

Books I Recommend Without Reservation: 2006

June 28, 2007

[Original link](#)

I read over a hundred and twenty books in 2006. Some of them were OK. Some were good. Some were very good. Here are the handful that I can recommend you read without any reservations. This isn't a top ten list; the books aren't in any particularly meaningful order. These are just the books that I can honestly say that, as a human being, I think you will enjoy reading (and you'll be a better person for having done so).

Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*

This loving ethnography is like a trip inside the lives of children. Lareau spends time with families black and white; poor, middle-class, and wealthy. The description is engrossing and the theoretical contributions thought-provoking, even if you have no background in the field.

G. H. Hardy *A Mathematician's Apology* (PDF) Godfrey Hardy was a great mathematician. But, looking back on his life, he wondered what it was he had actually contributed to society. In this, his classic defense of his pragmatically-worthless profession, he examines what it means to have spent your life wisely. (Previous thoughts: [my apology](#), [Legacy](#).)

Raymond Smullyan, *5000 BC (And Other Philosophical Fantasies)*

In this bizarrely delightful little book, Smullyan, the famed recreational logician, addresses topics from the annoyances on long car rides to the most difficult problems in philosophy, often at once, using stories that are so delightfully amusing that it seems hard to believe they could have any educational value.

Atul Gawande, *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*

Since I read this book, Gawande has become something of a rock star, but here he is the mild-mannered surgeon who's writing on *Slate* got him picked up by the *New Yorker*. The columns in this book are collected from his pieces for that magazine and address with reflection and investigation the various difficulties of modern medicine.

George Saunders, *In Persuasion Nation: Stories* I have to be honest with you. I'm not really one for science fiction. Indeed, I'm not a big fan of fiction in general. But George Saunders is different: I'll read just about anything by him. Saunders' stories manage to combine a whimsically-imagined future, biting critique of our present era, along with a use of language so delightfully varied that one wonders how one man can have such control over his authorial voice.

Thomas Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On?: Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its L*

One would think a book on labor history would be dreadfully dull and, more to the point, depressing. And yet, in the first chapter of this book, I found something that made me laugh or smile widely on practically every page. My friend Rick Perlstein got me to read this book by [telling me](#) it was “the best political book of the last 15 years [—] the best book of the last 15 years.” (He’s since taken me to meet Geoghegan several times.) It’s hard to imagine a book more important and touching.

Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached: Unfolding the Mystery of the Infant-Mother Bond and Its*

At the beginning of the last century, doctors thought parental love was unimportant: [parents weren’t allowed to even visit their kids in the hospital](#), psychology experts encouraged moms not to hug or kiss their children, the US government handed out pamphlets on how to be firm with your children. This *tour de force* book tells the amazing story of how all that was overturned by a group of dedicated scientists whose research into the subject of parental love brought some of the most stunningly strong results in the entire field of psychology. Thrillingly good story, textbook on the science, and self-help guide all in one — I can’t recommend this book enough.

David Feige, *Indefensible: One Lawyer’s Journey into the Inferno of American Justice*

Being a public defender is a fairly interesting job, but David Feige manages to make it downright fascinating in this in-depth description of his career. Feige describes his life in luscious detail, from the urine on his doorstep to the gritty details of the courtroom, and doesn’t hesitate to name names or dig into unpleasant subjects. If only there was a book this good on every career.

Scott McCloud, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*

Any Scott McCloud book is a treasure, but this one is especially probing. Essentially, McCloud asks what it is a writer does and what it takes to be a good one. His medium is comics, but a lot of the rules are applicable to other formats and it’s hard to imagine a book this curious or this well-written about them.

Dean Baker, *The Conservative Nanny State: How the Wealthy Use the Government to Stay Ri*

One wouldn’t expect a book about economic abuses to be fun, but Dean Baker manages to do it, mostly by turning everything you thought you knew about the subject topsy-turvy. I gave this book to a fairly conservative friend of mine and even he loved it. Plus it’s downloadable for free. ([Previous review.](#)) (Disclosure: I liked the book so much I converted it to HTML and got a free paperback copy in return.)

Jeremy Iversen, *High School Confidential: Secrets of an Undercover Student* ([alt. link](#))

Leaving school, Jeremy Iversen didn’t find the world as exciting as he expected. So he went back. Posing as a high school student, with only the school’s principal knowing the truth, he spent half a year among

the kids and teachers, documenting the life of the average Californian and wondering what it meant for our nation's future. The result is an amazingly good read and a fascinating look at an incredibly important institution. ([Previous review.](#)) (Disclosure: I've [hung out](#) with the author.)

Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* Kipnis is a rollickingly vicious writer, with sentences that have the rhythm and punch of a machine gun. But the book isn't just a fun rant, it also makes an incredibly thought-provoking argument about what it means socially to be in a relationship. ([Previous review.](#))

Matt Taibbi and Mark Ames, *The eXile: Sex, Drugs, and Libel in the New Russia*

Matt Taibbi is my favorite political journalist. He writes with a raw honesty that manages to be both politically biting and hilarious. This book tells the story of how, after playing professional basketball in Inner Mongolia, met up with co-founder Mark Ames and started an independent newspaper that danced in the flames of Russia's dying society. The result is a strange and incredible book: stories of seedy dive bars full of drugged up loose women, intermixed with incredible feats of investigative journalism into the oligarchs dragging Russia down — without any change in tone. It's wonderful.

Joan Didion, *Political Fictions* Damn, this book is good. Nobody knows how to take a book and skewer it like Didion. The *New York Review of Books* pieces reprinted in here are simply some of the best eviscerations of any genre. Its hard to imagine how people can walk after a review like that.

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections: A Novel* After the popular reviews and the Oprah's Book Club selection, I had just about learned to ignore Franzen's big novel. But when a friend told me she was loving it, I decided to check it out. That was no mistake. This is a thoughtful, readable piece of fiction, with big geeky topics and a hearty emotional core.

Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland* Perlstein's last book, *Before the Storm*, managed to turn the story the a largely-dismissed political figure, Barry Goldwater, into a lesson on how the left can take over the country. Now, in *Nixonland*, he examines the turmoil of the 1960s with fresh eyes and the perfidy of the Nixon administration with new depth. I read the book as he was writing it and sent comments — apparently I was the first outside his home to finish it — and the final version hasn't been published. But do be sure to pick it up as soon as it is.