

The Best Novels of 2009

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I don't claim my favorites of last year were the year's best. I'm a jury of one, and I don't even try to be comprehensive or objective. I know that sometimes a book happens to match my mood and leapfrogs over possibly better books to become a favorite. But these eight books (listed alphabetically by author) got stars in my book diary:

"Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi" by Geoff Dyer. Two linked novellas about youngish men looking for sex, spirituality and/or salvation in old river cities.

"The Unit" by Ninni Holmqvist. A dystopic vision of the near future (translated from Swedish) in which childless or unattached people are labeled "dispensable" and reduced to biological petri dishes—or worse.

"Blame" by Michelle Huneven. A college professor drinks and drives, killing two people. Sentenced to four years in prison, she re-creates herself with the help of cons and confederates.

"It's Beginning to Hurt" by James Lasdun. A wonderfully accessible and poetically written collection of short stories about seduction, anxiety and death—in other words, life.

"The City & the City" by China Miéville. In a divided Eastern European city of the future, citizens of one are forbidden even to look at those of the other. A murder forces a police inspector to investigate both.

"Cutting for Stone" by Abraham Verghese. A radiant, teeming first novel of missionaries, medicine and magic spanning the globe from India to Ethiopia to the Bronx.

"The Little Stranger" by Sarah Waters. A thinking person's ghost story that gives new meaning to the word haunting. The narrator, a skeptical man of science, is brilliantly unreliable.

"A Happy Marriage" by Rafael Yglesias. A psychologically astute portrait of a marriage in all its agonies and ecstasies. (Also, go back and read the author's earlier "Dr. Neruda's Cure for Evil.")

Two other very fine novels that were published earlier, but that I only stumbled on last year, were "Fault Lines" by Nancy Huston and "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" by Mohsin Hamid. Wait! One more: "My Revolutions" by Hari Kunzru.

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