

“The 5 Greatest Novels of the Decade”

by Adam Krause

Writers have every right to end this decade in a state of as much uncertainty and confusion as everybody else. Will there be paper books in ten years, or will everyone be curling up with the Kindle? Will there still be investigative newspaper journalism, or will all public information be provided by bloggers like yours truly? And what should we even call this ten-year period at the beginning of the twenty-first century that we have just lived through? “The oughts” sounds regretful, “the ‘00s” sounds sinister and “the turn of the century” still sounds like we should all be wearing petticoats.

However, while most of us are anxiously watching the skies, the hurricane coasts and our stock portfolios to see where the next disaster will come from, a few novelists have kept their eyes focused where they should be: on, as William Faulkner memorably put it, “the old verities and truths of the heart... love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice” and on epic stories of conflict, culture clash and family that bring these qualities to the fore. Each of these five books is sprawling and ambitious, able to leap generations in a single bound and observe, as if with X-ray vision, the intensity of a single moment. They should be required reading for anyone who wants to write in these times: anyone who thinks they can step up and give our recent history a name.

5. *White Teeth*

British-Jamaican author Zadie Smith finished this stunning first novel when she was a 22-year-old undergraduate at Cambridge. It concerns the lifelong friendship between two war veterans in London, Archibald Jones and Samad Iqbal, and the intertwined destinies of their offspring. Archie gets regular letters from the Swedish cyclist with whom, in the greatest triumph of his life, he tied for thirteenth place in the Olympics (“your earnest competitor, Horst Ibelgaufits”) and Samad’s wife, in punishment for his decision to send their son away to Bangladesh to study Islam, resolves never again to give him a yes or no answer on anything (“Where have you put the remote control?” “It is as likely to be in the drawer, Samad Miah, as it is behind the sofa.”) It is as funny and penetrating a look at our multicultural society as has been written yet this century.

4. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

It may be the reviewer’s bias or a cultural movement that is here to stay, but though no graphic novels have been included on this list, the next three novels draw on comic books for their inspiration. This decade has brought about the belated acknowledgment that comics can be as affecting, and take as many risks, as the best literature. Two other related developments: movies based on comic books are now cemented in the mind of Hollywood as the most reliable way to get audiences to the theatre (which may not be such a good thing) and writers of more traditional literary forms are more and more often invoking superheroes as a powerful metaphor, a part of

our collective unconscious in the way that the myths of Odin and Hades informed the imaginations of earlier cultures.

Oscar Wao is a Dominican-American nerd, who as we follow him through high school and college, desperately wants a woman but is much more comfortable talking to his Doctor Who figurines. His story is narrated by Yunior, the on-again-off-again boyfriend of Oscar's sister, who also narrated the author's earlier story collection *Drown*. Yunior has been given the task of watching over Oscar, but cannot protect the brilliant misfit from his tendency to fall madly in love with any woman who talks to him, even when he goes to visit his relatives in the Dominican Republic and the curse of a hated dictator finds him from beyond the grave. Diaz's chief accomplishment is in the language, the way it blends epic storytelling and street slang, Spanish and English, the confident narration of a folk tale with the awkward scrawled-diary intimacy of an adolescent who thinks nobody else has ever been in love before.

3. *The Fortress of Solitude*

One of the great things a novel can do is show the way the passage of time changes people: how many different times in a day or a lifetime our identity shifts to meet what the world asks of us. Jumping swiftly from one point of view to the next ("*You're white!* Winegar wanted to scream. *Man can fly!* Dylan wanted to scream") Jonathan Lethem tells the story of Dylan Ebdus, a "whiteboy" whose well-meaning bohemian parents move to a black neighborhood of Brooklyn in order to raise him. After leaving for college but failing to escape his past, Dylan returns as an adult to take care of unfinished business. The bulk of the story takes place in the late seventies, as phenomena that would define American culture for the rest of the century – rap, crack, graffiti and punk rock – were being forged in the crucible of New York. Its supporting characters change with their times – one goes from chess nerd to wannabe gangster to landlord in a new, gentrified Brooklyn – and we believe the authenticity of each, not because the character has finally found their true self but because the world Lethem creates is so constantly in motion. Oh yeah, and there's a magical ring that sometimes gives flight, sometimes invisibility: two superpowers that the amateur should never confuse with one another.

2. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

Master magician Michael Chabon transforms meticulous research into a world that never was: a New York circa 1940 seen through the eyes of two young comic book creators, all sharp angles and jutting jaws that mask the human frailty behind the heroics. In America it is the Golden Age of comics and in Europe it is an age of unprecedented darkness, of World War II and the Holocaust, from which Joe Kavalier, a budding artist in Prague, escapes by smuggling himself inside of a giant golem. He winds up in his American aunt's small apartment with his cousin Sammy Clay, and the two of them create the Escapist, a Houdini-like superhero who makes them famous. The immersive, addictive novel (which my college roommate claimed to read in a single day, by doing nothing else for eleven hours but flip through its 656 pages) articulates, more

brilliantly than any of Chabon's work before or since, the author's vision that it is the dreams we dream that make our lives all the more real.

1. *The Corrections*

This dark, hilarious novel came out in September 2001, just after a decade that many pundits called "a holiday from history," to announce that however happy we thought we might be while on Prozac, the holiday was over. At its center are three siblings, products of a prosperous Midwestern childhood: Chip, a lecherous academic who ends up working for an Eastern European Internet scam that allows investors to buy pieces of Lithuania; Gary, a successful but miserable investor who has to hide his drinking from the surveillance system rigged up by his ten-year-old son; and Denise, a trendy chef who breaks up her boss's marriage by sleeping with both him and his earnest hippie wife. Their father is losing his mind to Parkinson's disease and their mother wants them to come home for one last Christmas together. The writing is so sharp, the failures of the characters rendered in such excruciating and recognizable detail, that you can open the book to any page and find a sentence that draws the eye, compelling you to read to the end of the scene. Franzen, who has not published a novel since, managed to write what is, so far, the century's most important American novel by focusing on an image we have seen a thousand times – witness the happy family on its cover – and zooming in to pick at all the warts, veins and scars.