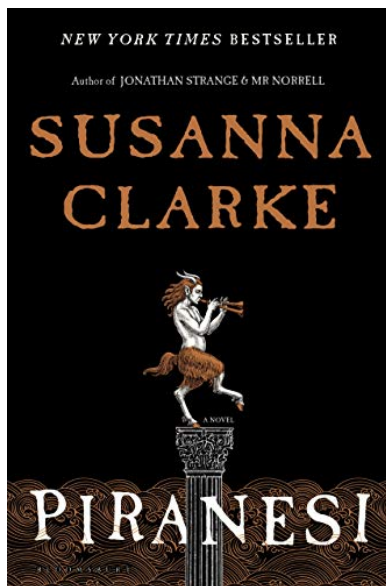brokensandals.net -> Reviews -> Favorite books I read in 2020

Posted 2020-12-05.

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Fiction

After publishing one of my all-time favorite novels in 2004 and a just-okay set of short stories a couple years later, Susanna Clarke more or less went quiet for 14 years. So I was surprised and thrilled to hear of her new book, *Piranesi*.

Although the setting and story are fairly different from *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, some of the appeal is the same: a quaint ambience; a charming emulation of a past era's literary style. Moreover, it's an escape to a calm and orderly world. I suggest reading it in a dark room with classical music playing, and perhaps brewing yourself some tea (regardless of whether you like tea).
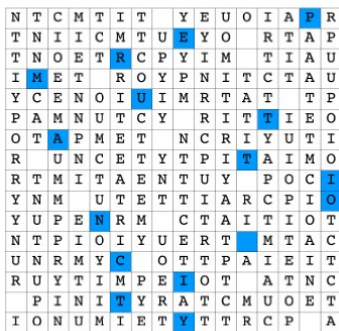
Greg Egan's *Diaspora* was one of my picks last year, and *Permutation City* has confirmed him as my favorite writer of optimistic futurist sci-fi. His work is driven by concepts, not plot or characters, but the concepts are delectable.

This novel offers lots of fascinating speculations about the implications of technology for reprogramming our own minds. It's also built on a mind-bending hypothesis about the ultimate nature of consciousness; the Hans Moravec paper "Simulation, Consciousness, Existence" that Egan references in a FAQ about the book provides an entertaining (and disturbing) trip further down that rabbit hole.

I only bought a copy of *In the Night Garden* because I'd gone to hear the author do a reading (from her
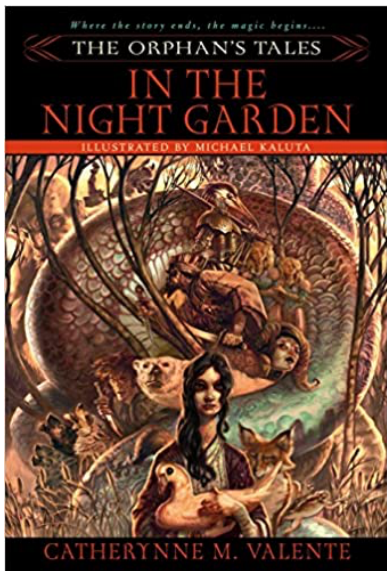
memorable novel *Space Opera*) and it felt vaguely rude to ignore the merch table. Or to ignore the enthusiastic recommendation of this particular book by the person staffing said merch table. But it turned out to be an excellent recommendation.

Fantasy is not my favorite genre; I don't often get invested in reading about epic struggles for the fate of detailed alternate medieval universes. The fantasy stories more likely to hook me are ones with narrower stakes and a fairy-tale feel, and this is a perfect example. Catherynne Valente weaves together short, myth-like segments from many different perspectives to create a narrative just real enough to be engaging and surreal enough to be enchanting.
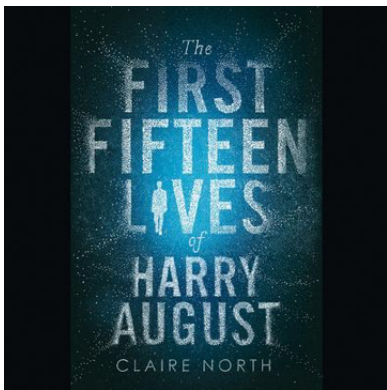
Claire North's *First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* plays on one of my favorite sci-premises, the time loop. It's a creative and thoughtful take. Also, the audio book is read by Peter Kenny, who I'm pretty sure is objectively the best narrator.
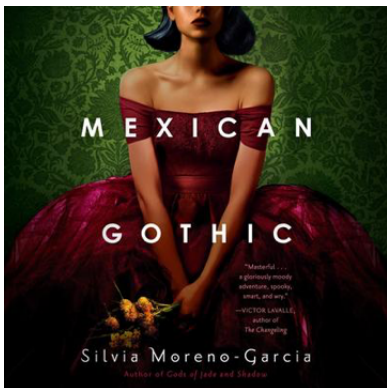
Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic* gave me exactly what I want from a horror novel. Elegantly creepy atmosphere, good writing, solid plot and characters; it's a pleasure to listen to.

When I first tried to read Peter Watts's *Blindsight* years ago, I found it unbearably lacking in emotion, and didn't get very far. I'm glad I gave it a second chance. The protagonist is more complex and interesting than he seems at first, and the premise behind the alien life in the novel is really fascinating. I love first contact stories and this is a great one.
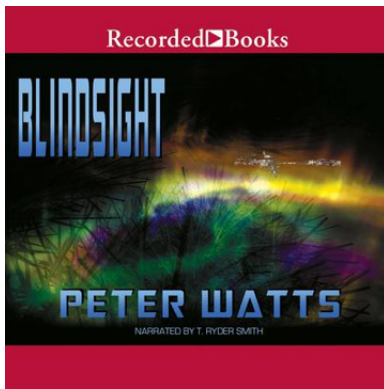
Nonfiction

Lori Gottlieb's *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* is three things: a memoir, a set of fictionalized mini-biographies, and a collection of thoughts about therapy and life in general. It's successful as all three.


> *We can't have change without loss, which is why so often people say they want change but nonetheless stay exactly the same.*
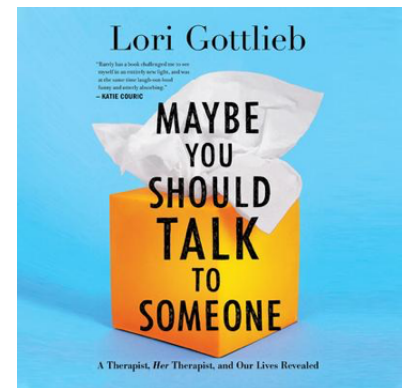
The View From Nowhere is definitely the best philosophy book *title* I read this year, and probably also the best philosophy book I read this year. Nagel discusses how the quest for objectivity (which can never be perfectly achieved) interacts with questions of knowledge, personal identity, free will, and ethics, revealing analogies between those areas which hadn't occurred to me before.

I'll confess I was biased in Nagel's favor going into this because of my anti-reductionist views on consciousness and ethics. I like this quote from Anscombe he includes in a footnote: "This often happens in philosophy; it is argued that 'all we find' is such-and-such, and it turns out that the arguer has excluded from his idea of 'finding' the sort of thing he says we don't 'find'." That problem shows up a lot in the core debates over those two issues, I think.

> *Too much time is wasted because of the assumption that methods already in existence will solve problems for which they were not designed; too many hypotheses and systems of thought in philosophy and elsewhere are based on the bizarre view that we, at this point in history, are in possession of the basic forms of understanding needed to comprehend absolutely anything.*
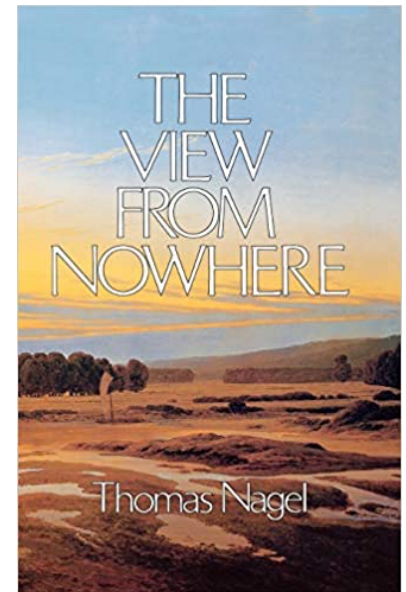
The two-year confinement of Anne Frank to a cramped annex, not to mention her subsequent mistreatment and murder, put into perspective how light an ordeal this year's pandemic lockdowns have been by comparison. But I must agree with what Anne herself opines in one entry of her diary: focusing on how much worse off others are is not a very effective way to feel better about one's own suffering. She believed, rather, that we must focus on the good, and especially the beauty of the natural world.

There are no easy answers to the question of how - or how long - to go on in the face of extreme suffering. But it is a precious privilege to be able to read, and try to learn from, the thoughts of someone who endured so much.
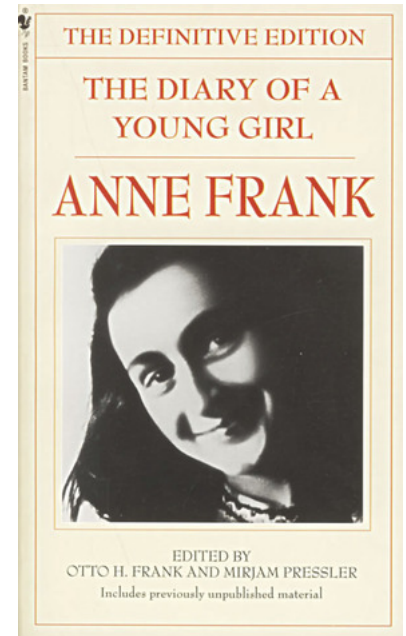
> *We can't contain the ways in which people want to make things: it happens everywhere, all the time.*

Nadia Eghbal's *Working in Public* is packed with interesting quotes, stats, and analysis about the world of open-source software development. My main takeaway was that most open source projects are reliant on an individual or small group of core contributors, and the attention of those individuals is a crucial limited resource that needs to be rationed. This goes against the commonplace notion that the success of open source depends on encouraging as many people to participate as possible.

I doubt I would have ever read *The Constitution of Liberty* if it had not been a book club selection, but I found it very thought-provoking.

> *Though most people regard as very natural the claim that nobody should be rewarded more than he deserves for his pain and effort, it is nevertheless based on a colossal presumption. It presumes that we are able to judge in every individual instance how well people use the different opportunities and talents given to them and how meritorious their achievements are in the light of all the circumstances which have made them possible. It presumes that some human beings are in a position to determine conclusively what a person is worth and are entitled to determine what he may achieve.*

You might expect that a book on the subject of "liberty" would evaluate governments in terms of how permissive or restrictive they are, but Hayek's concern is instead the extent to which a government adheres to the "rule of law." Under his definition, rule of law is not merely the requirement that government officials must obey the law like everyone else. It's the requirement that legal rules be "general, equally applicable, and certain"; that citizens should not be subjected to "the arbitrary will" of others, even if that will is exercised by means of legitimate legal processes (such as a law that gives broad discretionary power to a regulatory agency). This is an axis along which policies can be classified which has interesting differences from the more commonly discussed axes of *freedom vs central planning* and *individualism vs collectivism*.
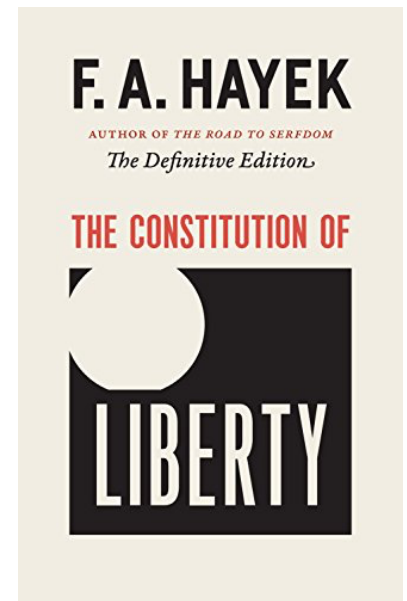
Much of the appeal to me of the emperor Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* lies in the supposition that it was never meant to be published. It's a chance to see the unfiltered personal thoughts of a ruler. Unlike many ancient texts, the concerns that occupy this one feel entirely relatable, even across eighteen centuries and several layers of social strata.

Aurelius makes some very implausible assumptions and paints an unrealistically panacean picture of Stoic philosophy. But I do think Stoicism provides some potentially useful tools for coping with unalterable circumstances, and the presentation of it here is inspirational.

> *When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own...*
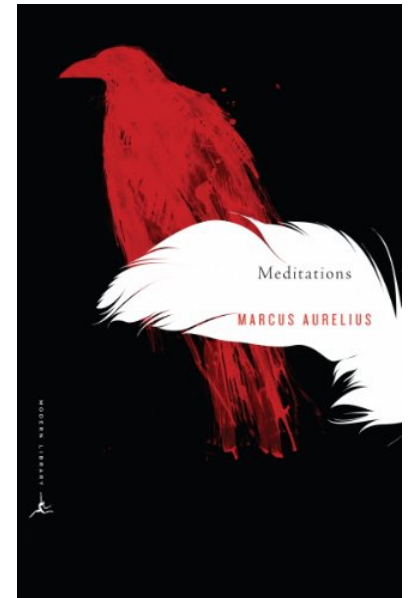
Very Deliberate Omissions

Books I had expected to like, but do not recommend...

Remember that guy you met the other day who was sure he had it all figured out? The one who'd spent about five minutes thinking about the world, realized his opinions were the clear and incontrovertible conclusions of pure unbiased logic, and went forth to lecture all his acquaintances on health, gender, education, ethics, and governance?

That guy's spiritual forebear wrote a bunch of books and got himself remembered as a founder of Western
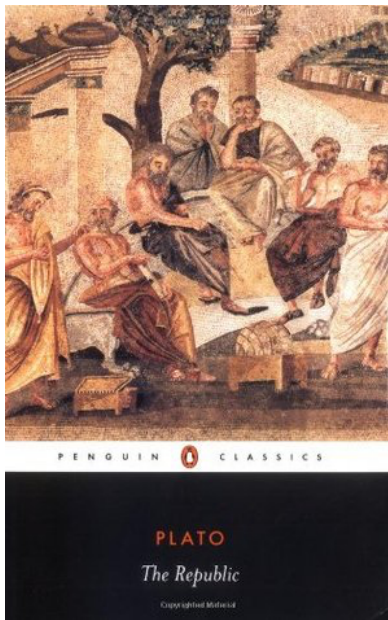
philosophy. If you're expecting any useful takeaways from Plato's *Republic*, you're going to be disappointed. But it does at least give the lie to the idea that philosophy never makes progress; contemporary analytic philosophy is noticeably less flimsy than this stuff.

Wuthering Heights is the story of some really terrible people whose every word and deed telegraphs how terrible they are. They make everyone around them miserable for years. But not in, like, an interesting way.

Questions, quibbles, recommendations? Email me at jacobaw@gmail.com.