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THE BEST BOOKS OF 2004

Nonfiction

Times Staff Writer

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Against All Enemies

Inside America's War on Terror

Richard A. Clarke

The Free Press: 292 pp., \$27

Richard A. Clarke's "Against All Enemies" makes clear that he is perhaps the single most improbable hero American liberals have ever revered. "Against All Enemies" is the story of what it is like to be an obsessive personality and, at the same time, a Washington bureaucrat. Much attention has been given (rightly so) to Clarke's first chapter, a gripping first-person account of the events inside the White House on Sept. 11 and 12, 2001. Yet the entire book tells an equally compelling story about the last two decades of U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East and of the concomitant growth of terrorism against the United States. This is, however, not history but Clarke's version of it. He emerges as a kind of Forrest Gump with cunning: He is the heretofore unrecognizable figure in the back of the picture at major events, but it turns out that he was the central actor, the one who made the key discovery or found a solution.

— James Mann

Alexander Hamilton

Ron Chernow

Penguin Press: 820 pp., \$35

We carry his face in our wallets, on the \$10 bill; we know he was killed in a duel 200 years ago this July by Vice President Aaron Burr. Yet in the present Founders' revival, Alexander Hamilton — bastard, immigrant, adulterer, genius, journalist, begetter of our prosperity — has so far escaped a full-dress treatment. Now, Ron Chernow, whose previous books have chronicled the American Beauty roses and kudzu vines of mature American capitalism — Warburgs, Morgans, John D. Rockefeller Sr. — examines the man who planted the seeds. "Alexander Hamilton" is thorough, admiring and sad — just what a big book on its subject should be.

— Richard Brookhiser

Avengers of the New World

The Story of the Haitian Revolution

Laurent Dubois

The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press: 358 pp., \$29.95

Founding fathers are a rare breed. In their own day, they can easily be overlooked or misinterpreted; the Nazarene carpenter comes to mind. Usually, though, they are eventually recognized. Not so with Toussaint L'Ouverture. Although (or possibly because) he brought the concept of racial equality to the Americas and was the foremost leader of the world's first properly nationalist struggle, L'Ouverture is most often remembered by the Western world as an interesting case, a slave general wearing a three-cornered hat with a feather in it, a sword by his side. But this man, exiled and imprisoned before his final

triumph was accomplished, is really the patriarch of the post-colonial Americas. Laurent Dubois renders him in movingly human terms, and Dubois' literary sensibility informs this book from start to finish, so that the reader feels as if the story must be fiction, yet it is not. This is a stern and brilliant book.

— Amy Wilentz

Beasts of the Field

A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769-1913

Richard Steven Street

Stanford University Press: 904 pp., \$75; \$29.95 paper

"Beasts of the Field" is a history book that reaches into the present and changes the way we see things. I now understand why the lives of farmworkers so often end in the same broken place. Because it has always been this way — as far back as the native Chumash and Gabrielinos who plowed the first fields in the shadow of the missions and the Chinese who erected the levees to drain the waters of the great Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and the white Europeans who threshed the wheat as the giant metal harvester, the farm's first breathing machine, snorted and clawed at the earth. For the first time, thanks to Richard Steven Street's 25-year labor of love, the whole extraordinary tapestry of that early era is before us. Logging thousands of miles from field to library to newspaper morgue, he has produced a work of monumental scholarship. Street's remarkable book belongs next to such indispensable works as Oscar Handlin's "The Uprooted" and Bernard Bailyn's "Voyagers to the West."

— Mark Arax

A Chance Meeting

Intertwined Lives of American Artists and Writers, 1854-1967

Rachel Cohen

Random House: 366 pp., \$25.95

Rachel Cohen's enthralling "A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Artists and Writers, 1854-1967" is a series of linked explorations of intimacy and amity (including certain failures of intimacy, certain violations of amity) among American writers and artists. The 36 essays, as they progress (if that is the word) from the Civil War to the civil rights movement, constitute something of a new genre, rare in our period: "A Chance Meeting" is a Divination by Affective Nearness or, as I would like to call it, a proximanteia. And what is being divined is nothing less than a century or so of American taste, the nature of modern literary and artistic tangency in the United States.

— Richard Howard

Coast of Dreams

California on the Edge, 1990-2003

Kevin Starr

Alfred A. Knopf: 768 pp., \$35

Since 1978, Kevin Starr has been writing a monumental, multivolume history of California, Americans and the California dream. Until now, the installments have appeared in chronological order. But in "Coast of Dreams," Starr has leapfrogged, producing a chronicle of the state from 1990 to 2003. The picture he presents is of a grim period and an irrecoverable dream: of catastrophic fires, floods, Los Angeles' gang-banging murder spree and the nihilistic culture from which it sprang, the Rodney King beating, the ugly and farcical trial of O.J. Simpson and the perilous racial divisions it revealed, the nearly unrelieved deterioration of public services and the consequent disaffection of the state's residents. Most of all, it shows the loss of what Starr has previously defined as the promise of California.

Cuba and Its Music

From the First Drums to the Mambo

Ned Sublette

Chicago Review Press: 672 pp., \$36

"Cuba and Its Music" is an exceptionally evenhanded study. Ned Sublette's research is monumental. Even in Spanish, there is nothing nearly so thorough. His writing is as vivid and fast-moving as the music he loves — its tone passionate but never purple, its intelligence and rigor completely compatible with sardonic wisecracks and irrepressible bursts of informal verve. Its sole formal flaw is that it doesn't so much end as stop, presumably at the insistence of a publisher who persuaded Sublette to save his ammo for a sequel. Even so, he has added a major work to the tiny canon of social histories of music — perhaps even the grandest of them all.

— Robert Christgau

Eats, Shoots

& Leaves

The Zero Tolerance Approach

to Punctuation

Lynne Truss

Gotham Books: 210 pp., \$17.50

Not everything has gone haywire in a world that converts this haughtily subtitled book — "The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation" — into a bestseller. (I'll leave it to the reader to discover the meaning of the title, "Eats, Shoots & Leaves.") First in England, now in America, it has perched, proud and aloof, atop massive tomes about war, spies and presidents. Witty, smart, passionate, it gives long-overdue attention to "the traffic signals of language."

— John Rechy

For the Beauty

of the Earth

Birding, Opera, and Other Journeys

Thomas Urquhart

Shoemaker & Hoard: 314 pp., \$26

This memoir is so compelling because of the power of its thought and its writing. Thomas Urquhart's style is deceptively reserved, quietly crafted, complex, flexible and dryly humorous. The vital link he perceives between nature and art provides him with such felicitous images throughout as "English sparrows brawl under a split-wood fence, in the manner of Breughelian peasants at a messe." Urquhart writes throughout with a fine ear for the sound and rhythms of his sentences. Such constant pleasure is there in reading his prose, in fact, that I found myself thinking how much I would like to invite this man to dinner, so capable does he seem of talking knowledgeably, intelligently and engagingly about anything.

— Robert Finch

Franklin and Winston

An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship

Jon Meacham

Random House: 492 pp., \$29.95

It was a cold winter day in Washington, D.C., and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was visiting the White House. After taking a bath, he started pacing around the guest bedroom in the buff, frantically dictating a note. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. "Come in," Churchill instructed. The door opened and it was President Franklin D. Roosevelt, his face telegraphing embarrassment. There in front of him was a naked Churchill. "You see, Mr. President," the British leader intoned, "I have nothing to hide from you." Colorful anecdotes like this populate every page of "Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship," Jon Meacham's beautifully written and superbly researched dual biography. At the core of this book are the nearly 2,000 letters the pair exchanged between September 1939 and FDR's death in April 1945. Meacham skillfully fleshes out the backdrop against which these incessant exchanges occurred.

— Douglas Brinkley

Freethinkers

A History of American Secularism

Susan Jacoby

Metropolitan Books: 420 pp., \$27.50

For more than two centuries, the United States has avoided the bloody religious wars that have ravaged other nations from time immemorial. But under the umbrella of this immunity, we have suffered through our own "culture war" about what role religious belief should play in our government. In recent years, the metaphoric wall between church and state has suffered some erosion. We have a born-again Christian president who openly seeks divine inspiration, aggressively pushes for religious institutions to receive government funding for their social service programs and routinely invokes the Bible to advance his and the nation's political agenda. Against this backdrop, an intellectual response from embattled secularists was probably to be expected — and has now arrived in "Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism," by respected social critic and historian Susan Jacoby. Her antidote for this perceived religious triumphalism is a detailed counter-history celebrating the accomplishments of the nation's secular tradition and recalling the individual courage and contributions of that tradition's leading lights.

— Edward Lazarus

Grace and Power

The Private World of the Kennedy White House

Sally Bedell Smith

Random House: 610 pp., \$29.95

If there is little earth-rattlingly new to say about Jack and Jackie Kennedy, their private lives, their restive travels together and separately, the international aristocrats, arms dealers, piratical shipping magnates, aging debutantes, desiccated diplomats, dress designers and antiques experts they cultivated along with the obligatory politicians, reporters and other useful and often loathed Washington insiders, Sally Bedell Smith at least says everything worth mentioning about these matters in one book.

"Grace and Power" reads like something you'd be giddy to find in your dentist's waiting room, a gracefully written tell-all that really does tell a story worth reading. Smith's portrait of Jackie is irresistible. What comes through are Jackie's mischievous intelligence, her unerring sense of style, her love of the arts, her empathy for others, her forbearance and stoicism.

— Gary Indiana

His Excellency: George Washington

Joseph J. Ellis

Alfred A. Knopf: 326 pp., \$26.95

Joseph J. Ellis has written a lively and engaging overview of Washington, one that should be required reading for all of our disconnected, discontented citizenry. Ellis' biography isn't as exhaustive as James Thomas Flexner's "Washington: The Indispensable Man," nor as detailed as David Hackett Fischer's "Washington's Crossing" (a movie waiting to happen), but he does give us an accessible portrait of the man, not merely his actions but plausible guesses about his interior life.

— Nicholas Meyer

Infidels

Andrew Wheatcroft

Random House: 432 pp., \$29.95

It is astonishing that such a superb history of the myths and realities of Christian-Muslim relations should appear when we need it most. "Infidels" exposes the legends and the language that survive the facts and the conscious distortions on both sides of the age-old conflict. There is neither prejudice nor intellectual snobbery, nor opinions masked as fact. The democracy of speakers on both sides is a marvelous gift from a marvelously gifted scholar.

— Mary Lee Settle

The Lesser Evil

The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1945-59

Translated from the German by Martin Chalmers

Weidenfeld & Nicolson: 638 pp., \$40

The diaries of Victor Klemperer from the Nazi period were a phenomenon when published a decade ago. A German Jew married to a non-Jew, Klemperer from 1933 to 1945 kept a scrupulous record of the hardship and persecution that he survived. "The Lesser Evil" brings us Klemperer's final years as a Communist in East Germany. The book represents what Hollywood used to call a Russian ending — melancholy, ambiguous, haunted by failure. Yet it is never depressing, and often funny. Taken as a chronicle of modern Germany or as a testament to living in uncertainty, "The Lesser Evil" is a remarkable coda to an extraordinary life.

— Edmund Fawcett

The Mold in Dr. Florey's Coat

The Story of the Penicillin Miracle

Eric Lax

John Macrae/Henry Holt: 308 pp., \$25

Every day, men, women and children are rescued from dangerous infections by drugs that began — in the words of author Eric Lax — as "a blue-green moon of mold [that] shone over a sea of islets of staphylococci." The fuzzy trespasser on the culture plate of bacteria was the fungus that makes penicillin. It was Alexander Fleming who first spotted it in his lab at St. Mary's Hospital, London. The year was 1928. The tale of penicillin's journey from curiosity to 20th century miracle drug, in Lax's hands, makes for a marvelous read. Lax's fine book likely will become the classic account of penicillin's medical beginnings.

— Claire Panosian Dunavan

1912

Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs — The Election That Changed the Country

James Chace

Simon & Schuster: 326 pp., \$25.95

Presidential elections are a seamless web, especially now in the days of the "permanent campaign." Who doubts that the campaign of 2004 began as soon as the Supreme Court selected George W. Bush as the winner in 2000? James Chace's "1912" chronicles the dramatic four-cornered contest that year among Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and Eugene Debs, arguably the clearest choices in our history. Chace has ably captured the men and issues of the campaign. But this is more than history in a bottle, for he goes beyond the 1912 election to locate its continuing effects on and significance in subsequent American history.

— Stanley I. Kutler

Perilous Times

Free Speech in Wartime From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism

Geoffrey R. Stone

W.W. Norton: 730 pp., \$35

So rich in material is "Perilous Times," a chronicle of the tribulations of the 1st Amendment in wartime, that this scholarly yet highly readable book amounts to an anecdotal history of the United States itself, from the Founding Fathers to the present. Its author, Geoffrey R. Stone, a law professor at the University of Chicago and one of our foremost scholars on constitutional law, has written, with knowing passion, a cautionary tale for our times.

— Herbert Mitgang

Plan of Attack

Bob Woodward

Simon & Schuster: 468 pp., \$28

Bob Woodward has written an astonishing book: It reveals the startling degree of contempt, confusion, political ambition and personal vendetta that seems to dominate the inner circle around President Bush. Here is a portrait of a president who, it appears, consciously exploited America's fears after Sept. 11 to pursue an extraneous but deeply held animus against Saddam Hussein, the already defanged dictator of Iraq. In this revealing book, Bush appears as a man detached not only from the political implications of his actions but also, depressingly, from the human cost.

— Robert Scheer

Politics

Observations & Arguments 1966-2004

Hendrik Hertzberg

Penguin Press: 684 pp., \$29.95

In this book's introduction, David Remnick, the New Yorker's editor, says that Hendrik Hertzberg "has tone control the way Billie

Holiday had tone control." For those of us who are always looking for a clear voice, an engaged, spirited, sometimes irate, yet lucid voice, these essays are pay dirt. For those who have grown sick of debased ideological squabbles, it's exhilarating to read Hertzberg.

— Nicholas Goldberg

Rivers of Gold

The Rise of the Spanish Empire

Hugh Thomas

Random House: 698 pp., \$35

"Rivers of Gold" covers the conquest of Mexico, but its main concern is with the establishment of the Spanish overseas empire in the years before it became but one part of the wider imperial politics of the Hapsburg ruler Charles V. This is the period of the first tentative voyages by Columbus and a succession of other navigators. It is a familiar enough story in its details. But it has rarely been told before in its entirety or with such flare. "Rivers of Gold" has an unflagging narrative, a host of characters and a way of holding the reader's attention even when recounting the often wearying details of early-modern diplomatic history.

— Anthony Pagden

Sonata for Jukebox

Pop Music, Memory, and the Imagined Life

Geoffrey O'Brien

Counterpoint: 328 pp., \$27.50

For some people, music is background sound: ear candy at the banquet of life. For others, music is a vessel for immersion — less an accompaniment to life than the stuff of life itself. The latter will recognize a kindred spirit in Geoffrey O'Brien's "Sonata for Jukebox." O'Brien is a critic able to explicate music in unexpected and illuminating ways. This breathtaking book also gives us evocative selections on family and friends that seem almost to constitute a new genre, certainly a new sort of memoir: as dense with detail and echoing allusion, as full of catchy and telling hooks as an abandoned Beach Boys masterpiece or a collaborative novel by the Three Johns (Cheever, O'Hara, Updike).

— Tom Nolan

The Vatican to Vegas

A History of Special Effects

Norman M. Klein

The New Press: 506 pp., \$27.95

"The Vatican to Vegas" is astounding, exciting, infuriating. Norman M. Klein sees Hollywood and its special-effects artistry as providing an organic connection between the popular culture's architectural and theatrical forms and a kind of virtual space common today. And inasmuch as its attention is steadily directed toward what Klein means by special effects — the great domes on which theater, masque, religious rapture, baroque trompe l'oeil, industrial exhibition, cinema, Las Vegas are projected — so this book aspires to a running, jumping transcendence. Klein writes like an angel in a Tiepolo ceiling — and he thinks (this is the real motor) like jazz saxophonist Art Pepper on the very best stuff.

— David Thomson

Washington's Crossing

David Hackett Fischer

Oxford University Press: 564 pp., \$35

The image remains familiar, if only because it has been so often parodied: George Washington stands erect in an overcrowded boat, gazing steadfastly ahead. Emanuel Leutze painted this scene in 1851 and called it "George Washington Crossing the Delaware." David Hackett Fischer, a scholar of prodigious energy, aims to restore our understanding of the contingent, surprising quality of the episode. His great achievement in "Washington's Crossing" is to enable the reader to appreciate the fragility of the Revolution in late 1776, and hence to understand the days around the battles of Trenton and Princeton as a watershed in American history. This is a tale that helps us understand anew a great American icon.

— Fred Anderson

Washington Gone Crazy

Senator Pat McCarran and the Great

American Communist Hunt

Michael J. Ybarra

Steerforth Press: 856 pp., \$35

Everyone knows Joe McCarthy. His name is synonymous with the search for Reds under every bed, with unleashing a hysterical and paranoid search for un-American demons bent on betraying the republic. But who today remembers Pat McCarran, the senator who made McCarthy possible? Now, in the magisterial "Washington Gone Crazy," Michael J. Ybarra meticulously traces McCarran's rise to power and tells the often sordid story of the havoc he unleashed. Ybarra's book is indispensable as a more nuanced assessment of a crucial and still contested period of our recent history.

— Ronald Radosh

What's the Matter

With Kansas?

How Conservatives Won the Heart of America

Thomas Frank

Metropolitan Books: 308 pp., \$24

In "What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America," Thomas Frank heads to his home state to figure out how rural Midwesterners, who 100 years ago raged against Wall Street and the "money power," came to embrace the Republican Party. Frank makes a smart, convincing case that the same class resentment that fueled Populism is behind the animosity that many working-class Kansans — and other Americans — have for liberals.

— Chris Suellentrop

Where We Are Now

Notes From Los Angeles

D.J. Waldie

Angel City Press: 206 pp., \$16.95 paper

In essayist D.J. Waldie, the Plains of Id have found a voice. The Plains of Id: That is what Reyner Banham called the suburbanized flatlands of Los Angeles County in his classic 1971 study, "Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies." In these essays, Waldie lifts his eyes up and addresses the larger Los Angeles. His overriding insight is that Los Angeles as a whole is a success. Not a booster success, for there are tragedies and failures aplenty. And not merely the success of attitude and style. But a success for ordinary people who, like Waldie's parents in the late 1940s, arrived here to seek a better life. The city is about those small homes that hardworking people somehow scrape together the money to make a down payment on; those parks where they gather on Saturdays; those churches, synagogues and mosques where they worship; and, yes, even those buses they take to work.

— Kevin Starr

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