

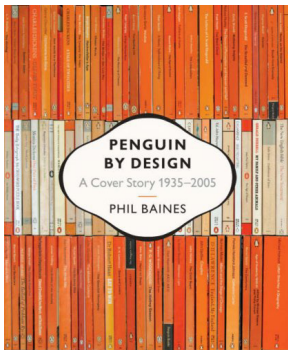
Another year, another list of thirteen books selected through an exhaustively thorough and utterly scientific process. Well, okay, maybe not. While my annual selection process involves me simply standing in front of my bookcase, pulling down recent reads and thumbing through them, I am always curious to parse my completed list and look for any “themes” in my year of reading.

2011 appeared to be—excluding my two favorite books of the year: *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers and *Everything Beautiful Began After* by Simon Van Booy—a real year of “books on books” for me.

I read books on design, author biographies, essays on the writing/reading life, an exploration of book theft, and a history of New York publishing houses.

I have also noticed that it's thanks to several exceptional literary journals that I don't get more books read each year, journals such as *Glimmer Train*, *Paris Review*, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *N+1*, and *Slice*. And magazines like *Harper's*, *Poets & Writers*, and *Vanity Fair*.

What a wonderful dilemma: too much good writing to read! Happy New Year, Happy Reading, and Bon Chance!



## *Penguin by Design: A Cover Story 1935-2005*

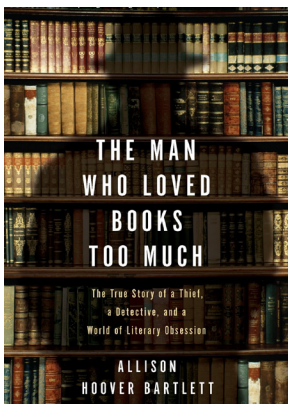
Phil Baines

For two glorious weeks this past summer, I traveled around England with my family. Everyday was a lifetime of happiness. We spent most of our trip in the countryside around the North Sea, visiting with our dear friends, the Wards. Eventually, we made our way down to the Big Smoke: London. In a small bookshop beside the Thames that I visit every time I'm in London, I treated myself to this handsome design book.

When Penguin Books exploded onto the paperback scene in 1935 under the direction of Sir Allen Lane, they changed not only the publishing world but the world of readers by offering quality books for just sixpence, or 1/40th of a pound sterling. In their first ten months of operation alone, one million Penguin books were printed. Penguin, quite simply, brought literature to the masses.

Lane made an interesting and concerted decision that rather than tackle each book's design as a disparate object, the press would establish itself as a “brand” of trusted titles. Twenty-one year old Edward Young designed Penguin's first famously spare grid cover design and iconic penguin logo in 1935. German typographer Jan Tschichold, as well as designers Hans Schmoller, Germano Facetti, and Romek Marber refined the grid over the decades.

This book about a quintessentially English publisher will always remain a wonderful reminder of my 2011 trip to England.



## *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much:*

### *The True Story of a Thief, a Detective, and World of Literary Obsession*

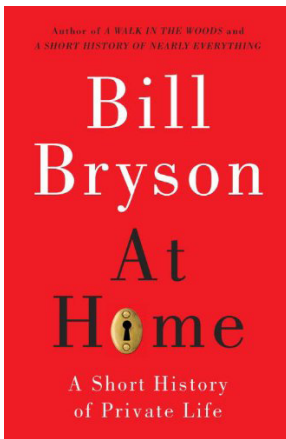
Allison Hoover Bartlett

Allison Hoover Bartlett—who has written for the New York Times, the Washington Post, and San Francisco Magazine over the years—was so captivated by book thief John Gilkey that she spent years interviewing him (in and out of prison) and immersing herself in the world of antiquarian books. The result of her investigation is a fascinating mix of psychological thriller and sociology report—Gilkey is a man, after all, most interested in simply possessing the books he steals; he actually uses the Modern Library's 100 Best Novels reading list when considering what first editions he'll pilfer next.

In many ways, Bartlett struck gold with her first full-length foray thanks in large part to the sheer magnetism of both her titular thief and detective. Gilkey is a “villain” that you can't help but occasionally empathize with, or at least feel oddly sad for. On the other hand, Ken Sanders, the detective (really just a Salt Lake City book dealer who served as the Security Chair of the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America) is a “hero” with a sometimes grating personality. It's to Bartlett's credit that she doesn't paint either man in black-and-white, but portrays them in all of their human grayness.

In the end, Bartlett's ruminations about the reading life and books as objects turn what may have been wonderful piece of long-form journalism into a thought-provoking book.

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## *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*

Bill Bryson

I am a latecomer to Bill Bryson. My friends have been reading and gushing about his fact-filled books for years before I cracked open anything he'd written. I also had the bad habit of confusing Bill Bryson with Bill Buford, the longtime *Granta* editor, *New Yorker* fiction editor, and author of *Among the Thugs* and *Heat*.

Finally, when I missed my departing flight at Heathrow in the autumn of 2008, I sat down in a café and read Bryson's wonderful *Shakespeare: The World as Stage* (Doubleday, 2007) in a single sitting. I was hooked on Bryson's smart, cheerful, seemingly effortless tone.

This year, I read and thoroughly enjoyed Bryson's latest travel down the path of his endless curiosity: *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*. Using the rooms of his own home in the English countryside, Bryson aspires to uncover the mysteries of where we live and how we live. While he occasionally wanders off subject, you tend to stay with him because he's just so damned interesting.

For those who want to dig deeper into the facts cited in his 512-page book, a nineteen-page bibliography on Bryson's website lists the hundreds titles—nearly 450—that he referenced while writing *At Home*.

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## *Journalism Matters*

Peter W. Cox

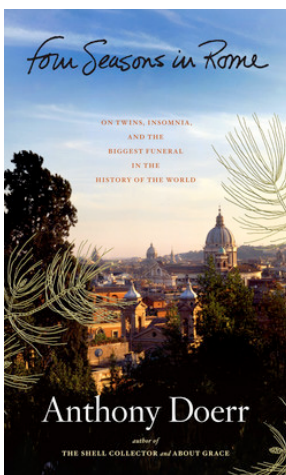
We have our national journalism heroes, our Woodward and Bernstein, Helen Thomas, Seymour Hersh, Eric Schlosser, and others. But I hope, too, that every state will continue to have their own regional heroes of the free press. Here in Maine, the legend of Peter W. Cox still looms larger over the state's journalism.

Cox arrived in Maine in the late 1950s to work for the fledgling *Kennebunk Star*. Years later the paper would evolve into the *York County Coast Star*, become one Maine's largest weeklies, and earn national distinction; I had the great pleasure of working as a reporter at the *Coast Star*.

Cox's great contribution to my state—and the story at the heart of *Journalism Matters*—was co-founding the *Maine Times* in 1968. The paper became the state's much-needed crusader against things like dirty politics and pollution, and supported things like progressive politics and conservation. Current Maine journalist Bill Nemitz sums it up best: "Peter Cox understood that a journalist's true potential resides in an ability to record, but also to analyze, to interpret, to confront, and, ultimately, to enlighten."

Cox passed away in 2004 (the *New York Times* carried his obit). He would likely be distressed by our nation's rapid descent into journalism without journalists.

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## *Four Seasons in Rome: On Twins, Insomnia, and the Biggest Funeral in the History of the World*

Anthony Doerr

I first read Anthony Doerr several years ago when I stumbled upon his stunning short story "The Caretaker" from his debut collection *The Shell Collector*. I was astonished by his tale of a Liberian man's disturbing journey from his homeland to the United States.

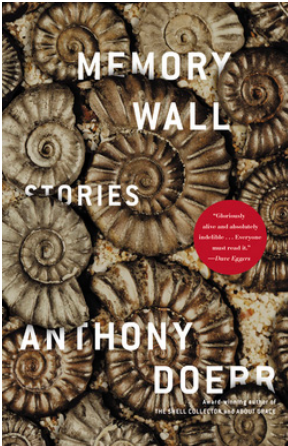
Doerr's memoir *Four Seasons in Rome* is a vivid, searching hymn to the year he spent living in Italy after receiving the Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters—a prestigious prize that

arrived in Doerr's mailbox on the very day that he and wife returned home from the hospital with their newborn twins.

Now, a disclaimer: I am the father to a nine-year-old daughter and my older brother has been living abroad in Milan, Italy since the mid-1990s. So a book about fatherhood and Italy is almost destined to hit me squarely in the heart!

Doerr's writing is exceptional—descriptive yet concise. I marveled in his descriptions of stony Rome, the vigil and funeral for Pope John Paul II, the rarified light, and the soaring trees outside his writing studio. But it is Doerr's intellectual wanderings put down on the page that hooked me: he is traversing both the foreignness of a country and language, and the foreignness of being a new father. In the end, his navigation of both is luminous.

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## *Memory Wall*

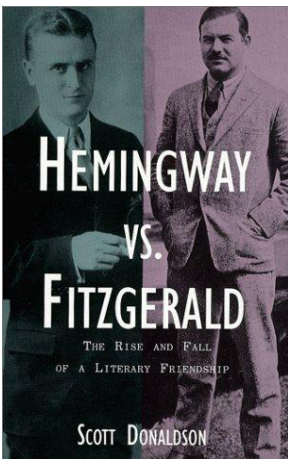
Anthony Doerr

Yes, two books by Anthony Doerr are on my list this year. I am often at a loss to describe Anthony Doerr's short stories. And I mean this as a compliment. They seem to exist in their own realm. I agree with Dave Eggers's assessment of this book: "It's fair to say that Anthony Doerr is doing things with the short story that have rarely been attempted and seldom achieved. The stories in *Memory Wall* have such scope and depth that they hit as hard as novels three times their length. Doerr has set a new standard, I think, for what a story can do."

The collection's title story actually grew out of an Eggers/McSweeney's assignment to "travel somewhere in the world and imagine life there in 2024." Doerr chose South Africa and then wove in, in his words, "Alzheimer's and grandma and fossils." The result is breathtaking.

Within his memoir *Four Seasons in Rome*, Doerr writes about how while he is not working on the war novel he thought he'd write in Rome, he is wandering around inside a short story about a small, remote-Chinese village scheduled to be flooded during the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. For those readers paying attention, they'll notice that the unnamed story becomes "Village 113" in *Memory Wall*. The story eventually earned Doerr an O'Henry Prize, while the collection as a whole earned him the coveted 2010 Story Prize.

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## *Hemingway vs. Fitzgerald: The Rise and Fall of a Literary Friendship*

Scott Donaldson

Newspaper reporter/editor turned biographer Scott Donaldson always manages to make his reportage readable. I first discovered Donaldson through his biography of suburban bard John Cheever (it's an interesting read but was ultimately compromised due to constraints from the Cheever Estate). Donaldson has also penned tomes on F. Scott Fitzgerald, Archibald MacLeish, and poet Edwin Arlington Robinson (a three time Pulitzer winner and Maine boy!)—several of these biographies are still available thanks to the Authors Guild's wonderful BackinPrint program.

While Donaldson cut his teeth as a reporter, he is not the type of biographer who stands silent on the sidelines and simply records the facts. And I don't mind that in a biographer, so long as the commentator voice doesn't intrude too much or too often. Donaldson skates the line. But for a man who has already written solo biographies of Hemingway and Fitzgerald (*By Force of Will* and *Fool for Love*, respectively), I think we need him to defend at times this theory of literary grudge match he has set up in the "vs." of his book's title.

While the "vs." theme is a little contrived, the complex relationship between two of the twentieth century's greatest writers was certainly anything but simple. If you're interested in the work of



Hemingway and Fitzgerald, the true story of their convoluted friendship reads like great fiction itself. If you prefer a less combative title, try Donaldson's most recent study of the pair, 2009's *Fitzgerald and Hemingway: Works and Days*.

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## *Zeitoun*

Dave Eggers

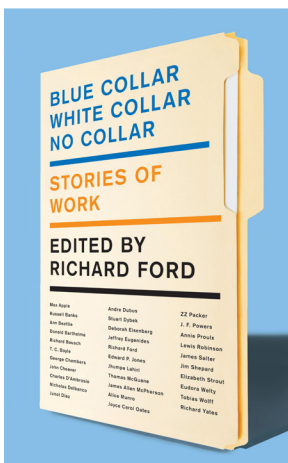
This true story of a man and his family set against Hurricane Katrina flooding New Orleans and our nation's handling of that disaster, is quite simply the best book I've read in years. It was literarily breathtaking. If read as a "nonfiction novel," than this book is my generation's *In Cold Blood*.

Page after page, I was amazed by (1) the sheer reportage that went into *Zeitoun*—it's actually hard to believe Egger's himself wasn't actually there on the ground as New Orleans flooded—and (2) how that same reportage disappeared into the swift, compelling narrative. This book is both the micro-story of one man and his family, and a macro-story of our country and how it handles crisis.

I'm often reminded of, and sometimes ashamed of, what a short collective memory we have for current events. "Of course," I thought, as Eggers pointed out how National Guard troops being deployed to post-Katrina New Orleans were being flown in fresh from stress-riddled tours of duty in the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq.

In 2009, Eggers helped found the Zeitoun Foundation in order to donate the proceeds of *Zeitoun* to the re-building of New Orleans. At last count, the foundation had given away \$250,000 in grants. I admire the hell out of Eggers as both a writer and a human.

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## *Blue Collar, White Collar, No Collar: Stories of Work*

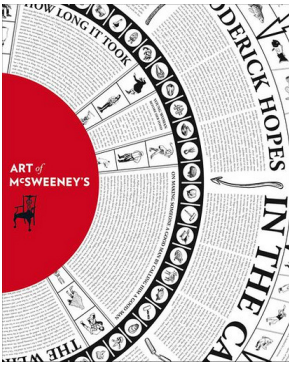
Richard Ford, editor

"...work, however we do it or define it, is near the heart of human things; and as with all we know of the heart, its truth is most tellingly found in the acts of our imagination," writes Richard Ford in his introduction to this exceptional anthology.

This collection—which also serves as a fundraiser for the youth writing and tutoring program 826michigan—brims with wonderfully thoughtful story selections from modern masters such as Andre Dubus, Alice Munro, Eudora Welty, and Tobias Wolff. But Ford also wove in startlingly good stories by some oft overlooked masters like J.F. Powers, James Salter, and Richard Yates. And, a constant supporter of young talent, I was pleased to see Ford's inclusion of Junot Diaz, Jhumpa Lahiri, Z.Z. Packer, and Lewis Robinson. If there's a "Volume 2" in the works, I'm putting in a vote for Maile Meloy's heartbreaking "Travis, B." and Andre Dubus III's "The Bartender."

The greatest anthologies have the potential to serve as veritable "Must Read" list. If you wanted a crash course in the American short story, you could hardly do better than reading a collection by every contributor in this anthology. Here are just two examples: Annie Proulx's story "Job History" is from her collection *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, the same collection that contains her masterful novella "Brokeback Mountain." And Elizabeth Strout's story "Pharmacy" leads her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Olive Kitteridge*.

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## Art of McSweeney's

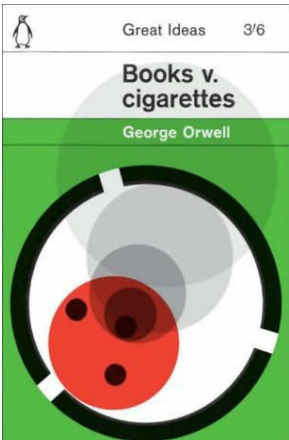
The Editors of McSweeney's

Just as *Penguin by Design: A Cover Story 1935-2005*—another favorite book of mine this year—isn't merely a "design book," the *Art of McSweeney's* is not only an in-depth look at how this iconoclastic publishing house values the book as an object, but a fascinating glimpse into the editorial process at McSweeney's.

This 266-page coffee table-sized tome is written in first-person blurbs by editors, authors, illustrators, interns, and others associated with the *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *McSweeney's Books*, as well as *The Believer* and *The Wholphin*.

It's all in here: the reasoning behind including a plastic comb with *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern 16*; the sketches for the intricately unfolding dust-jacket designed by Chris Ware for the all-comics *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern 13*; and hilarious stories about *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern 17*, which was made of several individual print pieces bundled like a packet of mail—"I guess this was the strangest issue of *McSweeney's*, and I take responsibility for its failures," writes Eggers.

How amazing it is in today's often fear-driven publishing industry to witness some folks who are willing to experiment and actually risk failure!?



## Books v. Cigarettes

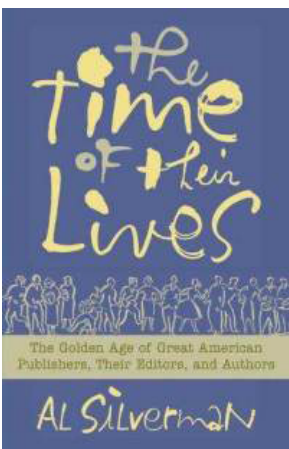
George Orwell

This Penguin paperback was another purchase on my trip abroad to England this past summer; I snagged the book in the Georgian market town of Holt near the North Sea. *Books v. Cigarettes* is part of a 100-volume Penguin series called Great Ideas. I kick myself for not snatching up at least Charles Dickens's *Night Walks* and William Morris's *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*.

For those who only know Orwell's fiction, this thin collection of essays written between 1936 and 1952 is a wonderful primer to his nonfiction. The essays "Bookshop Memories" and "Confessions of a Book Reviewer" are both gems.

But the title essay, originally published in 1946, is my personal favorite, and further evidence that some things just never change. Orwell sets the tone in the second paragraph: "This idea that the buying, or even the reading, of books is an expensive hobby and beyond the reach of the average person is so widespread that it deserves some detailed examination."

Orwell puts some monetary figures onto his reading life and reaches the conclusion that "my total reading expenses over the past fifteen years have been in the neighborhood of £25 a year." But his other vices, he calculates, cost him more in the range of £40 a year: "Forty pounds a year would just about pay for a packet of Woodbines [cigarettes] every day and half a pint of mild six days a week—not a magnificent allowance." Pure Orwell!



## The Time of Their Lives: The Golden Age of Great American Book Publishers, Their Editors and Authors

Al Silverman

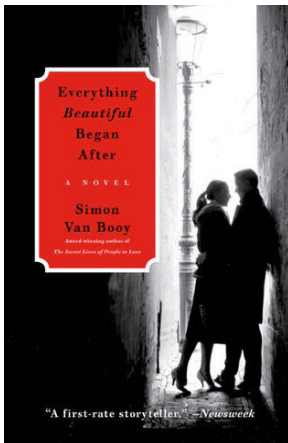
I can't remember how I came upon this odd book, but I'm glad I did. Al Silverman was the former CEO and chairman of the Book of the Month Club from 1972 to 1988. He went on to become an editor and publisher at Viking Press from 1989 to 1997, and edited greats such as Saul Bellow and William Kennedy. So Silverman's tome to American publishing reads like both a love letter and an insider's account.

*The Time of Their Lives* begins with the figures who led the industry after the First World War—giants like Alfred A. Knopf, Horace Liveright, Bennett Cerf, and Alfred Harcourt—and continues into the

1980s. It was a time when neither Straus nor Giroux had grey hair, when authors like Bellow, Roth, and Salinger were squirts, when Heller didn't have a title for *Catch-22*, and when editor Robert Gottlieb was just a young gun at Simon & Schuster in 1955...and the next thing you know, in 1968 he's succeeding Alfred Knopf himself as editor in chief at Knopf.

There are many times throughout the book when Silverman's writing is too chummy, and therefore confusing; it's as though he forgot that he was writing this for anyone other than his intimates. But I'm convinced that understanding the ideals on which the great American publishing houses were formed will only help inform our ideas about the complexity of today's publishing.

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## *Everything Beautiful Began After*

Simon Van Booy

In 2009, I fell under the spell of the five long, lyrical stories that comprise Simon Van Booy's second collection, *Love Begins in Winter*; in a moment of literary serendipity, I happened upon Van Booy reading in New Hampshire. The book had just been nominated for the 2009 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, the largest short story prize in the world. By the time I finished that collection, Van Booy had won the O'Connor.

But how, I wondered this year, could Van Booy sustain the lyrically dense and often dream-like intensity of his short stories in his first novel, *Everything Beautiful Began After*? Not long after beginning the book, the answer to that question became clear: he would handle it magnificently.

This was, hands down, my favorite novel of the year. In the elegant prose Van Booy has become revered for, *Everything Beautiful Began After* (originally titled *The Greek Affair*) traces three lives set against the Mediterranean heat of Athens: the drunken but brilliant American George; the searching French artist Rebecca; and the British archaeologist Henry. Andre Dubus III called the novel, "A powerful meditation on the undying nature of love and the often cruel beauty of one's own fate." He also quipped, "If F. Scott Fitzgerald and Marguerite Duras had had a son, he would be Simon Van Booy."

Even as I rocketed along through this novel, I marveled at not only Van Booy's language and craft—he shifts an entire long section of the book into the second person(!)—but how his poetic, tender, empathetic mind curiously searches and lands upon startling ways to describe our lives.