swedish doctor and TED-talk star, with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund – and The Perils of Perception (Atlantic Books) by Bobby Duffy, a former director at the polling firm Ipsos – show how our conceptions of the world are driven by headlines, stereotypes and long-defunct images, rather than ever-more-abundant facts. This pair of light-hearted but data-rich books calibrate our view of the world and explain how our cognitive processes can lead us astray.

Marina Warner

Edward Wilson-Lee’s The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books (William Collins) closes in on Columbus, father and son, in a gripping study of heroic endeavour and family rivalry; it’s a tour de force of sifting through dusty fragments and of vivid biographical storytelling, as well as a delicious, Borroesan dream for all bookworms and lovers of libraries and print ephemera. Among a host of writers returning to the Greek myths this year, Alice Oswald calls out to me most compellingly: in her hallucinatory chorale, Nobody (21 Publishing) she brings to the surface the near-effaced voices of figures – sea nymphs, poets, and nameless ones from the Odyssey, and sets about quietly echoing through them the drowning and the drowned in the Mediterranean today. The sequence’s ethereal lament is matched by watercolour paintings by William Tillyer, his blue washes as blue as her lines.
Chris Patten

Fortunately, Mick Herron seems to write a new Jackson Lamb novel every year. His latest in this series of wonderful and witty books about the more than eccentric head of a branch of MI5, London Rules (John Murray), came out on time. I read the first four of these thrillers in a couple of weeks last year. The latest is well up to Herron’s usual standards. Published earlier, in 2015, was Peter Frankopan’s The Silk Roads (Bloomsbury), a great scholarly history about central and western Asia. It provides the background to many past, present and future disasters.

Emily Wilson

I loved Maria Dahvana Headley’s The Mere Wife (Scribe), a memorably weird and deep retelling of Beowulf as a novel about suburban America, wilderness, PTSD and what it means to be a hero. Tara Westover’s Educated (Windmill Books) has stayed with me for its vivid evocation of a truly terrifying childhood, and its insight into the relationships between education, class and community. I was gripped and enthralled by a novel that came out in 2015: The Country of Ice Cream Star (Vintage) by Sandra Newman: a dystopic, politically acute fantasy whose verbal inventiveness rivals Riddley Walker.

Michael Moorcock

One of Iain Sinclair’s best books, Living With Buildings, Walking with Ghosts: On Health and Architecture (Wellcome Collection) is an illustrated elegy for London’s East End and her brutal architectural experiments. His walks (“defensive magic against illness”) through Le Carbusier’s single successful vertical village in Marseilles, through Mexico City, even in the Outer Hebrides, are described with pithy lyricism. His moving accounts of friends and their complicated relationship to housing estates, hospitals and ancient rural sites, describe our attempts to remain healthy and humane in increasingly hostile environments.

Alexander McCall Smith

Imperialism in all its forms continues to provoke lively debate. This year David Gilmour has made a major contribution to that discussion with his magisterial The British in India (Allen Lane). In this superb book he examines the motivation of British residents of India during the Raj. He looks at what they did, where they lived and how they died. What particularly strikes one is how few they were in number, and how remarkable it was that they governed so vast an area for so long. It is a fascinating story, explored with rigorous scholarship, and intensely readable.

Philip Hoare

Two books catch at our elementally crazy times. Olivia Laing’s Crudo (Picador) draws on her neuro-romantic marriage of heaven to deliver an account of our current hell, as she moves from a Tuscan idyll back to battered Britain; it’s so in-the-moment you’ll forget you aren’t reading about yourself. Horatio Clare’s Icebreaker (Chatto & Windus) takes us to Finland to consider the fragility of our world; his wryly philosophical and wonderfully humorous travelogue crackles and coruscates. From overheated summer to ice-bound waters, both books peer at potential disaster with brilliant wit and exquisite observation. I defy you to put either of them down.

Claire Tomalin

In In Pursuit of Civility by Keith Thomas (Yale), our finest living historian gives a dismayingly entertaining survey of what was held to be civilised behaviour and what barbarous in England between 1500 and 1800. As we colonised the world we claimed to be bringing civilisation, and as we enthused about personal liberty we enslaved Africans. To De Tocqueville, Manchester was a place where civilised man was turned back almost into a savage. A superb book, witty, learned and enlightening. I can’t resist recommending On Tangled Paths by Theodor Fontane (Penguin Classics), the great 19th-century German novelist. It’s a love story set in Berlin, short, sad and told with clarity and humour that make it devastating.

John Bew

Lords of the Desert: Britain’s Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East (Simon & Schuster) by James Barr is a beautifully written and bracing corrective to the idea that the US and UK were friendly partners in the Middle East in the decades after 1945, as opposed to jealous rivals on almost every major issue from Saudi oil to the Suez Canal. Pushing 900 pages, Julian Jackson’s A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle (Allen Lane) shows the art of historical biography alive and well, reminding us that memories of war and fierce patriotism could also be a constructive force in the remaking of postwar Europe.

Michael Brooks

Tim Radford’s The Consolations of Physics (Sceptre) is a love letter to the Voyager space probes. The poetry of their journey stimulated Radford to wax lyrical about the purpose of science. It is a beautiful, moving book that roams through the grand physics of recent decades. For all our knowledge of gravitational waves, the Higgs boson and the details of the planets, Radford can’t help but circle back to our greatest discovery: humanity’s place within the cosmos.

Eugenia Cheng’s The Art of Logic (Profile) is a mathematician’s thought-provoking attempt to lay out the tools of rational
Arguments

THE CRITICS | BOOKS

Alan Johnson

I knew of Christina Patterson as a skilfully probing journalist on the Independent who was great fun to be interviewed by and who shared my love of Larkin. She also wrote the most insightful piece I’ve ever read about my old boss, Gordon Brown. Her moving and funny book, The Art of Not Falling Apart (Atlantic Books) describes with searing honesty what it’s like for a single woman in middle age to lose the one thing that was holding life together – her job. I finally got round to reading Stoner by John Williams (Vintage Classics) in the summer and have found yet another “Best Book I’ve Ever Read”.

John Gray

Lawrence Osborne’s Only to Sleep (Hogarth) features a 72-year-old Philip Marlowe called from a boozy retirement in late Eighties California to investigate the suspicious drowning of a wealthy man and the tangled role of his young widow. A highly distinctive writer who quickly becomes addictive, Osborne recreates Raymond Chandler’s detective tackling one last mystery in the sun and shade of the Mexican borderlands. I loved it. This year a friend alerted me to Marguerite Yourcenar’s The Abyss (1968, published in English in 1984 by Harvill as Zeno of Bruges), the story of the life and death of a freethinking alchemist during the European wars of religion. It’s a masterpiece I’ll surely read again – and again.

Robert Chote

What better than the tale of a seemingly interminable journey that ends in a bloodbath to provide distraction from the Brexit negotiations. Emily Wilson’s bouncy, contemporary and unexpectedly funny translation of The Odyssey (WW Norton) has the “nimble gallop” she admires in the original. A cautionary reminder that even the scruffiest oddball may be a god in disguise.

Slightly closer to the present day, Agrippina by Emma Southon was well worth a £15 pre-publication punt with Unbound. Her lively and intermittently potty-mouthed biography of Nero’s remarkable mother contains fascinating vignettes of Roman life (what to expect on your wedding day) and explores why Roman authors wrote about women in the way that they did. Historical novel, full of literary echoes but with a voice all its own. Lowry plaitstogether a tale of mutiny and murder on the high seas with a sinister story of usurpation set in a 19th-century lunatic asylum. Hermann Melville mated with Wilkie Collin’s Michael Hughes’s Country (John Murray) is the story of the rage of Achilles set in Northern Ireland during the 1996 cease-fire. Achill is an IRA sniper. Henry/Hector is a British officer. Hughes brilliantly reconciles Homeric rhythms with his muscular modern idiom.

Daisy Johnson

My heart will always belong, in part, to short stories and if there is anyone who does short stories well it is Lauren Groff. I remember finding her stories online and reading or listening to them being read and feeling somehow undone by them. Groff says Florida (William Heinemann) is the best thing she has ever done and I have to agree. These are stories infested with heat and darkness, with isolation and grief. Reading them feels the same way walking home at night does, balanced on the edge.

Fiona Sampson

Maggie O’Farrell’s lucid, shocking memoir I Am, I Am, I Am (Tinder Press) recreates 17 moments at which she, or someone close to her, might have died but did not. It plunges us into the pragmatic, daylight matter of mortality: all the more bracingly because this is highly disciplined, consummate writing. O’Farrell is never sentimental. Nor is Elif Batuman in The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People who Read Them (Granta). Batuman’s very different sentimental education is a wryly brilliant portrait of herself as a young Turkish intellectual emerging among American and Uzbek Russianists and rogues.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett

I’ve read two novels with great admiration this year, both of them reworkings of old stories. Elizabeth Lowry’s Dark Water (Riverrun) is an ambitious and hugely enjoyable

Brendan Simms

The history of the immediate past is the hardest to write. Usually, it reads like stale newspapers, with the lack of sources and of perspective screaming redundancy from every page. This is why I found Adam Tooze’s Crashed. How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World (Allen Lane) refreshing. It provides a new perspective on a familiar period, and explains complex processes with enviable clarity. Few will agree with everything he says but nobody can fail to be gripped by this compelling analysis of a global and local meltdown whose political consequences are still being played out.

Gavin Francis

This year the books that have made the deepest impression are new translations of two classics. Gilgamesh Retold by Jenny Lewis (Carcassonne Classics) reworks the ancient epic – it’s innovative, graceful, erudite and utterly unputdownable. And...
Alasdair Gray has cast a spell over Dante’s *Hell* (Canongate), creating (and decorating) a verse translation that is modern, lyrical, yet faithful to the original. Much of the glory (and the misery) of human life is beautifully expressed by these slim volumes, demonstrating that humanity’s central preoccupations – ambition, lust, friendship, grief – haven’t changed in centuries.

**Rowan Williams**

Alan Garner’s memoir of his Cheshire childhood, *Where Shall We Run To?* (Fourth Estate) evokes a startlingly strange world, Hardyesque or even older, although its setting is the 1940s. The writing is pure Garner – spare, allusive, laconic, stone-cut. And, drawing on sources that Garner understands deeply, Hugh Lupton’s *The Assembly of the Severed Head* (Propolis) is an arresting recreation not only of the medieval Welsh tales of the *Mabinogion* but of the world in which they were written down – this is the best retelling of these stories I’ve come across, framed in a historical narrative that conveys very persuasively the physical and social texture of 13th-century life.

**Elif Shafak**

It is increasingly becoming clear that ours is the age of emotions, populism, tribalism and confusion. It is, at the very same time, an age that is witnessing the breakdown in public language. Information spreads fast, but misinformation even faster. How do we navigate our way through this deluge of information? As a novelist I am deeply interested in the use and misuse of language, the loss of words, as well as the silences and taboos in culture. *Enough Said: What’s Gone Wrong with the Language of Politics?* by Mark Thompson (Vintage) is for anyone who cares about words, the battle between truth and falsehood, the future of public space, in short, for those who want to mend our badly broken public language.

**Melissa Benn**

For sheer, satisfying storytelling, I would choose Meg Wolitzer’s *The Female Persuasion* (Chatto & Windus). Wolitzer has an admirable ability to write popular fiction about contemporary lives and politics, never losing the serrated edge of truth while remaining subtly suffused with human generosity. At the heart of the book is the relationship between a lost, idealistic college student and an established, charismatic older feminist (more Gloria Steinem than Germaine Greer), but its broader canvas traces the trajectory of characters whose lives are touched by grace and good fortune, tragedy and treachery, and the redemption that can follow. Wolitzer also captures the ways that feminism has been transformed over the past few decades without ever descending into caricature or feel-good generalities.

**Tracey Thorn**

The first book I read this year turned out to be one of the best – *Love and Trouble* by Claire Dederer (Tinder Press). It’s a memoir about being a middle-aged woman, married with kids, who is hit by a longing for her youthful, wilder self. It’s full of insight into ageing, long-term love and sex, the search for fulfilment and euphoria: “We refused to call it menopause. First of all, it wasn’t that, yet, and second of all, the very term annoyed us. When men have existential crises – when Richard Ford, for instance, limns the male at midlife – it doesn’t get called by some dumb hormonal name. It’s a ‘universal human experience’.” Bang on.

**Ray Monk**

The IPCC’s special report, “Global Warming of 1.5°C”, is essential reading for everyone. It leaves no doubt about how important it is that we keep climate change to 1.5°C rather than allow it to rise to 2°C nor about the enormous scale of the task we face if we are to achieve that. The book I most enjoyed this year, however, is *I am Dynamite!: A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* by Sue Prideaux (Faber & Faber), which in beautifully lucid and engaging prose provides a vivid and compelling account of Nietzsche’s extraordinary life, his amazing fortitude in the face of illness and neglect, and, finally, his heartbreaking descent into madness.

**Craig Raine**

I read *Asymmetry* (Granta) by Lisa Halliday twice. The title refers to the two halves of the book. The first half, “Folly”, is a fictionalised account of Halliday’s affair with Philip Roth. The second half, “Madness”, is about the war in Iraq. The link between them is the Roth figure’s written advice to his much younger lover: “Forget about world affairs. World affairs can take care of themselves.” She ignores this advice – successfully. Halliday can write: a Tempur mattress is like “sinking into a giant slab of fudge”,”camera flashes pop-pop-pop-popped like muzzle fire”; “the rain made a racket like oil frying”. She can describe the super-ordinary: “Back to the wind, Ezra lodged his cane in the groin of his corduroys and struggled with his jacket’s zipper.” And there are some terrific jokes.

**Jason Cowley**

Unsurpassed in the postwar period in Britain as a populariser of philosophy, Bryan Magee is now 88 and lives in one room in a nursing hospital in Oxford. *Ultimate Questions* (Princeton) is his final statement on philosophy. It grapples with the most fundamental questions of all: what does it mean to be human? What are the limits of our knowledge? Magee, an agnostic, is tormented by the “terminally inexplicable” nature of existence. “What I feel about this is a double sense of wonder that the inexplicable is actual,” he writes in this short, haunting and rather beautiful book.

**Gabriel Josipovici**

In *Muck* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) by the Israeli writer Dror Burstein and translated by that fine poet Gabriel Levin, Burstein brilliantly and movingly superimposes Jeremiah’s poetic imprecations against the Israel of his time and the strange trajectory of his career, as described in the biblical book named after him, on Israel’s present-day trials. It could easily fall flat, but in Burstein’s hands it is both hilarious and appalling.

**Helen Lewis**

Pat Barker’s *The Silence of The Girls* (Hamish Hamilton) retells the *Iliad* from the point of view of Briseis, the Trojan woman given as a prize to Achilles. When Agamemnon demands her to replace his own concubine/sex-slave, Achilles goes into a war-defining sulk. In unfussy, lyrical prose, Barker makes the story feel both alien and
familiar; the relationship between her Achilles and Patroclus is particularly moving. In non-fiction, Siva Vaidyanathan’s *Anti-Social Media* (Oxford University Press USA) is the best tech-sceptic book of the year, by an academic who writes like a human. Even better, Vaidyanathan’s insights into the destructive power of Facebook are truly global, taking in Modi’s India and Duterte’s Philippines.

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**Tom Gatti**

In *The Cost of Living* (Hamish Hamilton), Deborah Levy charts the unmaking of a marriage and family home, and the search for a new way to live. This slim memoir is full of wisdom, dry wit and disassembled gender roles, all of which combine in images such as Levy, in a black silk nightgown, a French postman’s jacket and “shaman slippers” wielding a Master Plunger to unblock her basin. There is plenty of dry wit, too, in Kathryn Maris’s *The House With Only an Attic and a Basement* (Penguin), a collection of cool, understated, addictive poems riffing on Aeschylus and Gertrude Stein, drawing on WhatsApp chats and adverts and covering singles cruises, school runs and modern male heroes such as “the P Man”, whose superpower is “launching the careers of mainly female potters”.

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**Andrew Hussey**

I thoroughly enjoyed *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers*, by Elaine Mokhtefi (Verso), for the sense of exhilaration that drives her through an extraordinary series of adventures, just as Algeria is about to become the hippest place on the planet. It would make a great film. I’m currently writing the biography of Isidore Isou, a Romanian Jew who came to Paris in 1945 and founded the avant-garde movement letrisme. His autobiography, *L’Agrégation d’un nom et d’un messie* (“Making of a Name and a Messiah”), published in 1947 by Gallimard, recounts his life in pre-war Bucharest with a group of fascist hooligans, trying to reach Palestine, his involvement with underground Zionist groups, and how he got to Paris as a clandestine immigrant. It’d make another great film.

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**Ian Rankin**

*The Long Take* by Robin Robertson (Picador) is a 200-page poem that reads like a novel. The hero, a traumatised Second World War veteran, relocates from New York to Los Angeles and begins to chart the huge changes that city undergoes in the late 1940s. As a journalist, he has access to the streets and their stories, but his own trajectory seems uncertain. Bold, brilliant, filled with wonderful imagery and meticulously researched, this is as poignant and visual as classic film noir.

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**Joan Bakewell**

*Behold America: A History of America First and the American Dream* by Sarah Churchwell (Bloomsbury) is precise in detail and hair-raising in impact, the story of what went before Trump in all its cruelty and populist fanaticism. Nothing’s new! *Sorrows of the Moon: A Journey Through London* by Iqbal Ahmed (Coldstream) was handed to me by the concierge of a London hotel: he had written it and somehow got it published. It is a Mayhew for our times, seeking out people and places we don’t usually hear about. Authentic, vivid, surprising.

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**Guy Gunaratne**

Any year Mathias Enard brings us new work is always worth celebrating. He invites us to engage with subjects as intricate as beauty, history and art, and always finds some way to make it still feel vital, leaving you with a resounding sense of hope and generosity. While *Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants* (Fitzcarraldo) may at times feel like reading the most beautiful poem as the world slowly degrades around you, it might also convince you that art is invincible. An important idea to hold on to, I think, as we wait for our political pantomimes to play out. Charlotte Mandell translates and the book is a miracle.

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**Neil O’Brien**

Not a high bar, I know, but Martin Slater’s *The National Debt* (Hurst & Co) is more interesting than it sounds. The book tells the tale, from the Middle Ages to Brexit, of how a “national debt” gradually emerged, and our battle to control it ever since. Slater shows how a superior ability to raise debt gave Britain the military edge in the 18th century, and why postwar policymakers were obsessed with avoiding devaluation because of the vast foreign debts owed. The national debt has been used by brilliant minds such as Keynes to save the nation, and by shysters throughout the ages to kick the can and to obscure who is really paying for what.

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**Bernardine Evaristo**

In her stunning third novel *Ordinary People* (Chatto & Windus), Diana Evans writes with exquisite intensity and language about two black British couples coping with marriage and parenthood. I also loved *The Lie of the Land* (Little, Brown) by Amanda Craig and its modern-day rural-urban explorations. It’s funny, compassionate and psychologically probing. Catherine Johnson’s children’s novels *Race to the Frozen North* (Barrington Stoke) – about Matthew Henson, the first African American to reach the North Pole – and *Freedom* (Scholastic), about a slave boy who lands in England, bring history alive with thrilling plots, feisty characters and bucketloads of adventure.

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**Rachel Reeves**

Ellen Wilkinson is one of the most exciting, radical and colourful women ever to have taken her seat in parliament. Whether it was widows’ pensions, the Jarrow Crusade, raising the school leaving age or introducing free school milk, she wasn’t afraid to challenge the assumed wisdoms. And she was also a novelist. *The Division Bell Mystery* (British Library Publishing) is a wonderful little murder mystery set in the House of Commons, packed with parliamentary detail, from the all-seeing porters and staff to the overworked political secretaries and the toxic mix of money and politics. Wilkinson wrote this novel in part to earn a living when she lost her seat in 1931 and in homage to Agatha Christie. I “discovered” it while researching my own history of women in Westminster and encouraged the British Library to put it back into print.

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**Jesse Norman**

OK, so I have had my head deep in Adam Smith as a cure for failing markets, escalating inequality and bad economics throughout 2018. But still, this has been a banner year for books about capitalism and its discontents, notable among them Adam Tooze on a decade of financial crashes, Martin Buchan on John Law, and Alan Greenspan and Adrian Wooldridge on capitalism in America. For me the most gripping of all was Paul Collier’s *The Future of Capitalism* (Allen Lane): a deep exploration of the ethical institutions underlying our market society – and an impassioned argument about how to restore them.

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**Mark Lawson**

The international humiliation of the attempt to decommunise south-east Asia is key to an understanding of America in the past 50 years: the counterculture, the Iraq War, the Trump presidency. I doubted there was room for another account, but Max Hastings jumps to the front of the queue with his dramatic and magisterial *Vietnam: An
Epic Tragedy 1945-1975 (William Collins). He gives proper weight to the long French preview of the doom that awaited the US, and is free of the influence on some American chroniclers of either guilt or neocon revisionism. Dramatic Exchanges: The Lives and Letters of the National Theatre (Profile), edited by Daniel Rosenthal, is a glossy but scholarly selection of memos, letters, postcards and emails from National talents including Olivier, Scofield, Stoppard, Pinter, Dench and Carol Ann Duffy. The theatre could surely get a great show from the book.

John Burnside

Making predictions is a perilous business, but I am confident that, as topical (and as urgent) as their analyses of Trump’s America may be today, the poems in Terrance Hayes’s American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin (Penguin) will still be read a hundred years from now (and beyond). Now in his mid-forties, Hayes is already one of America’s finest poets, and this new collection altogether confirms the reputation for acerbic observation, linguistic dazzle and emotional rigour that he built up over the past decade or so with such earlier collections as Lighthead and Wind in a Box.

Frank Cottrell-Boyce

The two most surprising books of the year for me were Alan Garner’s Where Shall We Run To? (Fourth Estate) and Stuart Kelly’s The Minister and the Murderer (Granta). In old age we are often overwhelmed and bewildered by vivid childhood memories. It’s therefore very cheering to see Garner embrace that moment as a gift and create this vivid, warm and surprisingly funny memoir of growing up in rural Cheshire. Kelly’s meditation on the case of James Nelson – a murderer who applied to be a Church of Scotland minister – is so engaging, challenging and entertaining. It just is. Read it.

I found Angie Thomas’s The Hate U Give (Walker Books) – both the book and its impact – really cheering. A thrilling work of political fiction, its message that life is complex and that love is important is crucial in an era of politics that seems addicted to infantile and murderous simplifications.

George Eaton

Few rock memoirs are worthy of critical note. Brett Anderson’s charmingly melancholic Coal Black Mornings (Little, Brown) was an exception. Escewing the “coke and gold discs” template, the Suede singer recounts a childhood of bohemian poverty and traces his band’s vivid prehistory.

In a year haunted by the spectre of Brexit, Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce’s Shadows of Empire: The AngloSphere in British Politics (Polity) was a lucid exposition of the imperial nostalgia that suffuses the Leave elite.

Leo Robson

Anna Burns’s Milkman (Faber & Faber), the winner of the Man Booker Prize – for which I served as a judge – is gripping, stark and funny, with a bold central choice (withholding names and place names) wholly justified by the execution. It has been described in some quarters as challenging and even “modernist” when, like some notably popular past winners of the same award (Vernon God Little, Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha), it simply traces the movement of a young mind fertile with images, ideas and tailored syntax. Lily Allen’s memoir My Thoughts Exactly (Blink) is an astonishing piece of writing, a companion in its verbal invention and analytic acuity of the confessional album, No Shame, whose raw material it faithfully records.

William Dalrymple

In Empire of Enchantment: the Story of Indian Magic (Hurst) John Zubrzycki has found the most wonderful story and told it brilliantly. This is, quite literally, a book of marvels. Minuteley researched yet instantly accessible, Manu Pillai’s Rebel Sultans (Jugernaut) will bring the fascinating history of medieval India to a whole new generation of readers. Manaku of Guler (Niyogi Books), by India’s leading art historian, BN Goswamy, has completed a lifetime of labour researching the most talented of all the families of artists at work in India in the 18th century.

David Kynaston

Travis Elborough writes about a wide range of subjects with originality, learning and charm. Atlas of the Unexpected (White Lion), one of his several books this year, is also seductively beautiful: an inspiring, dream-inducing guide to almost four dozen “haphazard discoveries, chance places and unimaginable destinations”, few of which are in Britain. My old book of the year is Jung Chang’s Wild Swans (William Collins), read painfully late. Like most people, I found the sheer cumulative weight of ideologically driven cruelty overwhelming. Is present-day China really different in kind rather than degree? I wonder.

Michael Prodger

It may suggest a malign nature but sometimes, when a friend writes a book, it is not the end of the world if it turns out less than wonderful. This was disappointingly far from the case with Martin Gayford’s superb Modernists and Mavericks (Thames & Hudson), a survey of Britain’s roistering postwar painters, dominated by the Bacon-Freud-Hockney triumvirate, that is erudite, lucid and enlightening in equal measure. Andrew Miller’s Now We Shall be Entirely Free (Sceptre), a high grade cat-and-mouse manhunt that covers the length of Britain during the Napoleonic Wars – a sort of The 39 Steps with added malice – is pitch-perfect.
Erica Wagner

Barbara Kingsolver’s Unsheltered (Faber & Faber) is a tremendous time-slip novel, its two linked narratives jumping seamlessly (yes, really) between 1871 and 2016. Two families in Vineland, New Jersey find their lives disrupted by the great arguments of the day: Darwin’s theory of evolution in the 19th century and the economic and ecological disruptions of the 21st. What a master of style and form she is. And Heimat: A German Family Album (Particular Books), Nora Krug’s graphic memoir of her German family’s complicity (or otherwise) in Nazism is extraordinary; read it and then listen to Philippe Sands’s podcast, The Ratline.

Preti Taneja

Dubravka Ugresic’s American Fictionary (Open Letter) brings the 25 years since the break-up of the former Yugoslavia into conversation with the questions that provoke us today. Written as a fictional dictionary it asks: what price globalisation? Can communities survive the redrawing of borders? Has publishing lost its “culture”? Bagels or doughnuts? Ugresic spares no one: not big businesses or us, their sheep-like consumers. Her new novel Fox (Open Letter), shape-shifts around how stories come to be written (and who by) and explores the lost lives of the women who inspired some of the most famous male writers around. Both books are fierce, dark and very, very funny.

Stuart Maconie

If I can’t declare with hand on heart that I preferred Sally Rooney’s second novel to her first, that’s only because I inhaled her debut, Conversations With Friends, with a hunger I haven’t felt for a contemporary novel in months. Normal People (Faber & Faber) is set in the same modern, millennial, digital Dublin, but here the focus is pulled even tighter; to two young people moving awkwardly through a precarious world of chilly but grave passions and fears. Love, sex, class, work, miscommunication and melancholy are all described in prose that is somehow at once lapidary and mysterious; glittering but with the feeling of something moving like weather behind the sentences.

Gerry Brakus

Sally Mann’s A Thousand Crossings (Abrams Books) celebrates over 40 years of the photographer’s work and is a book I will be revisiting again and again. Featuring previously unseen images as well as some of her best-known work, the book is both a sombre and inspiring look at Mann’s recurring themes – family, death, existence and the complex history of the American South, where she was born and still lives. I also thoroughly enjoyed Animal (Phaidon) an extensive look at the zoological world that should appeal to both adults and children alike, with 300 gorgeous images to pore over.

Ruth Padel

Nicholas Crane’s You Are Here: A Brief Guide to the World (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) is an erudite, dark-lit little book by a veteran explorer-broadcaster, distilling a lifetime of thought and travel. It is a hymn to geography, which “keeps us human”. Hannah Sullivan is a welcome, brilliantly confident new voice in British poetry. Three Poems (Faber & Faber), a sophisticated, intimate first collection, redefines modernism today. Its three poems shape-shift through sex, birth, death, terza rima, blank verse and rhymed couples.

Anna Leszkiewicz

My favourite book of 2018 is Everything Under by Daisy Johnson (Jonathan Cape), a novel about a difficult mother-daughter relationship that has its roots in classical myth. Set on the river in Oxford, a site that is both ancient and full of rushing mutability, this is a story that feels simultaneously inevitable and thrillingly unpredictable. Like many, I also loved Sally Rooney’s Normal People (Faber & Faber) for its insight, humour and compulsive characters.

Jude Rogers

While all of Europe apart from northern Spain enjoyed the heatwave this summer, I sat in northern Spain, in a cardigan, preparing to interview Marianne Faithfull by reading her 1994 autobiography, Faithfull (Penguin). Bloody Nora. Rage, abortion, suicide attempts, suicide, innumerable rock stars being unmasked as manipulative, misogynistic weaklings… given the recent wave of unashamed female music memoirs, it’s worth revisiting. Christie Watson’s The Language Of Kindness: A Nurse’s Story (Chatto & Windus) was no less shocking, its tender tone taking us through a career unfolding within our disintegrating NHS. The red-coated, sad-eyed woman in Watson’s waiting room, like a ghost, stayed with me.

David Hepworth

Kudos by Rachel Cusk (Faber & Faber) concludes one of the most interesting literary projects of recent years. Here we follow Faye to book festivals in Germany and Portugal, where she encounters a series of women and men who share stories that read like testimony, with life in the dock. Kudos is rich in comedy and wisdom, and is compelling from its first page to its extraordinary final scene. The Largesse of the Sea Maiden (Jonathan Cape) is another book of endings, in this case because its author, Denis Johnson, died in 2017. His final collection of short stories – funny, unpredictable, beautiful – is one of his finest works.

Hera Lindsay Bird

One of the most genius books I read this year was Under The Sea (Tyrant Books) – a collection of short stories by my favourite contemporary poet, Mark Leidner. Leidner takes comprehensibly bizarre concepts and somehow imbues them with all that beautiful, deep Chekovian crap I’ve come to love and secretly resent him for. Not like George Saunders, but there’s definitely some Venn diagram fan crossover. I also loved My Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh (Jonathan Cape). Who doesn’t want to dose themselves to the brim with various tranquilisers, waking only occasionally to watch Whoopi Goldberg films?
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