

- California Literary Review - <http://calitreview.com> -

Critics' Picks: Best Books of 2010

Posted By [Paul Comstock](#) On December 18, 2010 @ 9:34 pm In [Best Books, Non-Fiction Reviews](#) | [No Comments](#)

Fiction

Foreign Bodies, by Cynthia Ozick (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

"Cynthia Ozick's *Foreign Bodies* is a memorable achievement. Not only does she take Henry James' *The Ambassadors* and turn its plot inside out, what she makes of it is a contemporary family saga, together with all the ethnic battles and feuds of generations resurfacing for each of her young characters in their own escape from a business-oriented American family to the "culture" of Post-World War II Paris. This remarkable stylist creates her persuasive tale by encompassing in some of her portraits a depiction of the brutality and displacements of 20th Century Europeans in the years that followed James' own times. And only true mastery could balance such a shocking history while still making her novel wholly compelling." — [Julia Braun Kessler](#) ^[1]

iBoy by Kevin Brooks (Puffin Books)

"I'd never heard of Brooks—he's an award-winning English author—but now that I've read *iBoy*, I'm urging everyone to read the book and track down his other work. Set in a grungy, downmarket section of London, the story is both a coming-of-age tale and a vengeance thriller, with an engaging young hero and a villain who controls the world he lives in. It's a dark book, set against a bleak landscape of council flats and gang activity. It's a book about situation ethics and moral compromises. The book is a stylish, stunning read." — [Katherine Tomlinson](#) ^[2]

The Invisible Bridge, by Julie Orringer (Knopf)

"Hungary was one of the Central European nations devastated by the 20th Century and its Jewish community, one of the most assimilated on the continent, drank every drop of that bitter history to its dregs. So, it's fitting that Julie Orringer chose Budapest as the setting for her novel chronicling the lives of two lovers who are ultimately an embodiment of the suffering of their fellow Hungarians, Jewish and gentile alike, from the 1930s through the destruction of their world during the World War II. This has been compared by various critics to *Dr. Zhivago*, which too few people actually read any more to make it a legitimate measure for any other lengthy novel of life during wartime. It actually reminds me more of Flaubert and, like the great French author's work, Orringer's novel is worth the investment of time and effort to read." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]

Long, Last, Happy: New and Collected Stories, by Barry Hannah (Grove Press)

"Hannah's fiction has a long, sad history of being ignored by the reading market and the fame machine. But, it's brilliant all the same: grounded in the rich moral soil that nurtured Faulkner, O'Connor, Agee and other great 20th Century Southern writers. Hannah is one of the main reasons that Southern writers still display a very distinct regional style and concern with the better and lesser angels of mankind's nature at a time when cultural homogenization has stripped other parts of the U.S. of any regional distinction in thought or temperament.

Hannah is also subversive and very, very funny." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]

The Petting Zoo, by Jim Carroll (Viking)

"*The Petting Zoo* is one of the most noteworthy novels of 2010. It achieves this status not by literary merit alone – or even primarily. The most significant feature of this story of artistic angst and biblical allusion is that Jim Carroll died, aged 60, while working on the final draft in 2009. It is sadly the "alpha and omega" of Carroll's work as a writer of fiction.

Jim Carroll was no flashing meteor on the cultural scene, however. By the time of his death, he had two books of autobiographical writing on his resume. *The Basketball Diaries* was first published in 1978 and later became a cult hit of the 1980's. *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries, 1971-1973*, continued the story of Carroll's immersion into the drug culture of the 1970's. Carroll also published several collections of highly regarded poetry and headed a punk rock band that flirted with big time success in the early 1980's.

Carroll had, moreover, the trappings of legend about him. The "Catholic Boy" rebel personified the iconoclastic, self-destructive New York scene of the 1970's. He was a living link to the world of Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe and sex without fear of AIDS.

And now Carroll is gone too. *The Petting Zoo*, in its way, is an elegy to this ever-more remote milieu. Yet, its over-arching theme is far more serious than that. The novel charts the interior struggle of an artist, Billy Wolfram, who suddenly confronts the unpleasant fact that his considerable status as a painter and sculptor has less to do with his talents than it does to his role as a Manhattan celebrity.

Billy Wolfram, like Carroll, hails from Irish Catholic working class roots. His upward ascent in the contemporary art scene was anything but assured. But then Billy comes face-to-face with paintings by the 17th century master, Diego Velázquez, at the glittering opening to an art exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A panic attack sends him wandering about Manhattan in a state of severe distraction. He winds up in Central Park's Petting Zoo, taking a blow to the head from a tree limb and talking to a raven who may or may not be real.

Surreal scenes like Billy's encounter with the raven alternate with meditations on his Irish Catholic boyhood and early artistic career. Billy's attempt to unravel life's mysteries is by turns spiritually bleak and darkly humorous. Carroll's abundant writing skill, however, fails to fuse the flash-backs of the early Billy with the travail of his latter day self. Too often, memories of a young Billy grappling with his sexuality just get in the way of an otherwise absorbing novel.

The Petting Zoo is the work of a genius, rather than a work of genius. For all that, it deserves a wide readership and serious literary consideration. If an author only gets one chance to write a serious novel, then it had better deal with universal themes. Despite its flaws, Jim Carroll's *The Petting Zoo* does exactly that." — [Ed Voves](#) ^[4]

Purge, by Sofi Oksanen (Atlantic Books)

"This book was initially released in Finland in 2008, but the English version was released in the U.S. earlier this year. Oksanen's novel asks the central question all of us strive to avoid: what would you do to survive? Three generations of women in a small farming community in Estonia have to face their own moral limits while trying to survive war, Communism and an equally ruthless form of capitalism. What amazes me is Oksanen has the restraint to let readers form their own judgments about her characters, while still giving us a sympathetic look at their lives. Get this and read it. Oksanen is no one-hit wonder and this novel proves it." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]

Super Sad True Love Story: A Novel, by Gary Shteyngart (Random House)

"Welcome to America the Suspicious! Shteyngart's lippy tale of romantic woe takes place in an America gone rancid, where democracy has been replaced with a police state. It's not a political novel *per se*, though. It's more like Woody Allen before he turned pathetic." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]

Non-fiction

[Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet](#) ^[5] by Jennifer Homans (Random House)

"In his cycle of novels, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Anthony Powell presented a memorable portrait of life in the 20th century. Jennifer Homans' *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* goes one step further. Her book is literally a study of Western civilization's dance to the rhythm of the most beautiful of art forms. An accomplished dancer herself, Homans traces the course of ballet's 500 year history from the Renaissance to its most recent golden age, the magnificent flowering of dance at the New York City Ballet under the direction of George Balanchine during the post-World War II era.

Homans' concluding remarks that ballet may well be making its final curtain call, given the changing nature of modern culture, comes as a shock. Hopefully she is wrong. But it is hard to resist Homans' compulsively readable, brilliantly researched book. *Apollo's Angels* is not merely one of the best nonfiction books of 2010. It deserves to be cherished as an enduring study of human creativity at its best." — [Ed Voves](#) ^[4]

The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine, by Michael Lewis (W. W. Norton & Company)

"There was an avalanche of books in 2010 about the Great Crash of 2008. Many of them have ideological axes to grind. Michael Lewis, though, is a straight shooter and a brilliant narrative writer. His rare gift of explaining very technical aspects of the financial world to laymen is unsurpassed." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]

Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con That Is Breaking America, by Matt Taibbi; Spiegel & Grau

"Matt Taibbi has two things going for him. First of all, he has a scathing writing style that reminds me for all the world of Hunter S. Thompson. Taibbi's invective is half the fun of this book, especially since it's aimed at the very people who yanked the economy off its feet and their enablers in the D.C. media village, on Capitol Hill and in the White House. Second, Taibbi has the greatest gift any journalist or serious poker player can bring to the table: a leaden ass, which allows Taibbi to actually sit through hours of Congressional hearings and sift through mountains of data. You should laugh long and loud throughout most of this book, then be angry enough afterward to start paying closer attention to what is really going on in D.C." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]

The Killing of Crazy Horse by Thomas Powers (Knopf)

"Larry McMurtry has called this saga of the legendary martyred warrior Crazy Horse, his life, negotiations with the whites and his death, "one of the finest books yet written about the American West." Indeed, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thomas Powers, writing with compassion and intelligence, explores the complexities (and the brutality) of this crucial chapter in the "settling" of the West. In 1876 Crazy Horse, leader of the Lakota people, inflicted upon U.S. troops their worst ever frontier defeat at the Battle of Little Bighorn, but then began negotiations with the white invaders from the East. Crazy Horse came to trust them, but trust ended in betrayal. Within the year Crazy Horse was murdered, and some

10,000 of his Native American followers were driven from their home territory to walk and, some, to ride horseback, 200 miles across open windswept prairie-land in rain and snow along "wretched roads" toward the Missouri River." — [Judith Harris](#) ^[6]

The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them, by Elif Batuman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

"This is a delightful sleigh ride through some of the odder corners of Russian literature. It's well worth the trip and will give you entree into great Russian works of fiction that don't run in excess of 1,000 pages. You can follow up with Vladimir Nabokov's brilliant lectures on the literature of his homeland or Mikhael Bakhtin's literary theory." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]

They Live (Deep Focus), by Jonathan Lethem (Soft Skull Press)

"Have you ever read a book or seen a movie and thought it was a brilliant piece of art, but after you tell two or three friends or family members about it, you shut up because you get the definite sense that they think you're nuts. Yeah, that's what happened to me with *They Live*, John Carpenter's 1988 sci-fi classic about aliens who take control of our planet by exploiting our need to consume goods and services, our aspirations to higher class status and our unwillingness to confront uncomfortable truths about our society and culture. And it stars Rowdy Roddy Piper and Keith David, respectively a cheesy pro wrestler and one of the greatest actors currently working in American cinema. And it features cool, cheap sunglasses that allow the humans who wear them to see through the aliens' outside facade to the monsters underneath. It was the perfect middle finger salute to the Reagan Era. Apparently, author Lethem was the only other person than me to take *They Live* as brilliant, stinging social commentary. He explains why in this great book." — [Sam Stowe](#) ^[3]



Article printed from California Literary Review: <http://calitreview.com>

URL to article: <http://calitreview.com/13219>

URLs in this post:

[1] Julia Braun Kessler: http://calitreview.com/author/julia_kessler

[2] Katherine Tomlinson: http://calitreview.com/author/katherine_tomlinson

[3] Sam Stowe: http://calitreview.com/author/sam_stowe

[4] Ed Voves: http://calitreview.com/author/ed_voves

[5] Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet : <http://calitreview.com/12844>

[6] Judith Harris: http://calitreview.com/author/judith_harris