

# The 20 Best Books of 1981

By Robert R. Harris

It has become fashionable among many of our leading culture arbiters to decry the lack of quality in contemporary writing—and many of the books published in 1981 do offer some aid and comfort to the collapse-of-literature crowd. Such major writers as Gore Vidal, Toni Morrison, John Irving, Tom Wolfe, and V.S. Naipaul turned out disappointing work. But—pace the alarmists—many more good books are finding their way into print than ever before. And even though

fewer than a half dozen of the books published this year court brilliance, 1981 did produce a solid body of fiction and nonfiction—works of outstanding merit and lasting value. Here is our choice of the 20 best books of the year.

In fiction, four of the seven novels and three short-story collections on our list are stylistically or structurally daring. Books by Russell Hoban, Donald Barthelme, D.M. Thomas, and Raymond Carver strive to expand our notion of the limits of fiction and language. Other excellent novelists—this year, most

Robert R. Harris is the literary editor of *Saturday Review*.

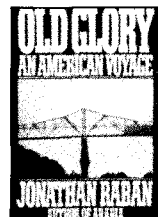
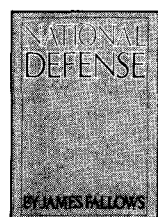
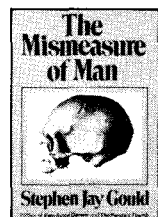
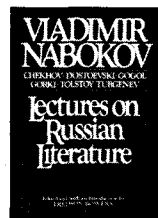
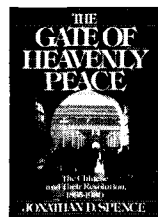
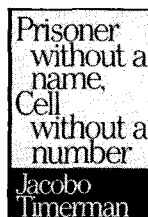
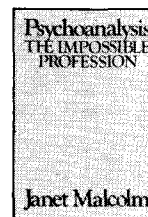
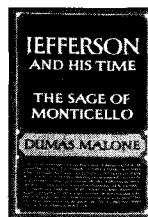
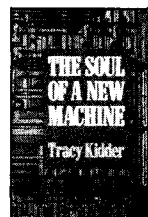
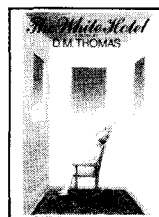
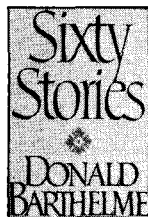
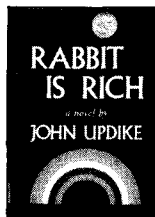
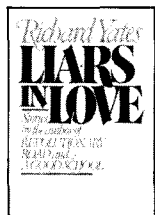
## Fiction

- A Flag for Sunrise** by Robert Stone (Alfred A. Knopf)  
**Gorky Park** by Martin Cruz Smith (Random House)  
**July's People** by Nadine Gordimer (The Viking Press)  
**Liars in Love** by Richard Yates (Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence)  
**The Men's Club** by Leonard Michaels (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)  
**Rabbit Is Rich** by John Updike (Alfred A. Knopf)  
**Riddley Walker** by Russell Hoban (Summit Books)  
**Sixty Stories** by Donald Barthelme (G.P. Putnam's Sons)  
**What We Talk About When We Talk About Love** by Raymond Carver (Alfred A. Knopf)  
**The White Hotel** by D.M. Thomas (The Viking Press)

## Nonfiction

- Basin and Range** by John McPhee (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)  
**The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895-1980**  
 by Jonathan D. Spence (The Viking Press)  
**Lectures on Russian Literature** by Vladimir Nabokov (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)  
**The Mismeasure of Man** by Stephen Jay Gould (W.W. Norton)  
**National Defense** by James Fallows (Random House)  
**Old Glory: An American Voyage** by Jonathan Raban (Simon & Schuster)  
**Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number** by Jacobo Timerman (Alfred A. Knopf)  
**Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession** by Janet Malcolm (Alfred A. Knopf)  
**The Sage of Monticello** by Dumas Malone (Little, Brown)  
**The Soul of a New Machine** by Tracy Kidder (Atlantic-Little, Brown)

Listed alphabetically by title.

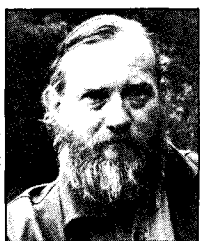


notably Robert Stone—have used the well-constructed plot with great success. Still others—Richard Yates, for example—rely on concentrated realism, while John Updike weighs in with his usual lyrical beauty and epic narrative. Tried-and-true themes—the trouble between men and women, and the pain mankind inflicts upon itself—predominate the year's best fiction, but they are handled with imagination and verve.

In nonfiction, perhaps in reaction to some of today's paramount concerns, no fewer than four of our selections interpret science. John McPhee, Stephen Jay Gould, Tracy Kidder, and Janet Malcolm explore respectively the intricacies of geology, intelligence testing, computer science, and psychoanalysis.

Since World War II, the writing of biography has burgeoned in America; it has gotten better and more sophisticated. Several good biographies—of Otto von Bismarck, Ralph Waldo Emerson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Carlos Williams, George Orwell, Andrew Jackson, Bernard Baruch, Theodore Roosevelt, Ulysses S. Grant, Felix Frankfurter, W.H. Auden, Saki, and the Beecher family—were published this year. But only one, Dumas Malone's *The Sage of Monticello*, has made our list.

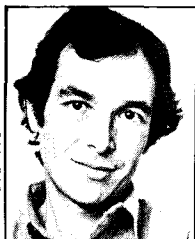
## Fiction



**A Flag for Sunrise**  
by Robert Stone  
Alfred A. Knopf  
439 pp., \$13.95

SO WELL-CRAFTED, intricately plotted, and quickly paced is this exceptional novel that it can quite easily be mistaken for just a melodramatic thriller. It is a thriller, but it is much much more. Robert Stone throws a motley group of Catholics—a beautiful nun, a whiskey priest, an anthropologist with CIA connections, and a drifter/deserter—into the cauldron of Tecan, a mythological Latin American country about to erupt in revolution. Stone's central characters encounter gun runners, revolutionaries, and spies, and the novel boils with violence, sadism, and sex. But the author is as concerned with his Catholics' moral dilemmas as he is with his plot's compli-

cated twists. He combines action and philosophical rumination with a deftness matching Graham Greene's. Stone's *A Hall of Mirrors* was filmed as *WUSA*, and his National Book Award-winning *Dog Soldiers* as *Who'll Stop the Rain*. If Hollywood repeats itself, this brilliant novel will be turned into a Grade-B movie too. Read the book instead.



**Gorky Park**  
by Martin Cruz Smith  
Random House  
365 pp., \$13.95

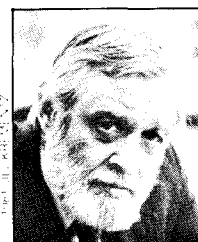
MARTIN CRUZ SMITH perpetrated several lackluster novels before he settled down to write *Gorky Park*, one of the best thrillers of recent years. Arkady Renko, chief police inspector for the People's Militia, is summoned when three horribly mutilated bodies are discovered in Moscow's Gorky Park. Before he's done solving the puzzle, Renko locks horns with the KGB, the CIA, the FBI, and the NYPD. Smith evidently spent very little time in Russia, but his portrayal of things Russian, including a Byzantine law-enforcement bureaucracy has the ring of accuracy. The twisted plot is not perfectly executed—we learn too soon who the villain is. But Smith keeps us reading anyway, eager to learn *how* the crimes have been committed. Renko, like John le Carré's George Smiley, is a likable, decent truth-seeker with marriage problems. And *Gorky Park* ranks with le Carré's best.



**July's People**  
by Nadine Gordimer  
The Viking Press  
160 pp., \$10.95

BAMFORD AND MAUREEN SMALES are middle-class white liberals from Johannesburg who claim to favor the liberation of South Africa's blacks. They have often thought of leaving their country, but when this poignant novel opens, it is clear that they've stayed too long. Set in the near future, *July's People* tells of what happens to the Smaleses after blacks take control of South Africa. July, the family's trusted manservant, takes them into hiding in his village in the lowveld of the

Transvaal. There, tension mounts between July and the Smaleses and between Bam and Maureen themselves. This is a parable about ruined lives and the pain of facing up to prejudices. Gordimer has always written with courage about her native South Africa and apartheid, sensitively exploring black-white relationships. In *July's People*, she does so again with force and eloquence.



**Liars in Love**  
by Richard Yates  
Delacorte Press/  
Seymour Lawrence  
272 pp., \$14.95

IN HIS FIRST collection of short stories since *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* was published nearly 20 years ago, Richard Yates—author of *Revolutionary Road*, *The Easter Parade*, and *A Good School*—offers seven lovely, long stories. Yates's old-fashioned realism is suffused with emotion and heartbreak, and even a Joycean epiphany or two, as when a young boy discovers that his mother's cloying best friend is not above playing the child's stutter for a laugh, or when an American G.I. learns that the sister from whom he's long been separated can be cruelly inattentive. Beautifully written, these stories are wrenching: A coed tells her father that she doesn't love him anymore; a brother and sister witness their mother's drunken tirade and their father's uncontrollable tears; a young writer comes to understand that his troubled life contains all that his colleague dreams of. Yates has yet to receive the recognition he deserves.



**The Men's Club**  
by Leonard Michaels  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux  
181 pp., \$10.95

LEONARD MICHAELS'S men's club includes a Berkeley college professor, a psychotherapist, a lawyer, a doctor, a real-estate dealer, and an ex-basketball player turned college administrator. They meet one evening at the psychotherapist's home, gorge on the food that's been prepared by the psychotherapist's wife for a meeting of her women's club, wreck the house, and lugubriously

lament their misadventures with women. This short, funny novel has been accused of being an anti-feminist tract (the psychotherapist has slept with 622 women, and he's still counting), relentlessly indulging in vengeful male fantasies. It's not, of course. Michaels's rather anonymous male characters reveal the frustrations and failures of male bonding. During a discussion of marital infidelity, one character, asked if he's ever jealous about his wife's trysts, replies, "No, man. I'm liberated." Asked what that means, he says, "as if it were obvious, 'I don't feel anything.'" If this novel disturbs, it is because it has the shock of truth.



**Rabbit Is Rich**  
by John Updike  
Alfred A. Knopf  
467 pp., \$13.95

HARRY "RABBIT" ANGSTROM is back after his adventures in *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*. It's 1979 and middle-aged Rabbit is making quite a lot of money in his Pennsylvania Toyota dealership. Lustful as ever, Rabbit nevertheless has mellowed, pretty much resigned to a life of "quiet desperation." He doesn't get along very well with his dead-beat son, Nelson, and his wife and mother-in-law can be trying. Skylab is falling, gas prices are rising, Krugerrands are a hot investment and Ipana toothpaste has vanished from the supermarket shelves. But Rabbit endures. John Updike is often criticized for not directly tackling the major concerns of modern America, and he's accused of writing overly poetic prose. But *Rabbit Is Rich* is blessed with a stunning lyrical grace, and in 25 years the *Rabbit* books will no doubt be judged a classic American epic of middle-class manners and mores.



**Riddley Walker**  
by Russell Hoban  
Summit Books  
220 pp., \$12.95

"WALKER IS my name and I am the same. Riddley Walker. Walking my riddles where ever theyve took me and walking them now on this paper the same." Riddley is a "connexion" man.

His job is to explain the traveling Punch and Judy shows that dramatize how many thousands of years in the past—in 1997—"the Littl Shynin Man the Addom" destroyed most of Western civilization. In Russell Hoban's highly imaginative world, the survivors of nuclear holocaust dig up "old Iron" (machines) around "Cambry" (Canterbury), England, dodge roving packs of wild dogs, speak in a fractured new lingo, and try to find clues to a past they can only partially comprehend. "How cud any I," Riddley laments, "not want to be like them what had boats in the air and picters on the wind?" But Riddley comes to realize that "the onlyes power is no power," and Hoban drives home his point about what it means for mankind to cross the brink into nuclear war. It takes 20 or 30 pages to get the gist of the novel's made-up language. It's worth it. This book stands as a warning of what nightmares may await us. And it offers little solace: Before the story is over, the human survivors of man's awesome destructiveness reinvent gunpowder.



**Sixty Stories**  
by Donald Barthelme  
G.P. Putnam's Sons  
457 pp., \$15.95

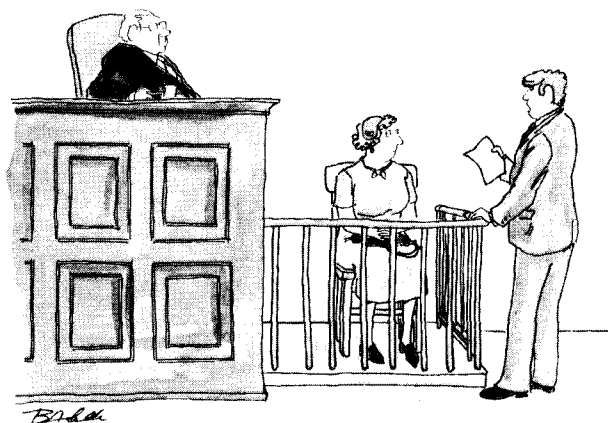
PROBABLY NO LIVING WRITER has as many bad imitators as does Donald Barthelme. For almost 20 years his stories have been appearing in the *New Yorker*, and countless less intelligent, less tal-

ented writers have tried to ape his unique style. With consummate class, Barthelme pushes post-modern experimentalism to the limit. These 60 stories are, by turn, chic, playful, sad, funny, self-indulgent, philosophical, surreal. Some, naturally, are better than others. It's very taxing to read them all at once, and explaining what they are *about* is like trying to interpret a collage. A giant balloon hovers above Manhattan; opportunities are missed; relationships sour; Indians attack; Robert Kennedy appears. This collection reminds us of what difficult pleasure Barthelme can bring patient readers and also reminds us not to confuse him with his lessers.



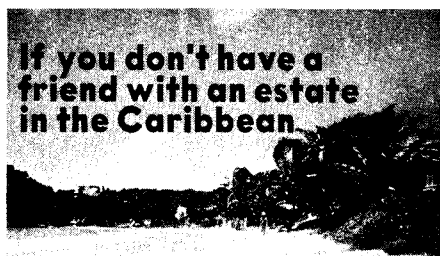
**What We Talk About When We Talk About Love**  
by Raymond Carver  
Alfred A. Knopf  
159 pp., \$9.95

"L.D. PUT THE shaving bag under his arm and picked up the suitcase. He said, 'I just want to say one thing more.' But then he could not think what it could possibly be." So ends a marriage in "One More Thing," one of 17 sparse stories in this slick collection. Raymond Carver pares language to the bone and writes stories in which, seemingly, nothing happens. Characters fret and talk or—more accurately (and more meaningfully)—keep silent. But the stories are laced with haunting brutality: Parents end a quarrel by pulling their baby out of each other's arms; fishing buddies come upon the body of a drowned woman and don't

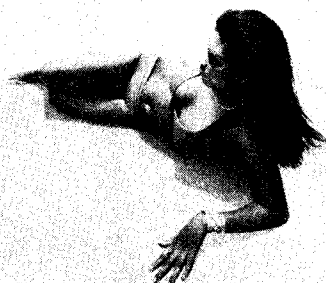


"Now, Mrs. Johnson, you'd been waiting in the checkout line for 15 minutes when the late Mr. Elliot came up and tried to stamp a 10% price increase on your five packages of ground round! Would you please tell the jury what happened next?"





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RANDOM HOUSE 

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# BOOKS

report it until their vacation weekend is over; two men start out to pick up young women and end by stoning them to death. Carver's world is bleak, and he never deigns to explain motives or emotions. His strikingly off-key stories, some only a few pages long, are capable of setting your teeth on edge.



JOYCE DAVIES

### The White Hotel

by D.M. Thomas

The Viking Press

274 pp., \$12.95

THE MOST STUNNING feature of this moving novel is its odd—and bold—structure. Frequent shifts in point of view and time sequence occur in a vibrant pastiche: letters by and to Sigmund Freud; deranged compositions written by the novel's heroine while under Freud's care; a case history by Freud; a conventional narrative detailing the heroine's life; and a ghostly conclusion in which all of the novel's dead are re-united in Palestine. Through this intricate web, Thomas, a British poet, relates the story of Lisa Erdman, born to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother in Odessa, from her career as both a dancer and a singer to her death at the hands of the Nazis at Babi Yar. The heroine's life is a metaphor for our century. Thomas convincingly implies that neurosis, bizarre sexual fantasy, and an obsession with death form a major part of our contemporary, cultural legacy.

## Nonfiction



JOHN THOMAS VICTOR

### Basin and Range

by John McPhee

Farrar, Straus & Giroux

216 pp., \$10.95

GEOLOGY RIVALS economics as a dismal science. There are all those rocks so difficult to distinguish from one another, and all that geologic time to keep track of. And geologists' jargon doesn't help ("meteoric water," we learn, is only rain). John McPhee is a master interpreter, and he brings geology to life. Discussion centers on plate tectonics, or the forces that make continents drift. The Red Sea as it exists today provides a glimpse of what the Atlantic looked like five million years after it originated somewhere in New Jersey. The same process is going on now in the American West's basins and ranges. Sooner or later, an ocean will begin to form; California will become an island. Down on the earth's mantle, plates (there are some 20 of them) shift. If they separate, oceans are formed; if they collide, mountains sprout. During the Oligocene, India was tossed up against Tibet, and we got the Himalayas. Writes McPhee: "If by some fiat I had to restrict all this writing to one sentence, this is the one I would choose: The summit of Mount Everest is marine limestone." He makes it all seem that simple.

