Books 2015: Fiction. A couple dozen eminently readable novels, plus a few to read aloud.

10. Garth Risk Hallberg, *City on Fire*. A rollicking good read, mostly living up to hype; nails 70s NYC far better than Kushner’s *Flamethrowers*. But dearly needed an editor: 200 pages too long.
  6. Thomas Mallon, *Finale*. This century’s Gore Vidal, issuing sweeping novels of politics and culture—though Mallon’s closer than Vidal to our own times…and much better crafter of fiction.
  4. Mary Oliver, *Felicity*. Thirty-eight jeweled poems, focused on journeys, love, & title-theme.
  3. Claire Fuller, *Our Endless Numbered Days*. Most gripping child narrator since *The Room*.

Critics’ Darlings, Left Me Cold: Kamel Daoud’s *Meursault Investigation* (so admire Camus that my judgement maybe clouded); Mary Gaitskill’s *The Mare* (never could find traction; abandoned midway); Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* (ditto—plus that ubiquitous creepy cover photo!).

Graylyn’s Top Bedtimers: Any *Curious George*, also video fave; *Madeleine in the White House* (she’s movin’ on up!); *Korean Children’s Favorite Stories* (Sara/G. made trek this year); *Miss Rumphius* (poignantly introduces entire life cycle); *Mrs. Tittlemouse* (Beatrix Potter moving up the charts; this outpaces *Peter Rabbit* thanks to memorable kids’ ballet).

Their B Game Beats Your A Game (Great authors: ‘15 not their best, but still better than most!)

- Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child*. More sledgehammer than deft; reflects our culture now?
- Salman Rushdie, *Two Years Eight Months….* Tips into prolixity, but side-riffs worth the trip.
- Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*. Riveting sci-fi meets erotic romp; much prefer former.
- Elena Ferrante, *Story of the Lost Child*. Only here b/c catching up: on #2 of her peerless quartet.
- Jonathan Franzen, *Purity*. Expertly crafted, entirely readable…and somehow left me cold.
- Peter Carey, *Amnesia*. Best offering in several years from the pride of Australian novelists.
- Dennis Lehane, *World Gone By*. Modern-day Chandler polishes off a bloody, moving trilogy.
- Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*. If she’d wanted it published, it would’ve been, long ago.
Books 2015: Non-Fiction. A plentitude of riches; our troubled times are fertile writerly ground.

20. Tim Weiner, One Man Against the World: The Tragedy of Richard Nixon. Title says it all.
18. Mary Karr, The Art of Memoir. Prefer her actual memorizing to this how-to manual, but enough idiosyncratic Karr-ian twists and astute asides to recommend it to all.
15. David Coates, Capitalism. With Jim Otteson’s End of Socialism, two Wake Forest profs provide very different views of modern capitalist systems. Happily, they can discuss civilly.
13. James Morone, The Devils We Know. Fourteen dazzling essays on US political culture.
9. Åsne Seierstad, One of Us. Beyond-horrific tale of Norwegian camp massacre; her just-facts, unsentimental recounting is the only bearable way to make it through—as reader or writer. 
7. Patti Smith, M Train. Older/wiser (?) sequel to Just Kids’s winsome tales of bygone NYC.
6. Eric G. Wilson, Keep it Fake and How to Make a Soul. Books this incisive and gorgeous arrive rarely; two masterful 2015 reflections on humanity’s state is just unfair to other writers.
4. Marilynne Robinson, The Givenness of Things. “The spirit of the times is one of joyless urgency...yet we have as good grounds for exulting in human brilliance as any generation ever.”
3. Mary Beard, SPQR. Ancient Rome: all of it. Beard’s elegant pen turns dry into living history.
2. Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me. Righteous genius; helped launch a movement.
1. Helen Macdonald, H is for Hawk. Universally and justly praised; goshawk’s ferality translated heart-clutchingly into prose. Praying she’ll continue in same vein (I is for Iguana?).

Best of the Rest, By Topic
Art/Architecture: Esther Choi et.al., Hippie Modernism. Missed Walker show; catalogue an A+.
Food: Marion Nestle, Soda Wars. Hard-hitting exposé—and genuinely readable, a grand combo.
History: Sean Condon, Shays’s Rebellion. Under-studied but vital episode finds its muse.
LitCrit: Helen Vendler, The Ocean, the Bird, & the Scholar. Indispensable essays, collected together in dip-in-anywhere volume. Next volume will include her terrific recent WFU talk.
Religion: John Senior, A Theology of Political Vocation. Essential link of civic & religious.
Sporting Life: Ronda Rousey, My Fight/Your Fight. Competitive fury, vividly distilled.
Words/Reading: Laura Aull, First-Year University Writing. Few more essential skills to teach, & this the definitive study. Also: David Whyte, Consolations. Fellow lexophiles, unite!
Longreads 2015. Most memorable of long-form nonfiction (scholarly/not) I devoured this year.


Carlo Rotella, “The Inevitable Spectacle of Mayweather vs. Pacquiao” (NYT Magazine). Best contemporary sweet-science chronicler returns to ring. http://nyti.ms/1MHFwAH

Anna Clark, “The Threat to Detroit’s Rebound Isn’t Crime or the Economy, It’s the Mortgage Industry” (Next City). Redlining revisited (did it ever go away?). http://bit.ly/1SgCII2


Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape” (New York Times). Essential look inside this horrorshow theocracy; helped fuel military opposition. http://nyti.ms/1mgUR5M

Movies 2015. Almost 30 you really should see. Except the last one.

Best window into future: Ex Machina (AI as Alicia Vikander, & fab Oscar Isaac: humanity’s outlook could be worse). Runner-up: Z for Zachariah (couldn’t be worse; we’re almost all dead).

Best 2+ hours in theater: Spotlight (in journalist-heroes category, surpasses All/President’s Men). Runner-up: The Martian (alone in bureaucrat-heroes category; may imitators widely spawn).

Best felt look at the mean streets: Straight Outta Compton (2015’s most underrated). Runner-up: Chi-Raq (Lysistrata hasn’t had such an imaginative restaging in oh, a couple thousand years).

Best docu-peek into lives of others: The Wolfpack (five film-obsessed brothers whose messianic father secluded them in small NYC apartment for years). Well chosen RiverRun! Runners-up: Amy (you’ll mourn all the more Lady Winehouse’s untimely deat); Noma My Perfect Storm (René Rezdepi’s culinary magic revealed. This film: Top Chef = NHL:peewee hockey).

Best high-finance 101: The Big Short (ably--& hilariously—translates Lewis’s nuanced account).

Best portrayal of the Troubles: ‘71 (heart-racing miniature portrait of Northern Ireland during danger’s height, through naive young British Army recruit’s very, very long night).

Best filmic diplomacy: The Chinese Mayor (doc-makers had full access to earnest mayor of a mid-size city; revelatory insights galore, especially into China’s labyrinthine local politics). Runner-up: Jafar Panahi’s Taxi, which eloquently dimensionalizes Iran in our Manichean age.

Best sequel to a thriller ‘til Damon returns as Bourne: Mad Max: Fury Road (and so Colbert exorted 2015 Wake Forest graduates: “may you ride eternal, shiny & chrome.” Runners-up: Spectre (Craig extends best-Bond run to a quartet; Seydoux the ultimate companion); MI:5 (with last year’s Edge of Tomorrow, Cruise’s first decent back-to-back films of this century).

Best portrayal of youth: Girlhood (life in banlieues, through sweet-sad eyes of Karidja Touré). Runner-up: Pixar’s Inside Out (poignant-hilarious imagining of adolescent moods & memories).

Best May-September ‘friendship’: Mistress America (While We’re Young made box-office noise, but story of frosh Tracy & 30something stepsister [?] Brooke’s twisted connection far superior).

Best trip thru Le Carré’s spyland: Secrets and Lies (Hanks in Private Ryan mode, far preferable to Langdon or Crowne). Runners-up: Jack Strong (Netflix it); Blackhat (stylish, preposterous).

Best portrayal of 1/3-life crisis: Anywhere Else (Israeli long-term PhD student Noa, home from Berlin to nutcase family). Runner-up: Brooklyn (another 30something trapped—here, b/t suitors).

Best prequel: Star Wars: The Force Awakens (yeah, you saw it too). Runners-up: Terminator-Genisys (Arnold old and young, somehow); Jurassic World (most derivative of the 3, by far)

Best choice for a 12-y/o boy, as long as he’s Finnish: Big Game (not sure how I endured this).