

# Best (overlooked) books 2012

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## Sylvia Lawson

Caroline Moorehead's [A Train in Winter: A Story of Resistance, Friendship and Survival](#) (Chatto and Windus, \$32.95) searches out the lives of the 230 women of the wartime Resistance who were rounded up and taken together, in one train, to Auschwitz in February 1943. Forty-nine survived the war and came home. Beginning research in 2008, Moorehead developed her book from the memories of four survivors, families and friends, and a great range of archives and personal papers. The outcome is a large group portrait and a web of stories in which the individuals and their relationships are tracked and kept vividly in focus; it's a great balancing act. If you thought we knew too much already of Holocaust tales and the Nazis' limitless barbarity, this book unpacks its special histories purposefully: Moorehead's concern is with the essential force of friendship in endurance and survival. At the end, the book is about the bleakness of survival — no sentimentality, no triumphalism — and the business of dealing with a history that never goes away. Of the forty-nine, very few found happiness, and Moorehead shows us why. Her book helps the present generations take up the inheritance; after reading it, we know again that the past is never finished with.

## Norman Abjorensen

[Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy](#), by Christopher Hayes (Crown, \$36), reminds us that the term "meritocracy," like Donald Horne's "lucky country," had its origins in irony. While written for and about America, this book addresses themes that will resonate just as powerfully in Australia. It chronicles the sense of despair and bafflement experienced by ordinary citizens as the nation's institutions — from Wall Street and Congress to the Catholic Church, corporate America and even major league baseball — foundered amid a welter of corruption and incompetence. The result is historically low levels of trust in these institutions, with an ever-widening gap between ordinary citizens and the new meritocratic elites, rootless and cynically self-serving.

## Nicholas Gruen

Jonathan Haidt is an American academic psychologist whose research has focused on uncovering deep patterns common to the ethical framework of all human societies. In [The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion](#) (Penguin, \$39.95), he likens the five or six basic themes of all cultures' ethical systems — avoidance of harm, protection of the weak, reciprocity, respect for authority, purity and loyalty — to "moral tastebuds" with which different societies build the sociological cuisines that constitute their moral codes. It's a compelling perspective that enables him to explain how, as a liberal (what Australians would call a "left liberal"), he came to have more empathy for the concerns of those on the right, whom he calls "conservatives." Liberals, he argues, deploy only two or three of the fundamental five or six foundations of the ethical repertoire, while conservatives' palate extends to all of them. This doesn't make Haidt a conservative, but does help him empathise and, so, understand conservatives better. The book is simply and compellingly written and I strongly recommend it.

## Andrew Ford

Of all the musicians I can think of, the American composer, conductor, writer and teacher Gunther Schuller (born 1925) has had the most wide-ranging career. Beginning as an orchestral musician, he played French horn on the "Birth of the Cool" sessions with Miles Davis and Gil Evans in 1949. In the mid 1950s, with John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet, he cultivated an approach known as the Third Stream, embracing elements of jazz and classical music. He orchestrated Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha* and went on to compose nearly 200 original works, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for *Of Reminiscences and Reflections*. That would be enough for most people, but Schuller has also conducted many of the world's great orchestras, taught countless students, especially at the Tanglewood Festival, and published some important books. The latest is his very engaging autobiography, [Gunther Schuller: A Life in Pursuit of Music and Beauty](#) (University of Rochester Press, £30).

We read of Schuller's encounters with famous composers and conductors, hang out with him in jazz clubs and at the Darmstadt Festival of New Music, and learn his views on instrumentalists and singers, from Laurence Melchior to Ethel Merman. Equal parts life and music, anecdote and philosophy, it is simply yet beautifully written.

### **Julian Thomas**

We spend a lot of time with books, as readers or authors, but most of us know almost nothing about the venerable industry that produces them. In his brilliant study of the contemporary trade press in London and New York, [Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century](#) (Polity, \$31.95), the Cambridge sociologist John B. Thompson explains how the business works, and how it has changed in recent decades. With interviews, stories and plenty of crisp analysis, Thompson patiently draws out the logic behind the apparently inexplicable events that make publishing such a puzzle for outsiders: the outlandish advance for a new author or the case of the successful author losing her agent and struggling to find a publisher. In this second edition, Thompson begins to address the extraordinary current transformation of the industry, as e-books, tablets and online stores take over. After centuries of change, the book trade is still evolving, and we will need another instalment of this tale sooner rather than later.

### **Melissa Sweet**

In [Belonging Together: Dealing with the Politics of Disenchantment in Australian Indigenous Policy](#) (Aboriginal Studies Press, \$39.95), anthropologist Patrick Sullivan examines how centralised policy-making, focused on the interests of bureaucrats and politicians and driven by managerialism, has been to the detriment of Indigenous well-being. He also critiques the role of media management in the development and implementation of Indigenous affairs policy, and says that "one of the greatest inhibitors of Aboriginal development is that Aboriginal policy is formulated for the non-Aboriginal public." Sullivan writes clearly and, while his critique is sharp, this is not a book of despair or hopelessness. Rather, he finds common ground for future progress, including a suggestion for new regional governance approaches and for a more effective engagement of the Indigenous not-for-profit sector. For me, it was one of those "lightbulb books," producing many flashes of understanding and enlightenment. It is also likely to be of interest for those with a concern for policy processes more broadly and particularly that elusive holy grail of "whole-of-government" approaches.

### **Jock Given**

"Before directors call 'action,' or editors mix sound and image, a thousand assembly lines from all over the world have streamed into media production." Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller's [Greening the Media](#) (Oxford University Press, \$29.95) gathers evidence of a "fascinating, infuriating, complex and contradictory historical relationship between media, environment and society." From the first "toxic drips and harmful puffs" of print and paper production noticed in the fifteenth century, through the battery acids and gutta percha deployed by telegraph companies, to Eastern Kodak's effluents in the Genesee River and the manufacturing of iPods, iPhones and iPads in China, Maxwell and Miller trace the environmental consequences of media and communications. "Ecological issues must inform those of us who love print and enjoy reading," they argue, "so that we learn to read beyond the text – not so much 'against the grain' as with an appreciation of how the grain came to be there and what it has meant for the Earth."

### **Richard Johnstone**

The extent to which we can confidently leave our keys with the people next door — in order that they might take delivery of a parcel, or let in a tradesman, or water the pot plants, or just keep an eye on things — remains the standout measure of the health of our neighbourly relationships. It's a measure that has a long pedigree, as Emily Cockayne demonstrates in her entertaining and thought-provoking [Cheek by Jowl: A History of Neighbours](#) (Bodley Head, \$59.95). In eighteenth-century England, says Cockayne, adducing her evidence from the records of the Old Bailey, "trust between neighbours was shown in many ways, not least by their habits of lending possessions and leaving keys with each other." If something goes wrong, though, the keys are taken back. From "hedge rage" (one neighbour's privacy is another's eternal darkness) to "neighbournet" (logging on via your neighbour's wifi connection), to say nothing of the noise of leaf-blowers, we continue to invent new ways

to fall out with next door. But then, it could be worse. “In 1314,” Emily Cockayne tells us, “Alice Wade rigged her privy up to the gutter that ran under her neighbour’s house, and it often blocked, leaving her neighbours ‘greatly inconvenienced by the stench.’”

### **Andrew Leigh**

Nate Silver became the *bête noire* of conservative commentators when he predicted that Barack Obama would romp home in November. But too few people here know of his book [The Signal and the Noise: The Art and Science of Prediction](#) (Penguin, \$29.99), the best thing I’ve ever read on forecasting. Silver shows why it’s easier to forecast weather than earthquakes, flu pandemics or terrorism. He writes knowledgeably about probabilities and big data, interspersed with interviews with everyone from world-beating poker player Tom Dwan to former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld. With a high degree of confidence, I predict that you will like this book.

### **Brian McFarlane**

I’m not sure if “overlooked” is quite the word for Steven Carroll’s [Spirit of Progress](#) (HarperCollins, \$29.99) or whether I just wanted it to make a bigger splash. In a sense, though, “a bigger splash” hardly seems the word for so beautifully modest a piece of work. *Spirit of Progress* is a prequel to Carroll’s wonderful “Glenroy trilogy,” in which he chronicled with poetic precision the slow, inexorable sprawl of northern Melbourne suburbia in the second half of the twentieth century. *Spirit* offers a very resonant account of the end of the war as it is felt in the streets of Melbourne and impinges on the lives of a cast of characters whose lives criss-cross in ways they aren’t always aware of. The central figure of the eccentric aunt, who lives a curiously fulfilled life in a tent in a paddock and becomes the subject of a painter’s interest, is based on an aunt of the author’s and is both symbolic and utterly real. This novel continues the story of Vic and Rita, whose married life is inscribed with the shifts of time and place, and it has a prologue and epilogue in which their son Michael is at large in Paris in the later 1970s. I can’t wait for his story to form the next in this glowing, poetic evocation of a world I thought I knew but which Carroll makes me see with new eyes.

### **Lesley Russell**

In [Five Chiefs: A Supreme Court Memoir](#) (Little, Brown, \$24.99), retired Supreme Court justice John Paul Stevens captures the inner workings of the US Supreme Court via his personal experiences with the five chief justices — Fred Vinson, Earl Warren, Warren Burger, William Rehnquist and John Roberts — with whom he interacted during his thirty-four years of service. He provides a rare and often illuminating, behind-the-scenes look at the people and functioning of the Supreme Court and his own role in pivotal cases such as *Bush v Gore*. When he arrived at the court in 1975, Stevens was a Republican judge appointed by a Republican president (Gerald Ford). Three decades later, he left the court as one its most liberal members. Justice Stevens’s writing reflects his persona — quiet but forceful. While he shows extraordinary respect for the institution and for his former colleagues — even those with whom he strongly disagreed — he is also absolutely clear about where he believes justice lies and he does not hide his concerns about some of the court’s recent decisions.

### **Matthew Ricketson**

17 June 2012 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Watergate burglary, which led to landmark investigative reporting by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward and, eventually, forced the resignation of president Richard Nixon. Amid the congratulatory retrospectives, what you probably didn’t hear about was a new book that forensically investigates the circumstances behind the decision by W. Mark Felt, the deputy director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to leak to Woodward. The journalists had kept Felt’s identity a secret for more than three decades until his family decided to reveal what they saw as his heroic role in Watergate before he died. They also felt he deserved to benefit from his actions, and sold the film rights to Tom Hanks’s production company for an estimated US\$1 million. In [Leak: Why Mark Felt Became Deep Throat](#) (Kansas University Press, \$42), Max Holland documents how Felt was far less interested in exposing dirty tricks at the White House in 1972 than he was in perpetrating dirty office politics of his own. This is an exemplary blend of investigative journalism and scholarship and I recommend it to anyone who wants to understand how politics and journalism

really work.

## **Brett Evans**

**Dial M for Murdoch: News Corporation and the Corruption of Britain** (Allen Lane, \$29.95), by the British Labour MP Tom Watson and the Independent's Martin Hickman, reads like a thriller. The first substantial book on the Murdoch phone-hacking scandal, it tells the appalling but compelling story of a media organisation that used its power to run amok through the institutions of the United Kingdom. Information is gold in Britain's highly competitive media market and many journalists — but particularly the tabloid reporters who worked on Murdoch's notorious News of the World — went digging for it by illegally hacking phones and bribing public officials. There are now dozens of cases before the courts in which journalists could face jail if found guilty. Watson and Hickman tell the tale with precision and wit. And they also recount the equally important story of how this nefarious world was exposed — despite the best efforts of News Corporation and its lawyers, private detectives and managing executives. It's an impressive work. I wonder if it got reviewed in the Times?

## **Michael Gill**

Ron Suskind's **Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President** (HarperCollins, \$19.99) is a Dr Strangelove for the modern era, without the satire. This former Wall Street Journal Washington correspondent lays open the contest between Washington and Wall Street. Candidate Obama gets an early warning of what's coming from a very well-connected man from The Street, and at first — well-informed and evidently well-advised — he seems set to take on the issues. Suskind exposes thoroughly how a combination of Clinton-era advisers and aggressive Obama staffers neutered an effective response to Wall Street's incredible volatility.

## **Tom Griffiths**

If Ned Kelly had been gentler and more learned but just as much a bushman he might have written **A Wild History: Life and Death on the Victoria River Frontier** (Monash University Publishing, \$29.95). Darrell Lewis's book is a distillation of bush wisdom and scholarly tenacity, of courageous fieldwork and equally adventurous archival sleuthing, of forty years of learning the country and of a lifetime of listening to history. Lewis has walked the Victoria River District in Australia's northwest, swum its crocodile-infested rivers, got to know its plants, animals and people, slept under its stars, inspected its caves, recorded its inscriptions on rock and tree, and then pursued its material diaspora wherever it may have migrated. I am reminded of a great landmark work in Australian history, *A Million Wild Acres*, a book about the Pillaga Scrub by another bush scholar, Eric Rolls. Lewis's book is full of frontier stories, superbly researched and skilfully told. And the book to look out for in early 2013 is *The Archaeology of Australia's Deserts* (Cambridge University Press) by Mike Smith. It's the most important work in Australian archaeology since John Mulvaney's *The Prehistory of Australia* (1969).

## **Klaus Neumann**

Maybe only an anthropologist would be attracted to a place because it has been ranked last in a survey that measured factors such as personal safety, health, education and transport in 400 cities. Bruce Whitehouse did ethnographic research in Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of the Congo and, in 2003, the "world's worst city." He was trying to understand a paradox: why has this city attracted migrants from other African countries? More importantly, his book, **Migrants and Strangers in an African City: Exile, Dignity, Belonging** (Indiana University Press, \$44.95), is an attempt to shed light on the position of these migrants and their children (many of whom were born in Brazzaville and have Congolese citizenship) as "strangers" in Georg Simmel's sense. I learned a lot from reading this book: about South–South migration, particularly in Africa; about "strangerhood" as a condition that is actively reproduced both by migrants and by members of the host society; about xenophobia not as an endemic cultural trait but as a historical phenomenon; about the motivations of people who move to a country where 70 per cent of the inhabitants live in absolute poverty; and about the performative and historically contingent nature of national identity in an African context. Whitehouse's ethnography is an often surprising and carefully argued book.

## Sara Dowse

Before the latest ceasefire, with bombs dropping, rockets flying and Palestinian children dying, it was timely to be reminded in a gruesome sort of way of the many books recently published on the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict. I thought it would have been salutary, to say the least, for our politicians to have had a look at some of them. For an understanding of what has happened to Hamas since 2006, for example, I would recommend [The Politics of Change in Palestine](#) by Michael Bröning (Pluto Press, \$39.95). Then there's Antony Loewenstein and Ahmed Moor's [After Zionism: One State for Israel and Palestine](#) (Saqi, \$24.95). These essays, by some of the best known analysts of mainstream Zionism, provide essential insights into why the intransigent course Israel has set itself on, supported by its Western allies, is not only proving disastrous for Palestinians but also spells the uncertain future of the Jewish state.

## David Hayes

Colin Ward (1924–2010) was one of those rare, life-affirming writer-radicals whose ideas and persona seemed to emanate from the same source, an innate sense of freedom and conviviality. This informed his early commitment to anarchism, acquired as a young soldier in Glasgow and developed in the lively postwar milieu of his native east London around the newspaper *Freedom* and, later, the journal *Anarchy* (which he edited). It was also the wellspring of a compendious oeuvre which, often by focusing on people's creative use of the world around them, illuminated many aspects of the social landscape: architecture and town planning, transport and housing (including self-build homes and squatting), holiday camps and allotments, the child in city and country. Many of his books and articles were published by small presses or hard-to-access magazines. This makes the 340-page collection [Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader](#) (AK Press, \$25.70), edited by the transatlantic team of Chris Wilbert and Damian F. White, all the more valuable, for in representing the range of Ward's writing the book also displays the consistency and integrity of his humane outlook. In an age in which global imperatives are being matched everywhere by a turn to the local and the particular, Colin Ward's optimistic, people-centred radicalism is ever fresh.

## Kerry Brown

Newly published in English, Yang Jisheng's [Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine](#) (Allen Lane, \$55) is one of the most important works of history to have appeared this century. This is a monumental work in every sense, recording the shocking details of the largest man-made famine in history, which afflicted the People's Republic of China from 1959 to 1963. Yang was originally a journalist for the official Xinhua news agency, but in his retirement, as a memorial to his adopted father who so tragically died during the famines, he set about looking at the archives within China that contained records of the deaths from the era. His meticulous style, and the lack of emotion with which he records the calamity, only makes it even more powerful. This is not history for the faint-hearted, but its impact in terms of recording unimaginable and wholly avoidable human misery is immense. No memorial could ever come close to honouring fully the innocent lives lost in this epic catastrophe, but in this work Yang fulfills the historian's moral, as well as intellectual, responsibility admirably. •

Reading good books is similar to meditation. When I was a student, I discovered that when I am stressed, I could pick up a good book and change the way I see the world. As I was reading, I felt more secure and relaxed. The book "Stress-Proof: The scientific solution to protect your brain and body," supports the idea that to diminish your stress level, focus your mind in a different activity. Fiction books follow the best way of revealing your great values and ideas, storytelling. I haven't been very enthusiastic in the past about fiction books, but in the past two years, I have turned my attention to several of them. I genuinely enjoy when the author has something to say behind a story, and I avoid books that are solely based on the relationships between the characters.