

## The year's top 100 books

Annual awards and lists of best books are anything but objective. Just like in life and politics, the results reflect the tastes of those who vote. So our list of the best books of the year, compiled from suggestions by almost 20 people, will look a lot different than lists elsewhere.

Judges for this year's National Book Award, for example, skipped over Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom" — a big novel that earned a lot of buzz but didn't even make the NBA's list of five finalists — but our contributors (find a list of them elsewhere in this section) overwhelmingly recommended it highly. And because of that, "Freedom" made our short list of best of the best of the year.

To survey the lists inside is to find lots of Midwestern voices, but many global ones as well. Our contributors apparently read and recommended far more fiction this year than they did other forms, and our list thus leans heavily in that direction. But there is something for almost everyone here: children's books, mysteries, sports, poetry, too.

As in the past, The Kansas City Star's list of top 100 books comes with a spotlight on a shorter list of titles — seven this year — deemed extra-special. In addition to Franzen's "Freedom," those range from the haunting, blue-collar fiction of Kansas City writer Christie Hodgen to the century-old voice of Mark Twain to surprisingly compelling books about a sports star, a punk rocker and a medical tragedy.

At a time when many people wonder about the future of the book, literacy and literature, books such as these remind us of the joy and power of reading. And in this new age of enlightenment — *e-lightenment?* — we hereby announce ourselves platform neutral. More and more of you are reading books on hand-held devices that are somewhat different from the bound-paper devices most of us grew up with. With their illuminated screens, their vast storage capabilities and their sleek portability, who's to say that a book is not a book?

### Fiction

•**"The Ask,"** by Sam Lipsyte (Farrar, Straus and Giroux): A hilarious, acid-drenched novel about disappointment and familial duty.

•**"Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self,"** by Danielle Evans (Riverhead): Evans' debut collection examines youth and race in America through a fresh set of eyes.

- **“Bound,”** by Antonya Nelson (Bloomsbury): Wichita native Nelson sets her textured novel in her hometown in the time of the resurgent BTK killer, peopling it with characters trying to find a balance between naughty and nice.
- **“C,”** by Tom McCarthy (Knopf): Creepy, gothic, Pynchonesque novel with brilliant scenes at Ypres in World War I.
- **“The Changeling: A Novel,”** by Kenzaburo Oe (Grove): The Japanese master evaluates his own form and technique in this late retrospective. A highly successful postmodern experiment, refusing to take easy refuge in the balms of nostalgic memory.
- **“Citrus County,”** by John Brandon (McSweeney’s). Gritty, grotesque and gothic in that weird Southern state of Florida. A fresh take on the coming-of-age novel.
- **“The Collected Stories,”** by Deborah Eisenberg (Picador): The culmination of a celebrated career. A must-read for anyone who cares about the short form.
- **“The Cookbook Collector,”** by Allegra Goodman (Dial Press): In a contemporary and subtle homage to Jane Austen’s “Sense and Sensibility,” Goodman unfurls the conflicting personalities of two sisters against the backdrop of late-’90s/early-aughts dot.com expansion, which sounds kind of dreadful but is instead one of the most skilled novels of the year.
- **“Day for Night,”** by Frederick Reiken (Little, Brown/Reagan Arthur): Reiken’s novel of miraculous survival and discovery embraces the Earth’s splendor, humankind’s capacity for good and evil, and the fact that we are all linked and that much is concealed within our oceanic psyches.
- **“ELEGIES FOR THE BROKENHEARTED,”** by Christie Hodgen (Norton): In a sassy vernacular, UMKC English professor Hodgen links elegies for five characters who suffered untimely deaths, rendered with such particularity that they walk off the page.
- **“FREEDOM,”** by Jonathan Franzen (Farrar, Straus and Giroux): Passionately imagined, psychologically exacting and shrewdly satirical, Franzen’s spiraling epic exposes the toxic ironies embedded in American middle-class life and reveals just how destructive our muddled notions of entitlement and freedom are and how obviously we squander life and love.
- **“Fun With Problems,”** by Robert Stone (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt): Excellent collection of stories of ruined lives with no escape.
- **“The House of Tomorrow,”** by Peter Bognanni (G.P. Putnam’s Sons): This winning debut novel revolves around a geodesic dome in Iowa and features a contagiously funny punk band called The Rash, comprising two boys whose unlikely friendship illustrates our essential need for one another.

- **“I Curse the River of Time,”** by Per Petterson (Graywolf Press): A dying mother and her wayward son face impending loss without bathing in pathos in this tale, crafted in atmospheric prose, by a popular Norwegian writer.
- **“Imperfect Birds,”** by Anne Lamott (Riverhead Books): Lamott’s seventh novel is a savvy, scary story of parents caught in a domestic triangle with their daughter, who knows how to score good grades and good drugs, deceiving her parents until it is almost too late.
- **“The Imperfectionists,”** by Tom Rachman (Dial Press): Rachman’s charming first novel makes even the lives of newspaper reporters — albeit expat newspaper reporters in Rome — gripping.
- **“In the Company of Angels,”** by Thomas E. Kennedy (Bloomsbury): Intricately woven and aching tale, set in Copenhagen, of a Chilean survivor of imprisonment and torture and the wounded Danish woman with whom he finds love.
- **“Kapitoil,”** by Teddy Wayne (Harper Perennial): This comic and accomplished first novel portrays the American cultural education of Karim Issar, a Qatari computer programmer who arrives in New York on the eve of the millennium.
- **“The Lonely Polygamist,”** by Brady Udall (W.W. Norton). One Mormon husband, his four wives and his 28 children: Not just the makings of a good joke but apparently the makings of a snappy and darkly comic novel.
- **“Madame Bovary,”** by Gustave Flaubert, translated by Lydia Davis (Viking): Great new translation of a masterwork that breathes life into a classic character.
- **“Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand,”** by Helen Simonson (Random House): A poignant romance between a major and a Pakistani shopkeeper brings simmering ethnic tensions in an English village to the surface in Simon’s wonderfully absorbing debut novel.
- **“My Hollywood,”** by Mona Simpson (Knopf): In alternating first-person narrations, a Filipina nanny and her composer employer tell a story tinged with domestic politics and inequities in socially stratified Los Angeles.
- **“Nashville Chrome,”** by Rick Bass (Houghton): This fictionalized portrait of a top-of-the-charts country trio — Maxine, Bonnie and Jim Ed Brown — is an empathic, breath-catching, mythic and profoundly American tale of creation, destruction and renewal.
- **“Point Omega,”** by Don DeLillo (Scribner): Considered by some a lesser work by DeLillo, it still packs an efficient punch. Meditative and metaphorical in its depiction of the Western landscape as a stand-in for the Middle East, a place of mystery and death.
- **“Selected Stories of William Trevor”** (Viking): Trevor is known to many as the greatest living Irish writer, and this collection offers some of his best and brightest works.

•“**Serious Men,**” by Manu Joseph (Norton): This fine debut novel from South Asia is a biting satire of India in the age of globalization, as old class and caste prejudices confront hypermodernity and rampant upward mobility.

•“**Shadow Tag,**” by Louise Erdrich (HarperCollins): A scorching tale with obvious autobiographical echoes about an assimilated upper middle-class American Indian couple, an artist and his muse, whose imploding marriage is witnessed with heartbreaking clarity by their precocious children.

•“**Skippy Dies,**” by Paul Murray (Faber & Faber): Evelyn Waugh-lovers will delight in the grim hilarity at the heart of this hefty novel set in Dublin’s venerable Seabrook College, where Skippy, in point of fact, does die. But that is only the beginning.

•“**Something Is Out There,**” by Richard Bausch (Knopf): Brilliant stories speak to what is best said in one of them: “The chain of events that made up the desperate seriousness of the private self.”

•“**Sourland,**” by Joyce Carol Oates (Ecco): Oates proves yet again that she is the matriarch of all things Gothic in contemporary fiction.

•“**Stations West,**” by Allison Amend (LSU Press): A fascinating portrait of Jews in the American Southwest by a promising first-time novelist.

•“**Super Sad True Love Story,**” by Gary Shteyngart (Random House): Pretend you won’t laugh. Trust us, you will. Shteyngart’s hallmark is believable absurdity, and here he raises the bar on fabulism to the level of unforgettable fiction.

•“**The Surrendered,**” by Chang-Rae Lee (Riverhead Books): The final 150 pages of Lee’s purposeful after-the-Korean War novel are so expertly crafted that you will want to measure them out.

•“**To the End of the Land,**” by David Grossman (Knopf): Powerfully moving portrait, by a leading Israeli writer, of lives hardened and overturned by war.

•“**The Typist,**” by Michael Knight (Atlantic): An understated, elegant, compact novel of the American occupation of Japan, by an underrated fiction writer.

•“**The Universe in Miniature in Miniature,**” by Patrick Somerville (Featherproof): A fun and fascinating collection of linked stories that connect inner and outer worlds by virtue of the main character’s supernatural helmet.

•“**A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD,**” by Jennifer Egan (Knopf): For all its sensory richness, social and psychological insights, spiky wit and brilliant layering of ideas and commentary, Egan’s time-bending tale is laced with suspense and punctuated by emotional ambushes of profound resonance.

•“**Voice of America,**” by E.C. Osondu (Harper): This stark debut novel explores cultural myths and conflicts in Nigeria and the U.S.

•“**Where the God of Love Hangs Out,**” by Amy Bloom (Random House): Bloom populates these linked short stories with characters one can’t help but root for.

•“**Wild Child and Other Stories,**” by T.C. Boyle (Viking): As sharp and entertaining as anyone writing short fiction today, Boyle continues to surprise with his ninth collection.

•“**The Wilding,**” by Benjamin Percy (Graywolf): Our reviewer called this first novel “an urgent and haunting look at the darker side of our nature and at our often futile attempts to control and manage the natural world.”

### **Mysteries, thrillers, suspense**

•“**Elegy for April,**” by Benjamin Black (Henry Holt): Writing under a pseudonym, peerless John Banville delivers another great Irish mystery.

•“**The Novel Bookstore,**” by Laurence Cossé, translated from the French by Alison Anderson (Europa Editions): Charming, engaging and sly tale for bibliophiles of a conspiracy to destroy a literary bookshop in Paris.

•“**Thereby Hangs a Tail,**” by Spencer Quinn (Atria): A most refreshing mystery set in the American Southwest and narrated by Chet, a failed police dog, who is the “right-hand” for his master, Bernie, a private detective. Hard to have more fun reading than his book.

•“**The Scent of Rain and Lightning,**” by Nancy Pickard (Random): A “gripping read” and “a master character study” (our reviewer wrote) of a Kansas family and a murder.

•“**31 Bond Street,**” by Ellen Horan (Harper/HarperCollins): This unjustly overlooked novel, with solid writing and a clever plot, is a reimagined thriller based on an 1850 New York City murder case that captured headlines in its day.

•“**The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest,**” by Stieg Larsson (Knopf): The third entry in the wildly popular and frankly violent series from the late Swedish writer. Its battered central character, the Goth hacker Lisbeth Salander, “defies social convention and authority,” our reviewer wrote, “and in the end finds a kind of rough justice in self-defense and revenge.”

•“**Our Kind of Traitor,**” by John le Carré (Knopf): The thriller master is in his element among anguished spies, a Russian mogul and geopolitical murk.

•“**Almost Dead,**” by Assaf Gavron (Harper Perennial): It might seem counterintuitive to expect that a book about terrorism could be suspenseful, deadpan comic and compelling

with likable characters on each side of the warring Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but this book did it.

### **Biography, autobiography, memoir**

•“**AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN, VOL. 1,**” edited by Harriet Elinor Smith (University of California Press): An event really, 100 years after Twain’s death, this is the first of three volumes of his humorous, inflammatory voice, much of it dictated during Twain’s last decade.

•“**City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and ’70s,**” by Edmund White (Bloomsbury USA): White, foremost social observer and cultural critic, offers his take on New York life in the most fascinating of decades.

•“**Doris Fleeson: Incomparably the First Political Journalist of Her Time,**” by Carolyn Saylor (Sunstone Press): Years before the Beltway was built, Kansas-born political columnist Doris Fleeson was among those in the fast lane of Washington journalism. This biography renders Fleeson, who died in 1970, relevant once more.

•“**The Grace of Silence,**” by Michele Norris (Pantheon): An NPR reporter presents an investigative family memoir of rare candor and artistry that dramatically reveals essential yet hidden aspects of African-American life

•“**Grant Wood: A Life,**” by R. Tripp Evans (Knopf): An art historian reclaims and unsnarls the long-hidden facts and truths of artist Grant Wood’s life and offers bold and revelatory critical interpretations of the Midwesterner’s uncanny paintings.

•“**I’m With Fatty: Losing Fifty Pounds in Fifty Miserable Weeks,**” by Edward Ugel (Weinstein Books): An irreverent memoir that is not your wife’s or your mother’s diet book.

•“**Irrepressible: The Life and Times of Jessica Mitford,**” by Leslie Brody (Counterpoint): Biography of an always fascinating iconoclast.

•“**JUST KIDS,**” by Patti Smith (Ecco): A riveting portrait of the musician’s beginnings and early adulthood in New York with the artist Robert Mapplethorpe.

•“**THE LAST BOY: MICKEY MANTLE AND THE END OF AMERICA’S CHILDHOOD,**” by Jane Leavy (HarperCollins): An exceptionally well-crafted portrait of the troubled man behind the heroics and the myths, this biography gains much of its power from the emotional complexities it stirs in the author and her readers.

•“**My Life As a Russian Novel,**” by Emmanuel Carrère (Metropolitan): The French filmmaker’s memoir is not your typical wimpy confessional, and it begins with an erotic dream.

• **“Lives Like Loaded Guns,”** by Lyndall Gordon (Viking): A marvelously speculative biography of Emily Dickinson.

• **“Young Mr. Obama: Chicago and the Making of a Black President,”** by Edward McClelland (Bloomsbury): Fascinating examination of a young man on the road to political greatness.

• **“Washington,”** by Ron Chernow (Penguin Press): The best single volume biography of Washington reveals him to be a man of passion.

### **History, current events, general nonfiction**

• **“The Atlantic: Great Sea Battles, Heroic Discoveries, Titanic Storms, and a Vast Ocean of a Million Stories,”** by Simon Winchester (Harper): Winchester waxes lyrical, rhetorical and historical in this broadly focused but eloquently detailed account of the great ocean and mankind’s relation to it.

• **“Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology,”** by David Abram (Pantheon): Abram — ecologist, philosopher and sleight-of-hand magician — investigates the forces that led our curious, inventive species away from worshipping nature to destroying it, in a provocative blend of stories, reflections and discoveries.

• **“Berlin at War,”** by Roger Moorhouse (Basic Books): It may be discomfiting for followers of World War II history to read about the air war over Berlin from the point of view of innocent German civilians on the ground, but English author Moorhouse provides stunning research and heartfelt interviews that never cease to fascinate.

• **“The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education,”** by Diane Ravitch (Basic): A compelling analysis of what’s wrong with public schools.

• **“The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again,”** by Robert McChesney and John Nichols (Nation): A provocative plan for rescuing — and revitalizing — newspapers.

• **“The Fall of the House of Walworth: A Tale of Madness and Murder in Gilded-Age America,”** by Geoffrey O’Brien (John MacRae/Holt): A narrative of abuse, patricide and social disintegration in upper-crust Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

• **“The Fiddler in the Subway,”** by Gene Weingarten (Simon & Schuster): Superb collection of magazine stories by a worthy journalist.

• **“FreeDarko Presents: The Undisputed Guide to Pro Basketball History,”** by multiple authors (Bloomsbury): A gorgeously illustrated hardcover from the guys behind the popular basketball blog FreeDarko.

•**“The Game From Where I Stand,”** by Doug Glanville (Times Books): An insightful look at baseball from a former player. The Star’s “Ball Star” blog called it a “must-read baseball book of 2010.”

•**“THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS,”** by Rebecca Skloot (Crown): Skloot is the first to tell the complex, tragic and profoundly revealing story of Henrietta Lacks and the “first immortal human cells,” code-named HeLa, an astonishing chronicle of racism and poverty, science and conscience, spirituality and family.

•**“Lethal Warriors: When the New Band of Brothers Came Home,”** by David Philipps (Palgrave Macmillan): An expose of how U.S. military commanders ignore deadly PTSD in soldiers returning from the invasion of Iraq.

•**“The Most Powerful Idea in the World: A Story of Steam, Industry, and Invention,”** by William Rosen (Random House): The history of steam power, set mainly in the 1700s but spanning the whole history of human invention and, most interesting for fans of “The Social Network,” of patent law and the debate over who “owns” an invention.

•**“Poisoning the Press: Richard Nixon, Jack Anderson and the Rise of Washington’s Scandal Culture,”** by Mark Feldstein (Farrar, Straus and Giroux): Recent history (from the 1960s and 1970s) as superb teacher.

•**“Running the Books: The Adventures of an Accidental Prison Librarian,”** by Avi Steinberg (Nan A. Talese): A Harvard graduate learns about life the hard way in his job among inmates.

•**“A Secret Gift: How One Man’s Kindness and a Trove of Letters Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression,”** by Ted Gup (Penguin Press): Inspiring story of an act of charity.

•**“Silk Parachute,”** by John McPhee (Farrar, Straus & Giroux): Personal, illuminating and highly engaging collection of essays from one of the great masters of narrative nonfiction.

•**“Travels in Siberia,”** by Ian Frazier (Farrar, Straus and Giroux): You want to go to Siberia and so you obviously want Frazier as guide to the flora, the fauna, the weather, the characters and all that Russian history.

•**“The Twilight of the Bombs,”** by Richard Rhodes (Knopf): The last book in the former Kansas Citian’s definitive work on the nuclear era.

•**“Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption,”** by Laura Hillenbrand (Random House): Stirring narrative account, from the author of “Seabiscuit,” of the extraordinary experience of Louis Zamperini, whose bomber crashed in the Pacific Ocean in 1943.



•**“Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization,”** by Steven Solomon (HarperCollins): Solomon’s unprecedented, all-encompassing and resounding inquiry into the science and politics of water is predicated on two incontrovertible yet widely disregarded facts: water is essential to life and to civilization.

•**“Wrong: Why Experts Keep Failing Us, and How to Know When Not to Trust Them,”** by David H. Freedman (Little, Brown): A persuasive explanation of why the conventional wisdom should often be ignored.

### **Criticism**

•**“Bob Dylan in America,”** by Sean Wilentz (Doubleday): A surprisingly fresh and enlightening series of essays on the life, the times, the music and the American historical context of the singular songwriter.

•**“Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?”** by James Shapiro (Simon and Schuster): A fascinating, highly readable history of the debate over the authorship of Shakespeare’s poems and plays — and of the kind of person and working conditions that surely produced them.

•**“The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist,”** by Orhan Pamuk (Harvard): The Turkish writer draws on his 35-year career to make a significant contribution to the theory of the novel, based on the distinction Friedrich Schiller made between the naive and the sentimental writer

•**“Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World,”** by Norman Lebrecht (Pantheon): A noted British cultural journalist takes a brisk, engaging journey through the life of a fascinating and enormously influential artist.

### **For children, young adults**

•**“Bink and Gollie,”** by Kate DiCamillo and Alison McGhee, with illustrations by Tony Fucile (Candlewick): An easy reader about two friends who are opposites in just about every way.

•**“Incarceron,”** by Catherine Fisher (Hodder): A young adult fantasy in which main characters Finn and Claudia, who live centuries apart, join forces to escape a prison that has developed a mind of its own.

•**“Luka and the Fire of Life,”** by Salman Rushdie (Random House): A fantasy/fable adults can also immerse themselves into, as they ponder metaphysical quandaries at every turn.

•**“Mockingbird,”** by Kathryn Erskine (Philomel): When school librarians start handicapping who will win the next John Newbery Medal for the most outstanding

children's book of 2010, Erskine's delicate novel about one girl affected by a school shooting will be a deserving prediction.

•**“Mockingjay,”** by Suzanne Collins (Scholastic Press): The “Hunger Games” trilogy comes to a satisfying but sad end as Katniss Everdeen gears up to battle the Capitol in her journey to be free.

•**“Olivia Goes to Venice,”** by Ian Falconer (Atheneum): The “New Yorker” cartoonist expands his palette in the continuing picture-book adventures of Olivia — this is her sixth tale — a curious and experimental pig whose cleverness is worthy of adult enjoyment.

•**“The Red Pyramid,”** by Rick Riordan (Hyperion Book CH): The first book in the Kane Chronicles from the author of the Percy Jackson series finds two estranged siblings dealing with the loss of their parents and the discovery of their ties to Egyptian gods.

•**“Clockwork Angel,”** by Cassandra Clare (Margaret K. McElderry): Fans of Clare's Mortal Instruments series will enjoy this one in which Tessa Gray is kidnapped, learns she can transform into other people and is rescued by demon-slaying Shadowhunters as she learns more about the world she comes from and how to survive. Naturally, there's a love triangle too. .

•**“Beautiful Darkness,”** by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl (Little, Brown): The sequel to “Beautiful Creatures” finds Ethan and girlfriend Lena, a “caster” with magical powers, still anxiously waiting to see if she will go Light or Dark and exactly how Ethan is part of the process.

## Poetry

•**“The Books of What Remains,”** by Benjamin Alire Saenz (Copper Canyon): This poet of the Southwest probes, in the harshest possible terms, how the border has become a landscape of death and futile defiance, contrary to our romantic perceptions of the region.

•**“Come on All You Ghosts,”** by Matthew Zapruder (Copper Canyon): A poet of both respect and resistance, Zapruder presents droll, wistful and strangely beautiful poems ordered by dream logic that melds the familiar with the mysterious.

•**“Heavenly Questions,”** by Gjertrud Schnackenberg (Farrar, Straus and Giroux): Six epic and thrilling poems encompassing life, death, erudite detail, blank verse and rhyme.

•**“Maggot,”** by Paul Muldoon (Farrar, Straus and Giroux): A serious candidate for best poetry book of the year: Muldoon here shows his great linguistic and technical virtuosity, in poems that skate close to absurdity but never fall into the abyss.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**The 7-percent solution: Excerpts from the best of the best  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY | "Autobiography of Mark Twain, Vol. 1,"** edited by Harriet  
Elinor Smith

I was always told that I was a sickly and precarious and tiresome and uncertain child, and lived mainly on allopathic medicines during the first seven years of my life. I asked my mother about this, in her old age — she was in her eighty-eighth year — and said:

“I suppose that during all that time you were uneasy about me?”

“Yes, the whole time.”

“Afraid I wouldn’t live?”

After a reflective pause — ostensibly to think out the facts —

“No — afraid you would.”

It sounds like a plagiarism but it probably wasn’t.

**FICTION | “Elegies for the Brokenhearted,”** by Christie Hodgen

Every family had one and you were ours: the chump, the slouch, the drunk, the bum, the forever-newly-employed (garbageman, fry cook, orderly, delivery truck driver) and the forever-newly-unemployed (*I didn’t need that..., you’d say*), the chai-smoking ... with the muscle car, an acorn-brown 442 Cutlass Supreme named Michelle, the love of your life (*Let’s see what this baby can do, you’d say*, all six of us cousins piled in the back, and how we screamed when you rolled down the windows and put Michelle’s pedal to the metal on Route 20 ... )

| From “Elegy for Mike Beaudry”

**FICTION | “Freedom,”** by Jonathan Franzen

Walter and Patty were the young pioneers of Ramsey Hill — the first college grads to buy a house on Barrier Street since the old heart of St. Paul had fallen on hard times three decades earlier. They paid nothing for their Victorian and then killed themselves for ten years renovating it. Early on, some very determined person torched their garage and twice broke into their car before they got the garage rebuilt. Sunburned bikers descended on the vacant lot across the alley to drink Schlitz and grill knockwurst and rev engines at small hours until Patty went outside in sweatclothes and said, “Hey, you guys, you know what?” Patty frightened nobody, but she’d been a standout athlete in high school and college and possessed a jock sort of fearlessness.

**NONFICTION | “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,”** by Rebecca Skloot

There’s a photo on my wall of a woman I’ve never met, its left corner torn and patched together with tape. She looks straight into the camera and smiles, hands on hips, dress suit neatly pressed, lips painted deep red. It’s the late 1940s and she hasn’t yet reached the age of thirty. Her light brown skin is smooth, her eyes still young and playful,

oblivious to the tumor growing inside her — a tumor that would leave her five children motherless and change the future of medicine. Beneath the photo, a caption says her name is “Henrietta Lacks, Helen Lane or Helen Larson.”

**MEMOIR | “Just Kids,” by Patti Smith**

I had lived in the world of my books, most of them written in the nineteenth century. Though I was prepared to sleep on benches, in subways and graveyards, until I got work, I was not ready for the constant hunger that gnawed at me. I was a skinny thing with a high metabolism and a strong appetite. Romanticism could not quench my need for food. Even Baudelaire had to eat. His letters contained many a desperate cry for want of meat and porter.

I needed a job.

**BIOGRAPHY | “The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle and the End of America’s Childhood,” by Jane Leavy**

The transformation of The Mick over the course of eighteen years in the majors and forty-four years in the public eye parallels the transformation of American culture from willful innocence to knowing cynicism. To tell his story is to tell ours. And mine.

**FICTION | “A Visit From the Goon Squad,” by Jennifer Egan**

It began the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel. Sasha was adjusting her yellow eye shadow in the mirror when she noticed a bag on the floor beside the sink that must have belonged to the woman whose peeing she could faintly hear through the vaultlike door of a toilet stall. Inside the rim of the bag, barely visible, was a wallet made of pale green leather. It was easy for Sasha to recognize, looking back, that the peeing woman’s blind trust had provoked her: *We live in a city where people will steal the hair off your head if you give them half a chance, but you leave your stuff lying in plain sight and expect it to be waiting for you when you come back?* It made her want to teach the woman a lesson.

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