

# Paging the year's best

10 top titles that entertained and enlightened in 2010

## 1 **FREEDOM** by Jonathan Franzen (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

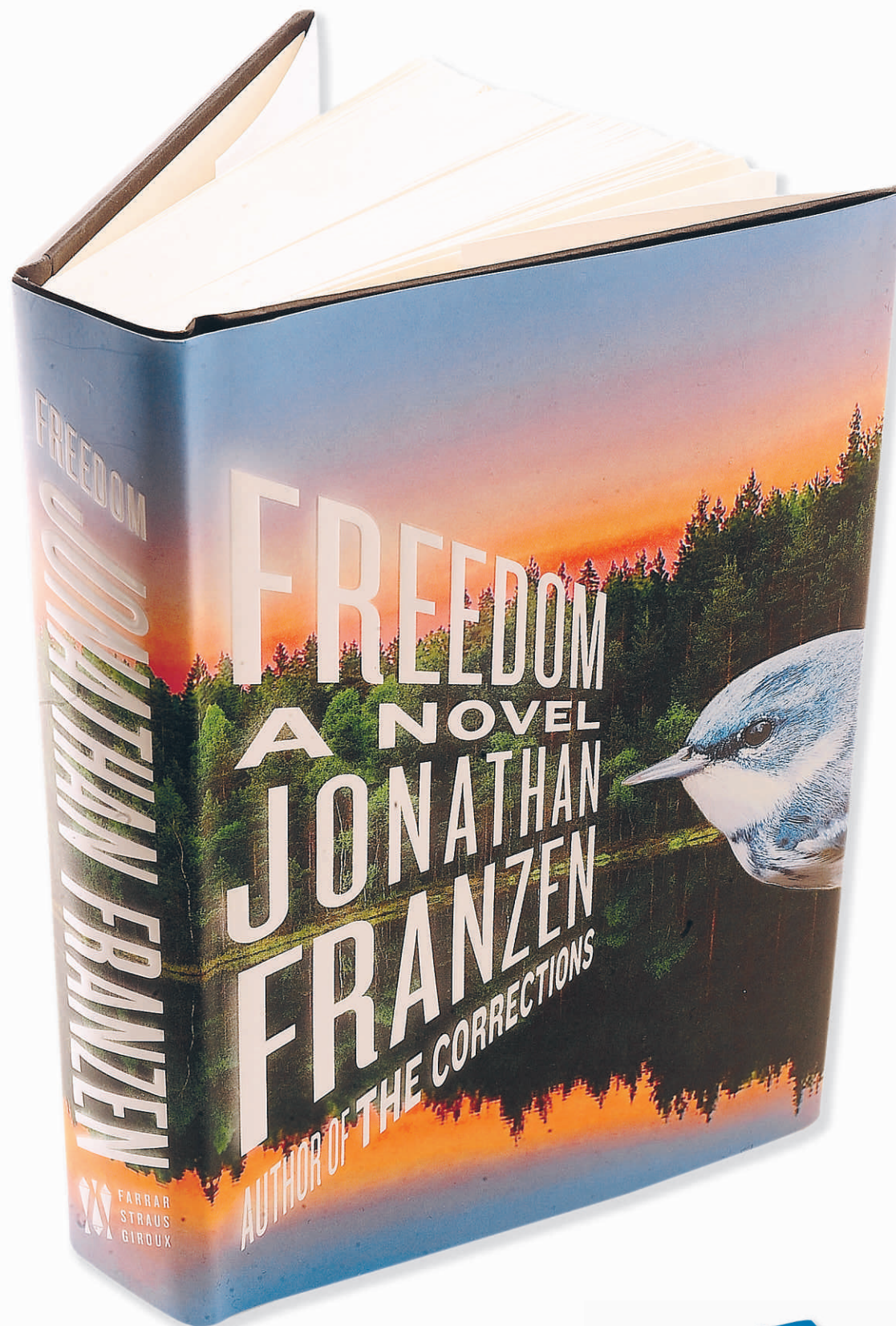
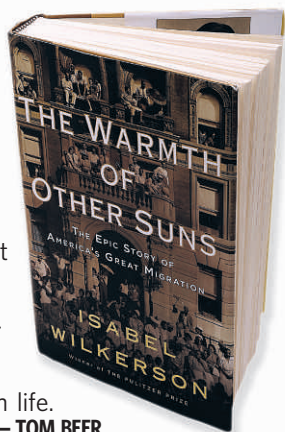
Look out, Jonathan Franzen, here comes the backlash. After Time put Franzen on the cover and The New York Times called "Freedom" a masterpiece, other magazines began using it as a punching bag, and he failed to get the expected National Book Award nomination. But there's no doubt that his latest is both a mesmerizing page-turner and an exhilarating novel of ideas. Walter and Patty Berglund, environmentalist and housewife, are one of the most intriguingly mismatched couples in literature, while punk rocker Richard Katz circles them like a lion stalking a kill. Freedom, in Franzen's materialist-individualistic America, amounts to a terrifying free-for-all. You don't have to like these warts-and-all characters to be drawn into their turmoil. It's as if the author has torn off pieces of himself and nailed them to the page. They are that raw, that real.

— DAN CRYER

## 2 **THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS** by Isabel Wilkerson (Random House)

You may have heard that this is a serious and important work of African-American history. It is, but don't let that scare you off. Wilkerson's rich account of the Great Migration, the mass exodus of some 6 million blacks from the Jim Crow South to the big cities of the North, is as intimate and moving as a novel. Wilkerson brings this vast phenomenon into focus by following three real-life characters, relating the indignities they endured in their rural hometowns and the unexpected challenges that met them in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. You'll get caught up in their personal stories — and finish the book with a deeper understanding of American life.

— TOM BEER

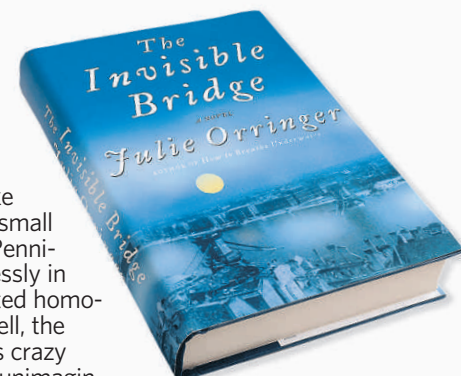


NEWSDAY PHOTOS / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS AND ALEJANDRA VILLA

## 3 **THE INVISIBLE BRIDGE** by Julie Orringer (Knopf)

Is it sacrilege to declare that "The Invisible Bridge" offers a fresh take on the Holocaust? Orringer's sweeping saga concerns the fate of a small group of Hungarian Jews living in Paris. They have their problems: Penniless Andras loses his scholarship to architecture school; he's hopelessly in love with an unattainable older woman; one of his friends is a closeted homosexual. But as Hitler's shadow falls over Europe, they realize that, well, the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. As the Nazi noose tightens, our heroes and heroines endure unimaginable hardships but never lose their humanity. A heartbreaking portrait of love — romantic, familial, comradely — in the face of tragedy.

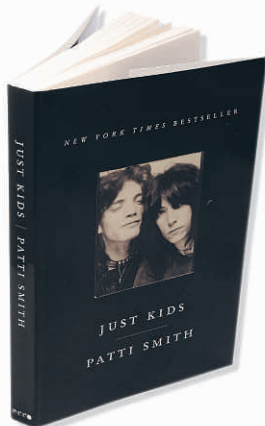
— ERICA MARCUS



## 4 JUST KIDS

by Patti Smith  
(Ecco)

Smith — poet, punk-rock icon and demimondaine from the anything-can-happen glory days of downtown New York — won the National Book Award for nonfiction with this remarkable memoir about her lengthy love affair and life-long friendship with the late Robert Mapplethorpe. Less a biography than a keepsake from her time with the notorious photographer of politically inflammatory homoerotic, the vibrant and surprisingly tender book offers riveting eyewitness testimony from the tumultuous bridge between the Beat Generation and the '70s fusion of pop, fashion-art and glam-rock.

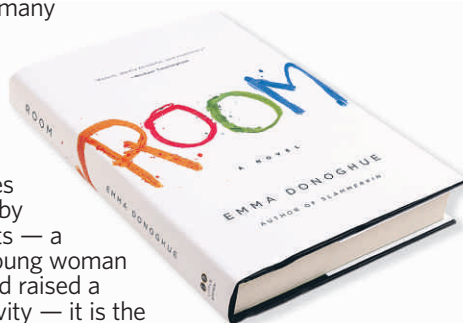


— LINDA WINER

## 5 ROOM

by Emma Donoghue  
(Little, Brown)

"Room" is an extremely unusual and original novel — so much so that it risks being misremembered as a novelty. We hope its presence on many of the year's Ten Best lists will prevent that. Set in sensational circumstances and inspired by current events — a kidnapped young woman has borne and raised a child in captivity — it is the furthest thing from a lurid, true-crime account. Instead, it is a dark and beautiful fairy tale about the parent-child relationship told by the most appealing 5-year-old narrator imaginable. Of all the novels I reviewed this year, it's the one I can't seem to get back, as my friends and neighbors keep passing it from one to the next.

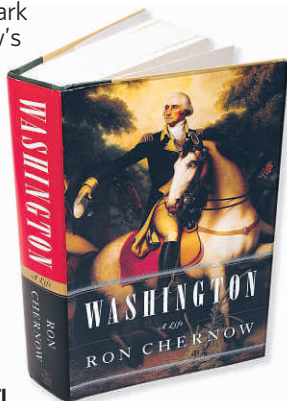


— MARION WINIK

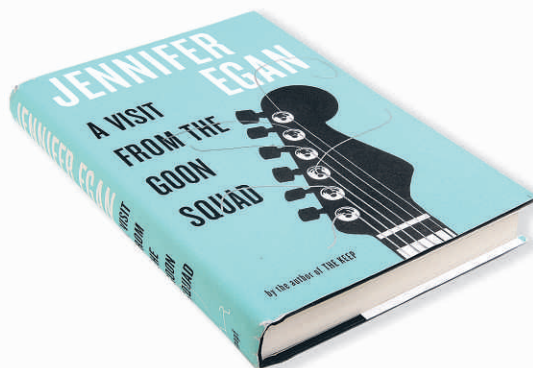
## 6 WASHINGTON: A Life

by Ron Chernow  
(Penguin Press)

In a year of memorable biographies and autobiographies, from Keith Richards and Patti Smith to Theodore Roosevelt and Mark Twain, comes Ron Chernow's "Washington" — first in war, first in peace and first in genre. Chernow evokes Washington in his times and brings him closer to ours, in one very accessible, lucid book that makes so many shelf-straining, multivolume works seem remote. He's no longer as distant as Mount Rushmore. And it's not "a life." It's *the* life.



— PETER M. GIANOTTI



## 7 A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD

by Jennifer Egan  
(Knopf)

Taking the music business as a case in point for society's monumental shift from the analog to the digital age, Egan's bold, thrilling narrative moves from the late 1970s to the early 2020s, while the characters wonder what happened to their youthful ideals. A chapter in the form of a PowerPoint presentation lyrically captures a fraught but loving family, one of the many instances in which this talented, visionary author reinvents the novel for the 21st century while affirming its historic values. Mingling the troubling issues of the Internet age with eternal human questions about the nature of self and the consequences of compromise, Egan proves again that she is one of our most thoughtful and exciting writers.

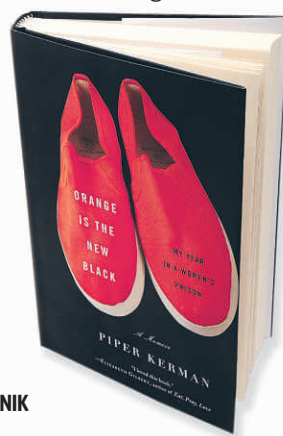
— WENDY SMITH

## 8 ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK

by Piper Kerman  
(Spiegel & Grau)

Though it didn't receive much attention, Kerman's memoir stands up to the best of the year. Shortly after she graduated from Smith College, Kerman drifted into a relationship with a woman who turned out to be involved in international drug smuggling; she eventually had Kerman bring a suitcase full of cash into the United States. Ten years later the author was living and working in Brooklyn, happily engaged, when the feds came a-knockin' at her door, and she was sentenced to 15 months in prison. Kerman's account of how women live behind bars, and the bizarre culture of prison, is thoroughly engrossing and weirdly heartwarming. She's hit the trifecta of memoir — rare, interesting circumstances, vivid writing and deep self-scrutiny.

— MARION WINIK

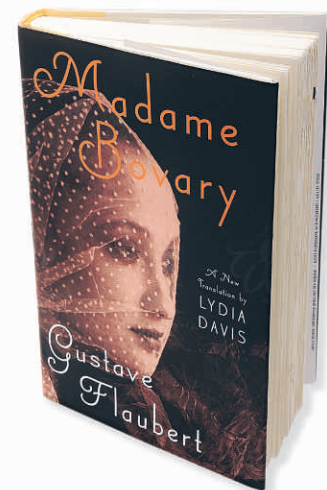


## 9 MADAME BOVARY

by Gustave Flaubert,  
translated by Lydia Davis  
(Viking)

The style is the content of Gustave Flaubert's "Madame Bovary," a revolution in realism and a pivotal point in the evolution of the novel. Read Lydia Davis' luminous new translation and discover a classic anew. She's devoted to the text, not rewriting it. The rhythm and the tone, the intricacies and the subtleties, make it the nearest an English-language reader will get to the poetic prose of Flaubert — and a masterpiece in its own right.

— PETER M. GIANOTTI

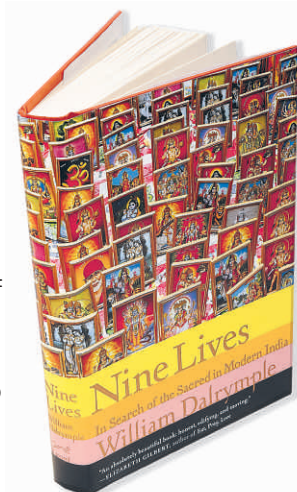


## 10 NINE LIVES: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India

by William Dalrymple  
(Knopf)

Nearly a decade after 9/11, global religious misunderstanding seems more rampant than ever. Here Dalrymple, a Scottish writer who has made New Delhi his second home, fashions nine enlightened portraits of spiritual life in India and Pakistan. In crystal-clear prose, the author introduces us to an untouchable laborer who is believed to transform into a god when he dances; a "lady fakir" whose devotional music and ecstatic trances are frowned on by Islamic fundamentalists; and one of the last Rajasthani folk bards, who has memorized an ancient epic that takes five nights to perform. "Nine Lives" speaks to the great question of our time: How do we observe our traditional faiths in the complex 21st century world?

— TOM BEER



## Four for a new year

Here's what we're looking forward to in 2011.

Benjamin Hale's debut novel, "The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore" (Twelve, February) is narrated by a talking chimpanzee and is already raising eyebrows for its human-simian sex scene. . . . The prolific Joyce Carol Oates chronicles the unexpected death of her hus-

band of 48 years, and the aftermath, in "A Widow's Story" (Ecco, February), a book drawing comparisons with Joan Didion's "The Year of Magical Thinking." . . . Foodies and chefs are swooning over "Blood, Bones, and Butter" (Random House, March), a memoir by Gabrielle Hamilton, chef at Prune restaurant in Manhattan. It's about food,

cooking, motherhood and the challenges of being female in a male-dominated industry. . . . When David Foster Wallace committed suicide in 2008, he left behind a novel in progress about an IRS tax-return-processing center in Illinois in the mid-'80s. "The Pale King" (Little, Brown; April) is eagerly awaited by legions of DFW devotees.

— TOM BEER