

BOOKS OF THE YEAR

Our favourite reads of 2016

Times writers tip the books they loved, from Robert Harris to Bruce Springsteen

December 3 2016, 12:01am, The Times



The troubled genius of Shostakovich examined in Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*

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Peter Brookes

Michel Houellebecq's **Submission** — out in paperback — is a timely, caustic, often funny novel of a France subjected to an Islamist takeover in the near future. It has the cleverest, most satisfying ending I've read all year. Things didn't end at all well in 1869 for three crofters from Ross-shire, in Graeme Macrae Burnet's **His Bloody Project**. Brilliantly unputdownable, it should have won the Man Booker. Which is probably why it didn't. John le Carré's memoir **The Pigeon Tunnel; Stories from my Life** is

criticised for containing a few tall ones. Stories, not pigeons. But what the hell, it's utterly compelling.



Elizabeth Strout
LEONARDO CENDAMO

Ann Treneman

This was the year that I discovered Elizabeth Strout. I happened upon *Olive Kitteridge* on one of my periodic bookshop prowls and was immediately drawn in by the honest (at times cruelly so) portrayal of everyday lives in a small-town Maine. It won the Pulitzer, but her novel this year is just as good. **My Name is Lucy Barton** intrigues and pierces with its evocative, skin-peeling-back remembrances of growing up dirt-poor. Nonfiction political book of the year? It's has to be Mr Ed Balls (cha-cha-cha) for his funny, human and unusually thoughtful **Speaking Out**.

Janice Turner

I've never read fewer books than in 2016. My mind refused to settle, constantly distracted by torrid news. I couldn't cope with anything glum or heavy. I craved a good laugh. So I recommend Curtis Sittenfeld's **Eligible**, a hilarious reworking of *Pride and Prejudice* that will thrill even devoted Jane Austen fans. I particularly loved Lizzie Bennet's sisters Lydia and Kitty, as maddeningly trivial as Austen's originals, screaming "haemorrhoids" and "blow job" in a stiff, preppy game of charades. It's filthy, funny and there's a happy ending. God knows we need a few of those.

Melanie Reid

The paperback of Mark Vanhoenacker's *Skyfaring: a Journey with a Pilot* coincided with my son getting his first job flying planes. I loved this fabulous insight into the secret world of the sky, but so will the most weary, cynical travellers. **Mr Darley's Arabian: High Life, Low Life, Sporting Life: A History of Racing in 25 Horses** by Christopher McGrath is an enthralling cultural history of humans as much as horses. And the young writer Cal Flyn's memoir **Thicker Than Water** is an original page-

turner about a morally ambiguous ancestor who helped to colonise Australia.

Giles Coren

The small handful of novelists that emerged in the 1980s and vied over 30 years for the accolade of Britain's best novelist have now fallen away to leave Julian Barnes unchallenged as our only genuinely serious writer of fiction, preoccupied as much with tone, form and the history of his art as with the bare essentials of plotting, humour and prose. He fires the odd dud and is occasionally a bit ponderous, but **The Noise of Time**, his riff on the genius, political heartbreak and eventual tragic decline of Shostakovich — with its deliberate whiff of Solzhenitsyn-era translatoresque — is his best for ages. It is gripping, outward-looking, generous with plot and atmosphere and far beyond the powers of McEwan, Amis, Ishiguro, Rushdie et al. Barnes is not an attention-seeking writer, on or off the page, but this book grabbed me by the nuts like nothing of his since *Staring at the Sun*. And my nuts are a lot harder to grab now than they were then. Sadly.

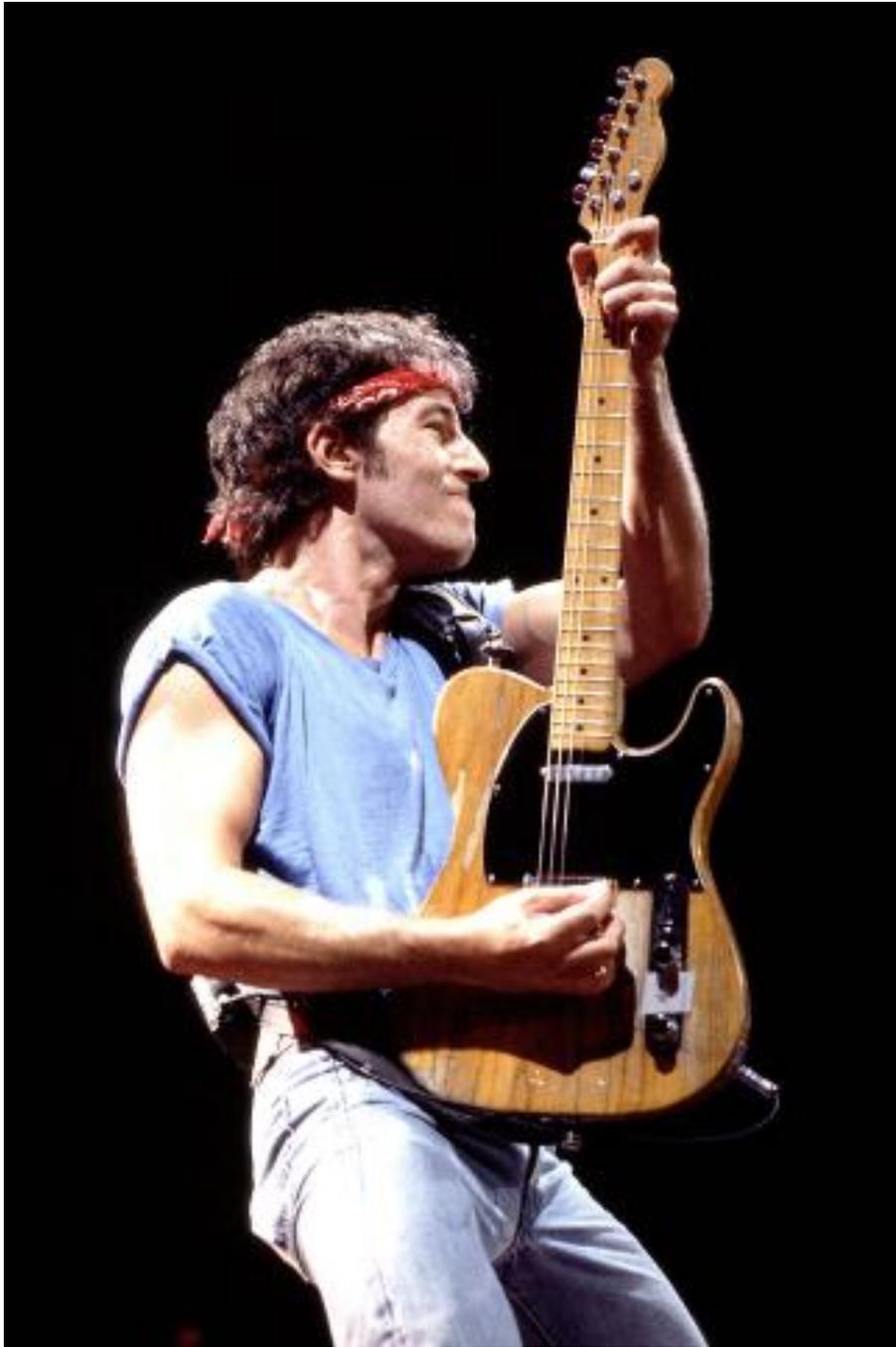
Ed Conway

For me this year was all about Robert Gordon's magisterial **The Rise and Fall of American Growth**. I'm a little sceptical about the thesis that occupies the latter chapters: that today's innovations (the internet, social networks et al) have far less productive potential than those from previous eras (the motor vehicle, the flushing loo and the refrigerator). Regardless, the best bit of the book is the first section: a history of how American household life has been transformed and improved beyond recognition over the past couple of centuries. Economists tend to ignore real life in favour of equations. Not Gordon, and we are all the more fortunate for it.

Matthew Parris

Two faith-related books from this atheist . . . but **The Bible for Grown-Ups** by Simon Loveday, written from the viewpoint of any faith or none, explains how the mantle of historical truth and divine authority has placed upon the Bible an intolerable weight, crushing it as a creative work of immense imaginative and inspirational power. I praised his unpublished manuscript in *The Times* last year, and its author died just after his life's work came to publication. In **The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe**, David Coltart offers a personal memoir and a magnificent history of the Rhodesia and Zimbabwe he served as one of the few white post-independence MPs: the minister who rescued a nation's schools. After every attempt on

his life I believe him when he says he couldn't have kept going without his Christian faith.



Bruce Springsteen

PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES/WIREIMAGE

Ben Macintyre

John Preston's **A Very English Scandal**, the story of Jeremy Thorpe's downfall and trial, is a brilliant exploration of an extraordinary political scandal, and the snobbery and old boy networks that riddled British society. Deeply researched, fluently written and darkly comic, it reads like a thriller. Bruce Springsteen's **Born to Run** is the rarest of pleasures, an autobiography by a rock star who can write, with honesty and without self-applause. I have been waiting for most of my life for Robert Harris to write a novel that is not gripping, insightful and entertaining. I am waiting still. His latest, **Conclave**, is superb.

Anna Murphy

For me it has been the Year of Reading Feministly, courtesy of books that are bitter, sweet, bittersweet and, in the case of the comedienne Amy Schumer's memoir **The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo**, taboo-bustingly funny. The American essay

collection **The Bitch is Back** is the follow-up to the bestselling *The Bitch in the House* of more than a decade ago, and is just as acute, just as thought-provoking. Quieter fictional commentaries on what it means to be a woman today are Anne Tyler's **Vinegar Girl** (inspired by *The Taming of the Shrew*) and Elizabeth Strout's **My Name is Lucy Barton**. All of the above are masterly (sic) in their way.

Libby Purves

Robert Harris's **Conclave** is a real page-turner, with a great twist in the final pages, and — considering it's about Roman Catholic cardinals — remarkably uncynical. **How To Read Water** by Tristan Gooley, tracking the behaviour of wetness in small and large amounts, is a vital read for we who regularly plunge into the North Sea (even on Christmas morning), sail across seas and occasionally slip down riverbanks and step in puddles. Good to know the science while you squelch. **Kind of Blue** by Ken Clarke is a political memoir that is actually readable.

Philip Collins

The finest book of this and many years is David Cesarani's posthumously published **Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews**. This is the most authoritative and sensitive account yet to claim that the destruction of European Jewry might not have been planned or carried out with industrial efficiency. The failure of the West to accept refugees in any number echoes out to us today. The best book in the field of British politics was John Bew's biography of Attlee, **Citizen Clem**, which dismantles the stone monument that the Labour Party has made of its first successful leader. Bew's Attlee is all the more impressive for being reclaimed as the modest and humble British patriot who always held Churchill's admiration. As Clive James tidies up his rooms in advance of departure, his **Collected Poems** are a selection of a lifetime of pursuing his first love as a writer. The greatest joy of the book comes from the melancholy, as the end draws near.

Rachel Sylvester

Politics became so overwhelming this year that I read to escape. Jessie Burton's **The Muse** had me hooked, then charmed. Part detective story, part romance, it follows the fortunes of two female artists — one a painter, the other a writer — linked by a mysterious painting. Exploring themes of creativity and inspiration, the plot keeps the pages turning, but the book also engages the brain. The same is true of Ian McEwan's **Nutshell**, a thriller written from the point of view of an unborn child. "Clever and infantile, it's dusk in the second Age of Reason," notes this wise observer of the

unfolding events. That could be the motto of the year.



A Founding Father remembered in Ron Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton*, and the hit musical *Hamilton*
THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES

Michael Gove

My books of the year have an American theme. Francis Spufford's novel **Golden Hill**, set in 18th-century New York, is a brilliant re-creation of the society and culture of the time: thoughtful and playful, moving and powerful. My biography of the year is Ron Chernow's **Alexander Hamilton**, published for the first time in the UK. Hamilton was the illegitimate immigrant from the West Indies who became the most principled, yet vilified, Founding Father. Gripping history, now turned into a hip-hop musical that is destined for the London stage next year.

Henry Winter

Pep Guardiola: The Evolution is the follow-up to *Pep Confidential*, Martí Perarnau's bestselling insight into the most intense, successful, visionary manager of the modern era. Guardiola here reflects on Bayern Munich and opens up on his plans for Manchester City. In **Leading**, Sir Alex Ferguson, the former Manchester United

manager, now mixing in Harvard circles, analyses the skills that kept him at the top for so long. **Hillsborough: The Truth** by Professor Phil Scraton was updated to take in the verdicts from the new inquest into the 1989 disaster, calling the media, police and government to account.

Kate Muir

Shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, **His Bloody Project** is the little book that could: the work of a sophomore novelist launched by a tiny independent Scottish publisher. Set in the Highlands in 1869, the book is a whydunnit, following a brutal triple murder by young Roderick Macrae. Medical reports, the account of the prisoner, the trial, and “travels in the borderlands of lunacy” are included. Yet what’s truly gripping is the account of crofting life under the brutal, unpredictable and unconscionable feudal system. Graeme Macrae Burnet is what the Scots call “thrawn”, and you cannot help but sympathise with him in this brilliantly constructed gem.

Alice Thomson

There are many half-finished books lying around my house this year, but I’ve read **The Hidden Life of Trees** by the German forester Peter Wohlleben three times. It’s incredibly calming, written in a matter-of-fact Germanic way, but is also romantic. Trees, he tells us, are highly social, they feel loneliness, scream with pain and communicate underground. Some younger trees take risks, older ones act as parents. Beeches are bullies and willows are loners. Poplars produce 1.8 million seeds, but only one will survive. This is a book about life, death and regeneration where nothing happens in a hurry, unlike the news in 2016.



A revolutionary journey relived in Catherine Merridale's *Lenin on the Train*
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David Aaronovitch

It has been a year for making bad history and publishing good ones. I've chosen four, although one is strictly speaking a biography. Two are about Russia. Daniel Beer's **The House of the Dead: Siberian Exile Under the Tsars**, covering four centuries, is full of extraordinary stories, any one of which could become a book in itself. Catherine Merridale's beautifully written **Lenin on the Train** concerns just a few months when a country and continent stood at the edge of a great historical leap. The other pair of books concern the origins of the Second World War. Both are the first volumes of two. Volker Ullrich's biography **Hitler: Volume I: Ascent 1889-1939** is a substantial addition to the Führer canon, and Dan Todman's **Britain's War: Into Battle, 1937-1941** also adds very valuable insights to what is a well-examined, if critical, period.

Alex O'Connell

I stayed up all night to finish **A Woman on the Edge of Time**, this doggedly reported, elegantly written tale of the novelist Jeremy Gavron's search to uncover the reason for the suicide of his clever, beautiful, academic mother. The writer was four when Hannah Gavron killed herself, dropping him at nursery before sticking her head in a gas oven,

using the method made famous by Sylvia Plath months earlier, also in Primrose Hill, north London. Gavron reassembles Hannah's life through letters, photos and diaries. Was she really depressed? Did she love her son too little? Or was she defeated by her struggle to be heard in a man's world? It's deeply personal, but without self-indulgence.

Rose Wild

Jumpin' Jack Flash by Keiron Pim tells the story of the strange louche life of David Litvinoff, a Sixties underworld legend who knew — and fell out with — everyone, from the Krays to Lucian Freud to the Rolling Stones. Jon Savage's **1966: The Year the Decade Exploded** is an encyclopaedic and intelligent record of a momentous time, in music and society. Al Capone, Louis Armstrong, a missing heiress and a most unusual private eye — **Dead Man's Blues** by Ray Celestin has it all. It's a great murder mystery with a musical subtext.

Sathnam Sanghera

I helped to judge the Wellcome Book Prize this year and so read a load of books about science, medicine and illness that I normally wouldn't have come across. **The Last Act of Love** by Cathy Rentzenbrink and **The Outrun** by Amy Liptrot turned out to be my reads of the year, both moving and original memoirs that are also tense, intricately structured and powerful pieces of writing. The winner, Suzanne O'Sullivan's **It's All in Your Head**, is a very rare thing for a book ostensibly about medicine: it is as addictive as a great box set; makes you rethink some of your closest relationships and wonder about some of the people you know best; and above all, like all truly great books, it is about love and compassion.

Will Hodgkinson

My Karl Ove Knausgaard obsession continued into 2016 with **Some Rain Must Fall**. The detail with which Knausgaard recalls his years as an overly serious, music-obsessed youth is so all-enveloping, I'm beginning to think it was actually me who grew up as the son of a depressed Norwegian alcoholic. Keiron Pim's **Jumpin' Jack Flash** shines a light on the fascinating David Litvinoff, an East End gangster, hustler and Sixties scenester who inspired the cult movie *Performance*, while Nell Zink's **Nicotine** takes up an unlikely subject — a woman grieving for her father joins a bunch of squatters united by their love of cigarettes — and turns it into deadly dry comedy. The plot gets increasingly preposterous, but Zink's unconventionality is refreshing.



Deborah Ross

I was implored to read Emma Cline's novel, **The Girls**, just as I was implored to read Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet — very boring, by the end — so I resisted (and resisted), but I am glad I finally caved. A young girl joins a cult, but mostly this is a spellbinding, supremely evocative coming-of-age story. If I were to do the imploring I would implore you to read **Bettyville**, George Hodgman's tender, funny, touching memoir of returning home to look after his mother in her old age, and the love that, hitherto, had not dared speak its name. (He's gay; they've never discussed.) Lastly, Ann Patchett's novel **Commonwealth**, and if you need to ask why, you've plainly never read any Ann Patchett. More fool you.

Melissa Katsoulis

Female readers often love books about women's lives and I'm sure Elena Ferrante will top many ladies' Christmas lists this year. But I find spying on the inner workings of the male mind more intriguing, and David Szalay hit the spot with **All That a Man Is**, a stylish and subtle exploration of masculinity that fully deserved its place on the Booker shortlist.

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst

In a strong year for fiction, with fine novels from established authors such as Ian McEwan and the Smiths (Ali and Zadie), the most grimly compelling fiction came from a new voice: Ottessa Moshfegh's Man Booker-shortlisted **Eileen**. It takes nerve to create such a thoroughly dislikeable narrator, but as she produces sad-funny descriptions of her life in 1960s small-town America, it is like someone reaching into a bottomless bag of gifts. In nonfiction, Alan Bennett's **Keeping On Keeping On** offers a chunky new selection from his diaries, which proves him to be a far stranger, spikier writer than many people assume.

Oliver Kamm

Robert Harris's **Conclave** is enthralling. I am admittedly Harris's literary stalker, having read everything by him — including political biographies from the 1980s. But his thrillers are masterpieces of the genre. This latest, about papal politics, is as fine as his novels about a victorious Nazi Germany or the Dreyfus case. **Dialect Matters** by Peter Trudgill is an entertaining collection of articles on language by a leading authority on dialect. Trudgill is justly harsh on the stubborn prejudice that non-standard dialects are not “correct” English. **Are Some Languages Better than Others?** by RMW Dixon is an accessible exposition of the sophistication and purpose of language.

Jenni Russell

Sobered by how little I understood about Donald Trump's appeal, I've been immersed in memoirs and reportage from Trump territory. One of the best is by the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, who five years ago left her liberal Californian bubble to become friends with the stoutly hospitable hunting, shooting and fishing Tea Partiers of Louisiana. **Strangers in Their Own Land** is a mesmerising account of the dignity, pride and sadness of people whose land, rivers, bodies and ways of life are being poisoned by the big business they support but who still believe that government is the ultimate evil, and that God, guns, jobs and abortion must decide how they vote.

Roger Boyes

Back in the 1980s Britain apparently persuaded Washington that foreign policy should be deployed as a “convenient form of ethical egotism” — you can project power, in other words, by telling foreigners that what is good for you is good. Maybe it's time for some more advice. **Realpolitik: A History** by John Bew, a British disciple of Henry Kissinger, could well find its way into the White House. I hope so, it's an elegant book about politics without cant. If anyone can persuade Donald Trump that great power

diplomacy has to be more than a display of virility then it is surely Bew.



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So funny to see all the literati get their Brexit whinges into their book reviews like Ancien

Regime exquisites sighing over all this revolution nonsense.

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Paul Knights 9 hours ago

Best book I've read this year - Ian McEwan's Nutshell. As always it has superb prose, tremendous characters and what McEwan never neglects - terrific plot.

Worst? Let's face it, it's much more fun discussing these. I've just finished Magpie Murders by Anthony Horowitz. I loved his 2 Holmes books and James Bond book but this is an absolute stinker. Sorry! Dull, overlong, with 2 denouement that are really not worth the effort, especially the first (it's a book within a book). A note to all authors and editors - books about writing and publishing are never interesting! :-)

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