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The Federalist's Notable Books of 2016

We're going to tell you what some of The Federalist's contributors read this year and why, confident that there's a little something here for everyone

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It's that time of year again, and The Federalist's second annual collection of notable books is upon us. Once again, we're not limiting ourselves merely to books that came out this year. We know that our reading lives and interests don't correspond to publishing industry calendars, so we're just going to tell you what some of The Federalist's regular contributors read this year and why, confident that there's a little something here for everyone.

David Harsanyi

The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies by Ryszard Legutko—Written by one of Solidarity's leading intellectuals, it is an important book about the alarming and growing tendency of liberal democracies to embrace illiberal governance, rhetoric, and norms.

Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the House of Caesar by Tom Holland—This is history, but it reads like a great novel. There is simply no other contemporary historian who brings ancient history to life with the same care and passion. Other great histories I read include the just-released *The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815-1914* by Richard J. Evans, which was a home run. Nathaniel Philbrick's *Valiant Ambition: George Washington, Benedict Arnold, and the Fate of the American Revolution* is also terrific.

The Three-Body Problem by Cixin Liu—If you're science fiction fan, you should already have read this book. Tor published the entire trilogy, which includes *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*. Also, there's *Jerusalem* by Alan Moore, author of *V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen* and many others. It's a massive but fascinating work that should probably be taken in reasonable portions. If you have the patience, it's worth checking out.

My Damage by Keith Morris—This is on the other side of density spectrum, but I really enjoyed this light autobiography by the legendary punk singer. I was also happy to discover 2012's *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever* by Will Hermes, which ranks up there with *Please Kill Me* and *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning* as the finest books on that era and place.

Gracy Olmstead

Growing Tomorrow, by Forrest Pritchard—This farming biography and cookbook is a unique, interesting look at farming across America. (In case you're interested, I [wrote a longer review](#) here.) The author, a family farmer from Berryville, Virginia, proffers a snapshot of farming across America—from New Mexico to Loudoun County, Virginia. He talks to fruit farmers and mushroom farmers, those involved in animal husbandry and those seeking to grow organic grains. Coupled with these interviews are a wealth of useful and delicious recipes (authentic chili and homemade egg noodles among them). It will make a great Christmas present for your favorite foodie.

Today Will Be Different, by Maria Semple—First things first: *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* was way better. In this new novel, Semple tells the tale of a retired cartoonist Eleanor Flood (much like Bernadette was a retired architect). Eleanor is mother to an eccentric but lovable little boy, and wife to an accomplished but mysterious doctor. She's struggling to live and work from day to day—postponing important work, forgetting meetings, struggling to confront life in a clear-eyed manner. Then, one day when everything goes wrong, she rediscovers purpose.

In some ways, this book is a copycat of Semple's older, more excellent work. The prose is a bit hard to follow in places—the scatterbrained nature of the protagonist carries forward into scatterbrained writing. However, that said, the characters in Semple's new novel are fun and quirky. Eleanor's drawings are a fun addition. And the larger narrative of sisterhood, estrangement, and family are lovely.

John Davidson

Thunder at Twilight by Frederic Morton—While we're still marching through the centennial of the First World War, this is the perfect time to delve into the history, not just of the war itself but of the world that produced it. Frederic Morton's vivid portrait of antebellum Vienna begins with the intrigues and tensions roiling the Hapsburg capital in 1913 and ends with the breakdown of diplomacy among the Great Powers and the outbreak of war in the fall of 1914.

Along the way, he introduces the reader to major historical figures of the twentieth century, all of whom happened to be in Vienna during those years: a frustrated young artist and aesthete named Adolph Hitler; an ex-seminary student from Georgia who turned radical and took the alias Joseph Stalin; the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, in his prime; and Leon Trotsky, holding court in the city's cafes and salons and awaiting the revolution.

Above all these is the figure of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Hapsburg heir who most wanted peace with Serbia, and whose assassination at the hands of a Serbian terrorist would plunge Europe into war, and the entire world into the ferment of modernity.

Part of Our Time: Some Ruins And Monuments Of The Thirties by Murray Kempton—In 1955, columnist Murray Kempton wrote a short book profiling important members of the Communist Party in America during the 1930s: Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, Lee Pressman, and others. His purpose was to go beyond the easy denunciations of communism that were in vogue in McCarthy-era America and explore what motivated these men to yearn and work for revolution.

They were animated, Kempton wrote, by the social myth of the '30s, that individuals did not matter and that history was moving inexorably toward a destination, which was socialist utopia. What makes the book so relevant to us today is that these men had something in common with many Americans in 2016: they believed the institutions of our society were corrupt beyond redemption, and must be destroyed.

“The early thirties tried bankers and found them guilty as steadily as steadily as the fifties were to try Communists,” he wrote. “The image of the American dream was flawed and cracked; its critics had never sounded more persuasive.” This book has surprising lessons for us today, at a time when growing numbers of Americans have lost confidence in our political system and the social institutions that hold us together as a nation.

Rebecca Cusey

A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World by William J. Bernstein—As it turns out, people wanting things from far away shaped the world far more than we imagined. We all know Columbus was looking for an easy way to get Indian spices when he discovered America, but this book goes way beyond that. How did trade affect distribution of plagues, and vice versa? What do religions owe to the traders who spread them? This book was fascinating and had me spellbound, imagining and explaining the forces that shape the world, both then and now.

Jerusalem: A Biography by Simon Sebag Montefiore—Sacred to three religions, and repeatedly conquered by all three, the violent and multifaceted history of Jerusalem is necessary to understanding the divisions in the Middle East. This book starts with biblical accounts of the city on a hill, goes through Roman and early Christian times, recounts Muslim empires and Crusaders against them, and flows into European-American control through the two World Wars, ultimately resulting in the independent state of Israel.

It's a fascinating story, one still being written, and this book tries to not take sides. Jerusalem, the city of King David, Jesus, and the Prophet Muhammed, is a city which has regularly seen blood literally flowing in the streets, with massacres of the most brutal kind. Some of them happened in its most sacred sites, such as the church built over the tomb in which Jesus is said to have been buried. It is a city of layers, one religion upon another, and of division, one religion separated from another. Ultimately, it is a story we must try to understand to begin to understand the world we live in. This book is a start.

Ilya Shapiro

Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance—This is the book of the year. It epitomizes the “show not tell” approach to writing that helps explain our populist political moment, and it does this without beating your over the head with voting models or social-scientific pontification. Author J.D. Vance managed to escape a childhood in the hollows of Kentucky and adolescence in post-steel-mill Ohio to join the Marines, graduate Yale Law School, and embark on a successful business career in Silicon Valley.

But it's the journey, not the destination, that's remarkable here. Part memoir, part pop-sociology, Vance does for the “hillbillies” what David Brooks did for the “bobos” (bourgeois bohemians) in

the leadup to the 2000 election: explain in conversational, example-ridden terms an important yet disturbing slice of Americana.

People's Republic by Kurt Schlichter—This is an engaging novel depicting life in a United States where Red and Blue America have literally separated. The protagonist smuggles people from coastal enclaves that resemble a mix of Castro's Cuba and *Animal Farm* (but I repeat myself) into a heartland that combines Texas and Sparta. It's a dystopia very different—because set nearer in the future—than the *Hunger Games* or *Divergent* series, but altogether just as chilling. A quick and enjoyable read.

The Awakening of Washington's Church by J.B. Simmons—This tells the story of The Falls Church—the actual church, located in the “little city” where I now live—from George Washington's time through its battle for survival amidst the Episcopalian schism over same-sex marriage. The author, my friend Josh Simmons, blends fascinating history, sound reporting, and acute legal analysis into a thoughtful narrative.

Supremely Partisan: How Raw Politics Tips the Scales in the United States Supreme Court by James Zirin—I'm only naming this book so you know to avoid it at all costs—call it an anti-recommendation. While this work has attained some acclaim, I couldn't get past the introduction, though I did sample bits of later chapters just to confirm my initial impression. The author's own ideological biases and oh-so-clever approach to the legal process and judicial politics are an incredible turn-off. His framing of the issues itself betrays a tiresome partisanship. In short, this book is akin to a book-length version of the latest breathless *Slate* critique, except more shallow.

Stella Morabito

Credentialed to Destroy: How and Why Education Became a Weapon by Robin Eubanks—This book is an eye-opener. It was self-published in 2013 (and has some style issues) but it's packed with really amazing dot connections that illustrate how Common Core is nothing more than pre-meditated “mind arson.” In my opinion, it's very relevant since I haven't seen that case made this thoroughly.

Rich Cromwell

Les Dinners de Gala by Salvador Dali—In 1973 the surrealist painter Salvador Dali released a cookbook and now, some 40 years later, it's available again. The book pairs 136 recipes with art, photos, and discursions from Dali with a heavy focus on classic French cooking. While not standard fare by modern standards—there are recipes that start with live eels and ones that include ingredients like rabbits—they are again relevant as modern chefs reinvent charcuterie and other such classic dishes for their menus.

Dali and his wife, Gala, were known for their extravagant dinner parties, and the book reflects their unconventional tastes. The recipes, though, can be prepared at home and include everything from hearty pork shoulder to a wide variety of shellfish dishes to cocktails and desserts. There is even a chapter devoted to aphrodisiacs.

While not a book of philosophy or politics, it is definitely a conversation starter and something that is an enjoyable to simply read as it is to search for recipes for your next dinner party. The

best meals delight all the senses, not just the taste buds, and *Les Diners de Gala* brings that aesthetic to the page.

Joy Pullmann

Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010 by Charles Murray—After my husband and I read this book when it came out four years ago, we took Murray's advice and packed our family off from the East Coast back into the Midwest. We even bought our first house in a blue-collar part of town. It was partly because we wanted to own the house free and clear within a few years, but also because we wanted to follow Murray's advice to live among the salt of the earth people we'd grown up with rather than bifurcating ourselves among college-educated, stable families, career-climbing types like us.

It's not likely the 2016 election would have been any less crazy had millions of other Americans had made similar individual decisions to economically integrate poorer neighborhoods, but perhaps the outcome would have shocked far fewer people. Perhaps more of us would have had an understanding of the despair many Americans feel.

In the wake of this year's election my husband recommended *Coming Apart* to a thoughtful friend of his, who then kept calling in the evenings to read stacks of quotes that blew his mind. Murray practically predicted 2016 four years earlier. He followed the data scrupulously to find America dividing into two tribes, as never before. Both folks who haven't and who have read the book will want to pick it up again. Pair it with *Hillbilly Elegy* to get your finger on America's pulse again.

David Marcus

Reformations by Carlos N.M. Eire—Next year will mark the five-hundredth anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's 95 Theses. The event is widely considered the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. But Carlos N. M. Eire argues, as the title suggests, that the events we know as the Reformation and counter-reformation were in fact a series of overlapping reform movements, both inside and outside the Catholic Church. Focused on the period of 1450-1650, Eire's work uses original sources in an easygoing, digestible style to explain the religious forces that would frame the modern West.

After 500 years the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations are working towards better relations, if not reconciliation. *Reformations* attempts and mostly succeeds in describing the schisms without the prejudice present from both Catholic and Protestant traditional histories. What emerges is a rich picture of the tensions and technologies (specifically the printing press and navigation) that would forge a new Europe over two centuries. Whether one is celebrating next year's quincentennial or not, Eire provides a new way of seeing the events that is both entertaining and enlightening.

Paul J. Bonicelli

SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome by Mary Beard—Beard, a classicist's classicist, with many volumes to her credit, takes a stab at revisionist history and offers some unique insights into the

Roman republic's origins and demise. She takes a hard look at the values, norms, and myths by which Romans understood themselves and on which they built their society.

Readers who admire so much about the Romans even while admitting their faults will find this book an interesting look into the psyche of the Roman, as well as learn to understand Rome better. Some timely themes are covered here, such as populism and the role it played over the centuries of Rome's rise and fall. Political leaders across the centuries share many characteristics and so do the people who choose them or succumb to them. *Plus ça change...*

Lisa De Pasquale

Clinton Cash: The Graphic Novel by Peter Schweizer, adapted by Chuck Dixon and Brett R. Smith—There's no doubt that Schweizer's original version of *Clinton Cash* helped defeat Hillary Clinton. In August, the graphic novel was published and made the facts about how the Clintons ran the Clinton Foundation and Clinton Global Initiative more accessible and understandable to a wider population.

It will be important in 2017 because it isn't just a handbook for keeping the Clintons out of the White House, but a tool to fight the Obamas' efforts to follow the Clinton model. The Obamas have already rented a house in DC, signaling that they don't plan on leaving the political scene. At an event at the White House, Michelle Obama said she would continue Let's Move and promoting her school lunch program after she leaves the White House. As for President Obama, one can imagine him making millions in speech fees on various topics across the globe.

Also of note, *Clinton Cash: The Graphic Novel* knocked *The Killing Joke*, the origin story of the Joker, out of its 200-week streak of being number one on The New York Times bestseller list. The right-of-center publishing world should take notice at the book's success and adapt more works into graphic novels. Some I'd like to see: *Bonhoeffer: Pastor. Martyr. Prophet. Spy*, by Eric Metaxas, *Treason* by Ann Coulter (as well as the one below), any book by Brad Thor, *Miracles and Massacres* by Glenn Beck, and *To Try Men's Souls* by Newt Gingrich. There will likely be books in the vein of *Lone Survivor* and *American Sniper* in the next couple years that would also be great adaptations.

Adios, America by Ann Coulter—In their July/August 2016 issue, *The Atlantic's* Peter Beinart pointed out that prior to announcing his run for the presidency Donald Trump said that Coulter's book was a "great read." Now that Trump is president-elect, the real work begins.

For voters like Coulter, that work starts with immigration and his promise to build a wall. If there are any hesitations or pushback from Congress, the extensive research in *Adios, America* will be an important tool in voters' arsenal. As I mentioned above, *Adios, America* is also ripe for the graphic novel treatment. It has sex, violence, heroes and villains.

The Trump Coloring Book by M.G. Anthony—Adult coloring books are trendy, and this was one of the first political ones in the 2016 election. They were the hottest item at the Republican National Convention and were given out at the LGBT for Trump party. A month later I saw it at an airport store. The publisher, Post Hill Press, told me that there are more than 175,000 copies in print and sales are surging since the election.

It may not be a great work of prose or journalism, but that is precisely why it's so popular. Flipping through it you don't get the sense that it's pro- or anti-Trump. It's just fun and kitschy. The reason, I hope, that we'll still be talking about this book in 2017 is because it's a way to introduce ideas and political figures in a non-traditional way.

Tom Nichols

Making the Unipolar Moment by Hal Brands—There are a lot of books about the Cold War, and a lot of books about “the state of the mess we're in.” There are books about globalization, about failed states, and about America's relations with the various parts of the world.

What's missing, however, is a book about how we got here: how the United States went from a superpower on the rocks in the 1970s to a supreme power dominating a unipolar world in the 1990s. That's why I've been fascinated with Hal Brands' new book. If you want to see how far we came from the edge of ruin—and how far we're falling from the achievements of the 1990s—this carefully researched book is essential reading.

M.G. Oprea

A Severe Mercy by Sheldon Vanauken—This is a love story and a lesson in grief. The autobiographical work traces the author's courtship and marriage to his beloved wife, Davy, and examines how he dealt with her death at a young age and with little warning.

The book also goes deep into their conversion to Christianity while studying at Oxford, where they both befriended C.S. Lewis. The book, like Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, is about the love between a man and a woman, but also between man and God. It's about the different faces that mercy takes, even one that sometimes seems cruel.

A Severe Mercy reminds us that to love someone is to open ourselves to deep and lasting pain. This book forces the reader to look at the reality of death but also at the hope of what lays beyond it. The last time Vanauken saw Lewis, the latter shouted across a busy Oxford street, “Christians NEVER say goodbye!” This is the story of Vanauken and his dear wife Davy.

Mark Hemingway

Trouble Boys by Bob Mehr—The Replacements weren't exactly a music industry success, selling only a few hundred thousand records in their '80s heyday and famous for incredibly self-destructive behavior that culminated in them getting kicked off *Saturday Night Live*. But the band's tragic story ended up being one of the greatest in the history of rock and roll, and their influence was ultimately celebrated by everyone from Bob Dylan to Kurt Cobain.

Chronicling the story of The Replacements is no easy feat, but Mehr has managed to write a unicorn of rock biographies. It eschews the perspective of the fan, it is scrupulously reported, and it casts a cold, appropriately judgmental eye on everything from childhood sexual abuse to the excesses of addiction and alcoholism. But without sacrificing an ounce of journalistic integrity, somehow Mehr's writing reverently reflects the songwriting genius of a bunch of loveable Midwestern punks who burned out too soon.

Shop Class As Soul Craft by Matthew Crawford—This was the first of three books I read this year to better wrap my head around Donald Trump’s America. Crawford’s book came out a few years ago, but it’s only gotten more relevant since then. Loosely, it’s the story of an academic who throws his expected career trajectory out the window, quits his job at a conservative think tank, and becomes a motorcycle mechanic in Richmond, Virginia.

Crawford has written a brilliant piece of popular philosophy to explain to educated types why they shouldn’t look down their nose at blue-collar workers and tradesmen, and explains—in some cases with actual diagrams of motorcycle parts—why they do more useful and rewarding work than information economy drones. In fact, Crawford seems to be challenging a lot of free trade economic gospel from the perspective of someone on the Right, precisely because of what it does to the job market. And his implication that America is the throes of kind of spiritual crisis because so many of us earn our living by pushing paper and electrons around, as opposed to building and repairing things, explains a lot about the post-industrial angst that played a big role in electing Trump.

Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Islam, Immigration, and the West by Chris Caldwell—Caldwell is a colleague of mine, and last fall, he started telling people that Trump could win the election. We all thought he might have gone crazy, but secretly knew he was too damn smart to ignore.

I finally read his elegantly argued 2009 book on European politics over the summer, and two things became pretty clear. One, the book is enormously prescient about how the liberal response to immigration and terrorism would be politically inadequate and lead to populist backlash in European politics. Caldwell surmised this in detail before the rise of ISIS and Brexit. Two, the parallels between trends in continental politics and the rise of Trumpism across the Atlantic years later leap off the page. No wonder he saw 2016 coming.

Dreamland: The True Tale of America’s Opiate Epidemic by Sam Quinones—This book came out last year and justly garnered a lot of praise. It’s compulsively readable and riveting journalism. However, Trump’s election has given the book new relevance. Much of the book is devoted to talking about opiate addiction flaring in parts of the country where the new economy left people behind. Further, it shows how the lion’s share of the current opiate problem is the result of sophisticated Mexican heroin operations.

The scope of the heroin problem right now is staggering, and at the ground level, savvy observers knew it was a big factor in surge of support for stricter immigration laws and border security that Trump capitalized on politically. Not that the political media noticed. It would be nice if they attempted cover the immigration debate in a way that doesn’t begin and end with racism. Reading this fine book would be a good start.

Well, that’s a wrap! Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukah, and here’s to finding lots of great new books to read in the new year.