

Best of 2014: Non-Fiction Books

written by Entropy | December 1, 2014

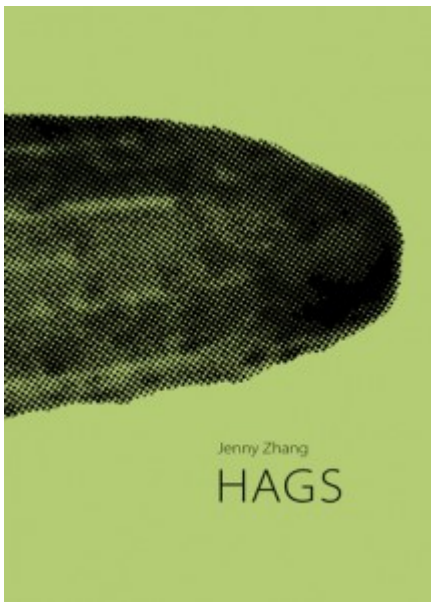


Continuing with our series of “Best of 2014” lists curated by the entire *Entropy* community, we present some favorite selections as nominated by the diverse staff and team at *Entropy*.

This list brings together some of our favorite non-fiction books, including creative non-fiction, essays, & memoir.

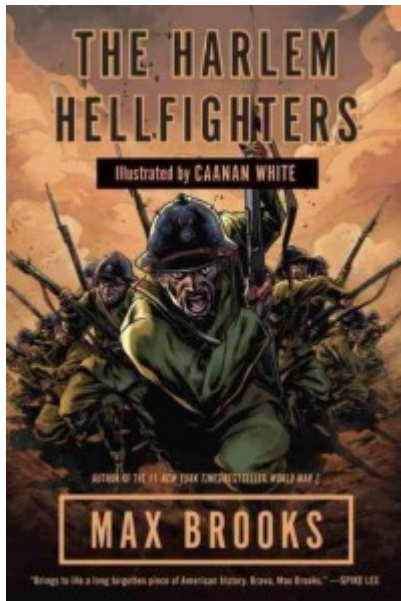
In no particular order:

1. *Hags* by Jenny Zhang (Guillotine)



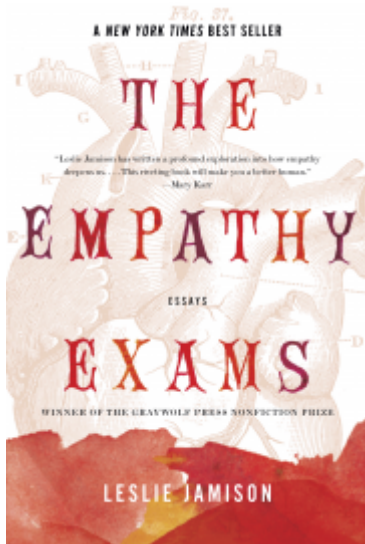
“These hags, these great beauties, these mermaids who taunt, who feast, who slash, who steal, these succubae who cannot rest, my mothers, my sisters, my unborn friends, my keepers, my guardians.”

2. *The Harlem Hellfighters* by Max Brooks (Broadway Books)



Brooks (*World War Z*, 2006) makes a U-turn from zombies with this fictionalized account of the famous all-black 369th Infantry. The opening scene of a trench bomb sets the stage for the whole book: endless, grimacing faces and buckets of gore, mostly in the form of exploded bodies splattering across the page. This intro also betrays the book's chief concern: simply telling the story of WWI combat, albeit from an unusual point of view. As a result, the plot is fuzzy and the characters suitably enjoyable placeholders. We follow our diverse bunch from enlistment to training to the hell of France, where they fight through inhumane conditions with the utmost valor, and for what? Prejudice and humiliation at every turn. "They would rather see white Germans," says one soldier, "instead of black Americans march in triumph up Fifth Avenue." White's appropriately cluttered art has the horrific shock value of EC Comics classics like *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*, and the whole thing comes off as resolutely Tarantinoesque. The movie version should be along any second now. —Daniel Kraus

3. *The Empathy Exams* by Leslie Jamison (Graywolf Press)



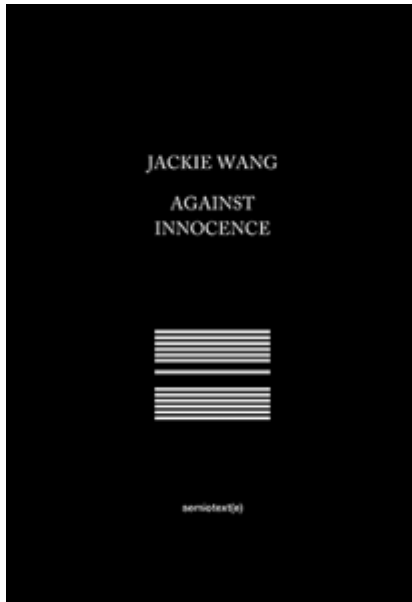
“Extraordinary . . . she calls to mind writers as disparate as Joan Didion and John Jeremiah Sullivan as she interrogates the palpitations of not just her own trippy heart but of all of ours. . . Her cerebral, witty, multichambered essays tend to swing around to one topic in particular: what we mean when we say we feel someone else’s pain. . . I’m not sure I’m capable of recommending a book because it might make you a better person. But watching the philosopher in Ms. Jamison grapple with empathy is a heart-expanding exercise.”—Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

4. *Earthbound* by Ken Baumann (Boss Fight Books)



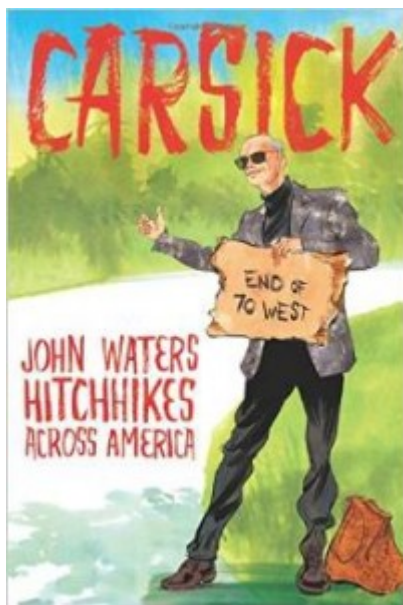
“At last, *EarthBound* gets the paperback it deserves.” – [Kill Screen](#)

5. *Against Innocence* by Jackie Wang (Semiotexte)



The political response to the murder of Troy Davis does not challenge the assumption that communities need to clean up their streets by rounding up criminals, for it relies on the claim that Davis is not one of those feared criminals, but *an innocent Black man*. Innocence, however, is just code for *nonthreatening to white civil society*. Troy Davis is differentiated from other Black men—the *bad* ones—and the legal system is diagnosed as being *infected* with racism, masking the fact that the legal system is constituent mechanism through which racial violence is carried out.

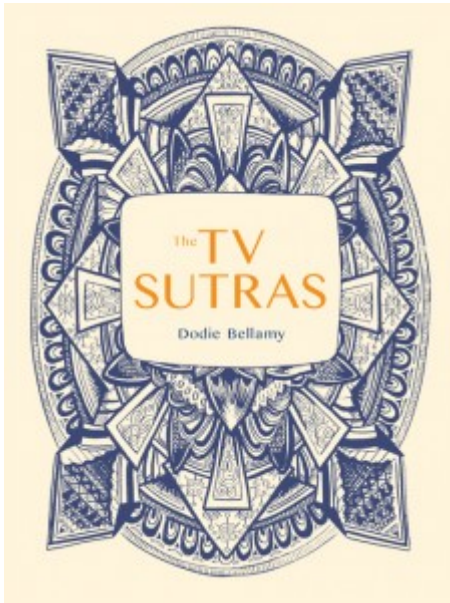
6. *Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America* by John Waters (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)



“This is all good, dirty subversive fun . . . a good helping of unbridled lewdness is surely to be expected, and no doubt cherished, from the man known as the king of filth and the pope of trash. However, once [Waters] gets on the road and begins his “real life” adventure, he comes across as a very different, and much more benign and vulnerable, figure. In many ways, he’s an innocent . . .

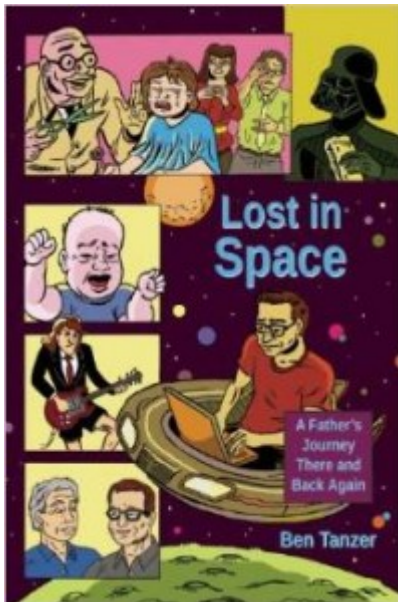
He also has to rely on the kindness of strangers, and he finds it everywhere. Quite a few people mistake him for a homeless man and try to give him a handout. Some of this is deeply moving . . . As he says in the book's acknowledgments, "If I ever hear another elitist jerk use the term *flyover people*, I'll punch him in the mouth.' I do believe he will." – Geoff Nicholson, *San Francisco Chronicle*

7. *The TV Sutras* by Dodie Bellamy (Ugly Duckling Presse)



My throat opens and I cry out, "Master, oh, Master!" I can't bear to live without him. Love spills from my mouth for him, love spills from my ears for him, love belches from my heart for him, love seeps from my nipples and cunt and armpits for him, stickly red love flows from my nose, spills over my lower lip and down my chin. Master, I don't care what you did come back please please please. Come. Back. When your world falls apart, pain opens to a marvel so tender, beautiful and ugly merge. Meaning is beaten away like dust from an exquisitely imperfect Persian rug.

8. *Lost in Space: A Father's Journey There and Back Again* by Ben Tanzer (Curbside Splendor)



“In *Lost in Space*, Tanzer manages to be both heartbreaking and funny, producing a book of beauty and truth about the complexity, the fear, pain, and primal love that being a parent entails. Tanzer raises the bar with this memoir, insisting that writers be truly honest, not make excuses for their feelings, to stare deep inside themselves, and still be entertaining, if not enlightening.”

– Paula Bomer, author of *Nine Months* and *Baby*

9. *Excavation: A Memoir* by Wendy C. Ortiz (Future Tense Books)



“*Excavation* stopped my heart. Its story is vital, cracking open a dialogue about what we keep secret and how those secrets shape our lives. The narrative is direct and unflinching, pulling you, challenging you, the kind of read where you call in sick because ohmygod what happens next; but between those moments, Ortiz hits pause and looks back, allowing the reader to breathe with her, to

reflect with her, to “wrestle with ghosts,” in language so breathtakingly beautiful, so precise and poetic and true.” – Megan Stielstra, author of *Once I Was Cool*

10. James Lee Byars: *1/2 an Autobiography, Sourcebook* by Magali Arriola, Peter Eeley, James Lee Byars (Walther König, Köln/MoMA PS1/Museo Jumex)



“I see my autobiography as an arbitrary segment of so many pages of time, of things that I have paid attention to at this point in my life.” – James Lee Byars.

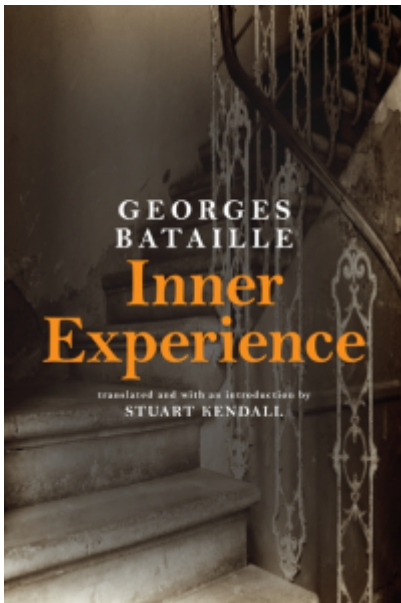
11. *Premonition* by Etel Adnan (Kelsey Street Press)



It's not that Etel Adnan is any wiser than you (though she's wiser

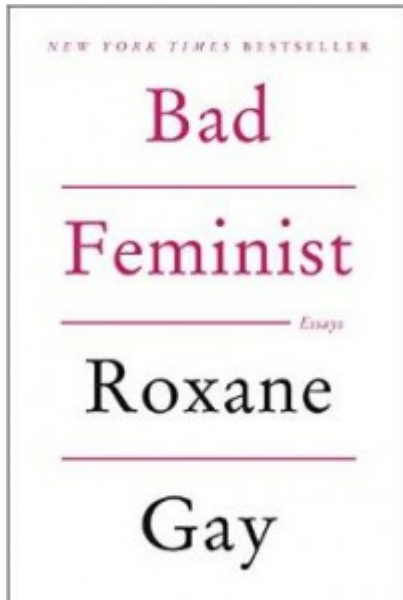
than I): it's that she struggles with meaning in ways that can teach us about the human heart, its memories, its sacrifices, its triumphs. In which land, I wonder, did she learn so much about loneliness—was it in Lebanon, Paris, California? And at what age does one learn so much about apprenticeship, the way we work and labor, only to see finally that our life so far marks only the beginning of understanding, acceptance, empathy? Like her painting, Adnan's prose style turns thought into image with premonitory ease and suggestion. "A forest saturated with trees," she writes, or thinks, "proclaims the existence of a river saturated with reflections." *Premonition*, introduced ably by the artist and writer Lynn Marie Kirby, can be read by those of any generation, and what the men don't know, the little girls will understand. —Kevin Killian

12. *Inner Experience* by Georges Bataille, New Translation by Stuart Kendall (SUNY Press)



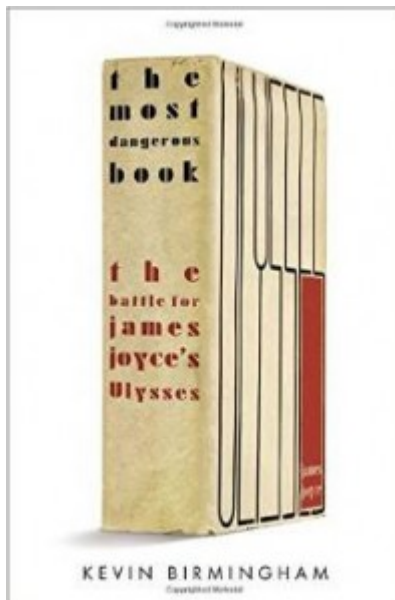
Originally published in 1943, *Inner Experience* is the single most significant work by one of the twentieth century's most influential writers. It outlines a mystical theology and experience of the sacred founded on the absence of god. Bataille calls *Inner Experience* a "narrative of despair," but also describes it as a book wherein "profundity and passion go tenderly hand in hand." Herein, he says, "The mind moves in a strange world where anguish and ecstasy take shape."

13. *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay (Harper Perennial)



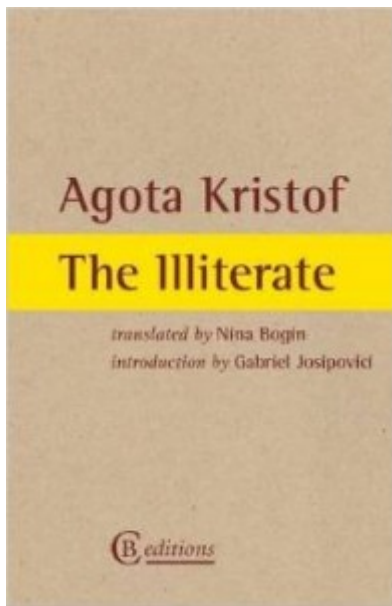
“Pink is my favorite color. I used to say my favorite color was black to be *cool*, but it is pink—all shades of pink. If I have an accessory, it is probably pink. I read *Vogue*, and I’m not doing it ironically, though it might seem that way. I once live-tweeted the September issue.”

14. *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce’s Ulysses* by Kevin Birmingham (Penguin Press)



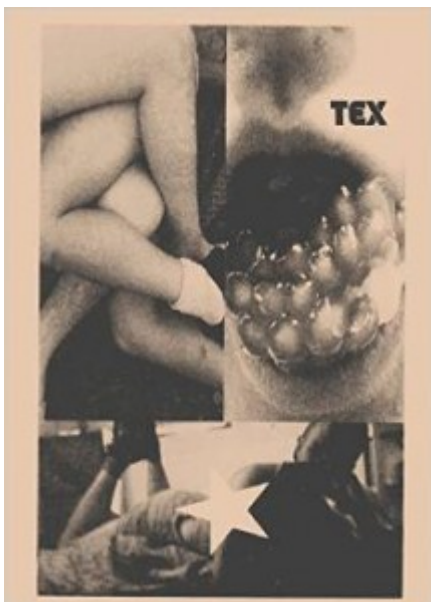
“A great story—how modernism brought down the regime of censorship—told as a great story. Kevin Birmingham’s imaginative scholarship brings Joyce and his world to life. There is a fresh detail on nearly every page.”—Louis Menand, Pulitzer prize-winning author of *The Metaphysical Club*

15. *The Illiterate* by Agota Kristof, Translated by Nina Bogin (CB Editions)



“This is a book of relevance today because we live in a world of migration, and Kristof shows it to us from within. It is one of the last books she wrote, slim and clean, but containing the accumulations of a lifetime.” – [John Self](#)

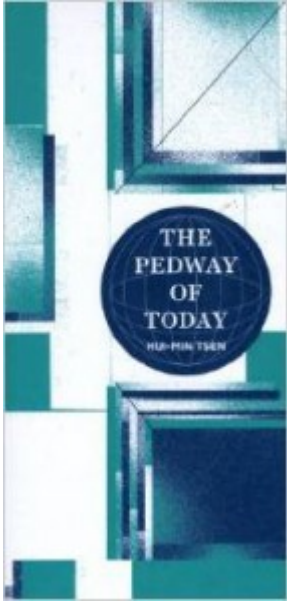
16. *Tex* by Beau Rice (Penny-Ante Editions)



An experiment between the epistolary and the ectype, *Tex* is a performance act in print. Featuring walk-ons by various interlocutors, this mnemonic outpour examines the potentiality of relationships in the digital age. Metonymic displacements, grammatical violations and verbal spillage form this rowdy non-narrative documenting one LA artist's sexual exploits, an evolving attachment to Texas-based former fling, Matt G, and the determination and opportunism involved with the continually forthcoming publication of this,

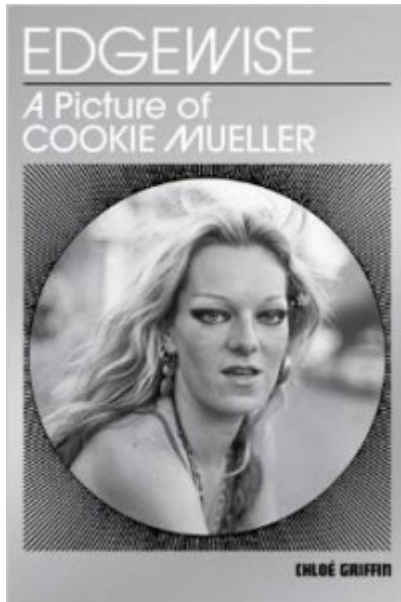
his first book.

17. *The Pedway of Today* by Hui-min Tsen (Green Lantern Press)



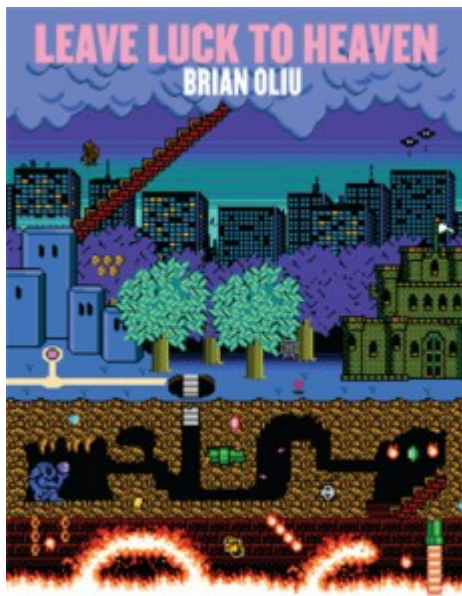
In 2010, Chicago-based artist Hui-min Tsen led a series of free, guided tours through the Chicago Pedway—a circuitous and ever-changing route of indoor passageways throughout Chicago’s downtown. Using the Pedway one need never step outside; it links train stations, skyscrapers, civic departments and department stores, containing enough pedestrian traffic to host small, underground businesses as well. Unique for its ad hoc nature, Tsen used the Pedway system to speculate on the various and changing Utopic visions that have shaped not only Chicago’s city development, but also American culture. This book is the culminating synopsis of that artistic tour. With this 2-color, accordion fold artist book, one can—for the very first time—follow the same journey independently on foot, or while seated before a fire, in a comfortable living room chair.

18. *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* by Chloé Griffin (Bbooks Verlag)



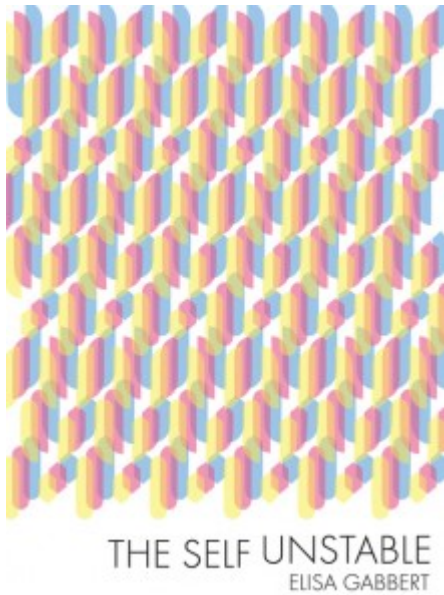
Cookie Mueller (1949-1989) was a firecracker, a cult figure, a wild child, a writer, a go-go dancer, a mother and a queer icon. A child of suburban 1950s Maryland, she made her name first as an actress in the films of John Waters, and then as an art critic and columnist, a writer of hilarious stories and a maven of New York's downtown art world. *Edgewise*, by Berlin-based actress and writer Chloé Griffin, tells the story of Cookie's life through an oral history composed of more than 80 interviews with the people who knew her.

19. *Leave Luck to Heaven* by Brian Oliu (Uncanny Valley Press)



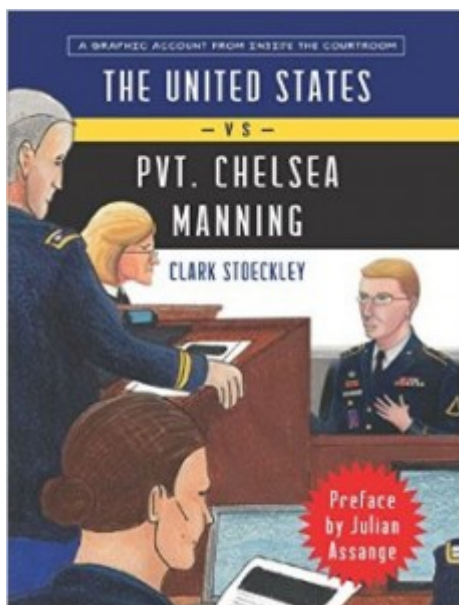
These gorgeous essays are not like other essays. They are not paeans to nostalgia. They are mortality, obsession, love, hunger, need, and strangeness. They are the weird, painful things we made NES games carry for us because we didn't know where else to put them.

20. *The Self Unstable* by Elisa Gabbert (Black Ocean)



Elisa Gabbert's *The Self Unstable* combines elements of memoir, philosophy, and aphorism to explore and trouble our ideas of the self, memory, happiness, aesthetics, love, and sex. With a sense of humor and an ability to find glimmers of the absurd in the profound, she uses the lyric essay like a koan to provoke the reader's reflection—unsettling the role of truth and interrogating the “I” in both literary and daily life: “The future isn't anywhere, so we can never get there. We can only disappear.”

21. *The United States vs. Private Chelsea Manning* by Clark Stoeckley (OR Books)



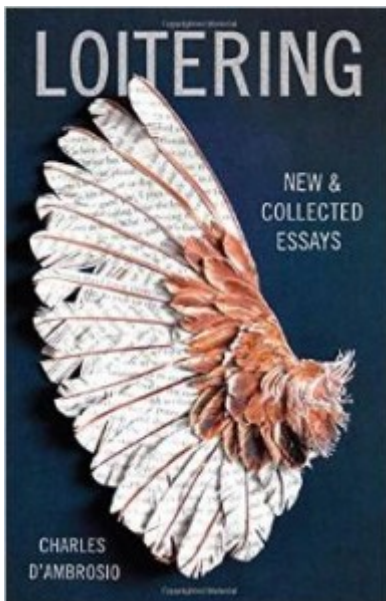
“A precious window into ... the trial of America's foremost political prisoner.” – Julian Assange

22. *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* by Lynne Tillman (Red Lemonade)



“I’ve long admired Lynne Tillman’s criticism. Her writing is founded on curiosity and deep feeling. It’s precise and imaginative, devoid of jargon or cliché. It’s the opposite of what I dislike in criticism, and I know I’m not alone in my appreciation of what she does.”— Joanna Fateman, *BOOKFORUM*

23. *Loitering: New and Collected Essays* by Charles D’Ambrosio (Tin House Books)



“As a witness to human longing and delusion, D’Ambrosio is among our most eloquent voices. Reading *Loitering* I thought about David Foster Wallace a lot. D’Ambrosio is a different sort of writer: more personal, more openly haunted, preoccupied by the rites of Catholicism. But he shares with Foster Wallace a gift for

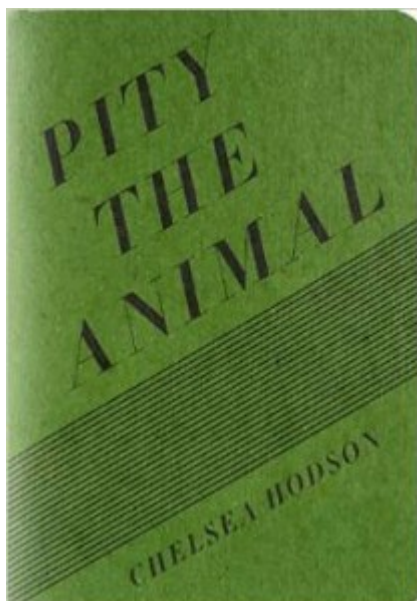
exactitude, erudition, and moral concern. Both take an obvious delight in language as an instrument of truth—and perhaps more so as a weapon in the war against the American habit of falsehood.”
—*The Daily Beast*

24. *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction* Edited by Chad Harbach (n+1)



In a widely read essay entitled “MFA vs. NYC,” (*n+1* Issue 10), bestselling novelist Chad Harbach (*The Art of Fielding*) argued that the American literary scene has split into two cultures: New York publishing versus university MFA programs. This book brings together established writers, MFA professors and students, and New York editors and agents to talk about these overlapping worlds, and the ways writers make (or fail to make) a living within them.

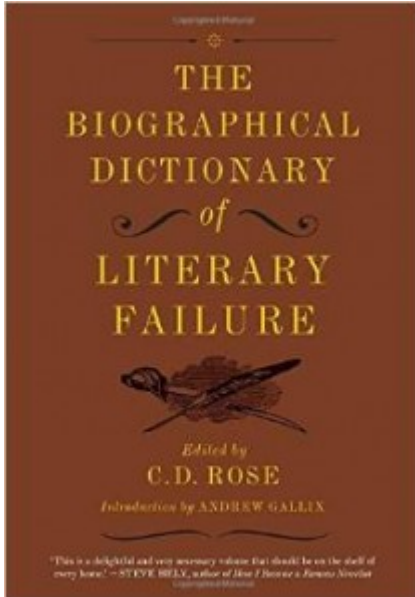
25. *Pity the Animal* by Chelsea Hodson (Future Tense Books)



PITY THE ANIMAL, an essay by Chelsea Hodson, explores the concept of human

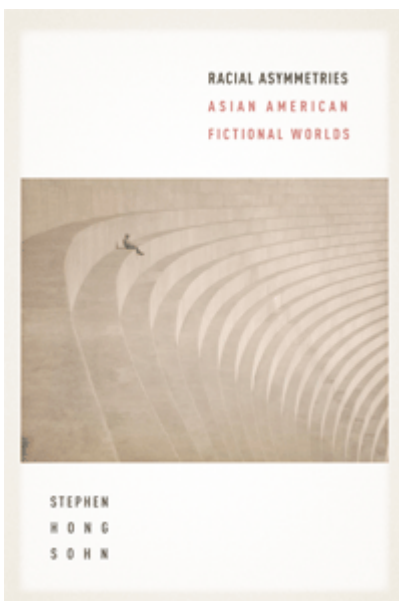
submission and commodification by way of window displays, wild animals, performance art, and sugar daddy dating websites. “How much can a body endure? Almost everything.”

26. *The Biographical Dictionary of Literary Failure* by C. D. Rose (Melville House)



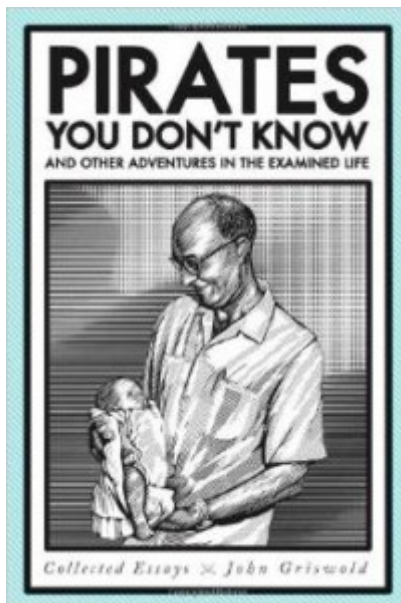
“This selection may appear to break the rules, but this hilarious ‘dictionary’ of literary may not be as non-fictional as you think. It helped inspire my new favorite life-negating maxim: fail worse and go out on bottom.” –*Flavorwire*, 50 Best Independent Fiction and Poetry Books of 2014

27. *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* by Stephen Hong Sohn (NYU Press)



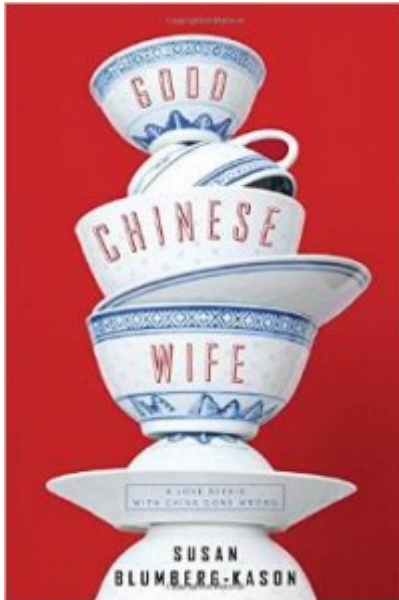
“Stephen Sohn’s *Racial Asymmetries* provides rich, nuanced readings of the performance, permutations, and persistence of race in 21st-century Asian American literature. In calling attention to the interplay between diverse Asian American texts and their conditions of emergence as such, Sohn’s analyses appreciate the cultural politics of difference that Asian American fictional worlds continue to critically express.” –Victor Bascara

28. *Pirates You Don’t Know, and Other Adventures in the Examined Life: Collected Essays* by John Griswold (University of Georgia Press)



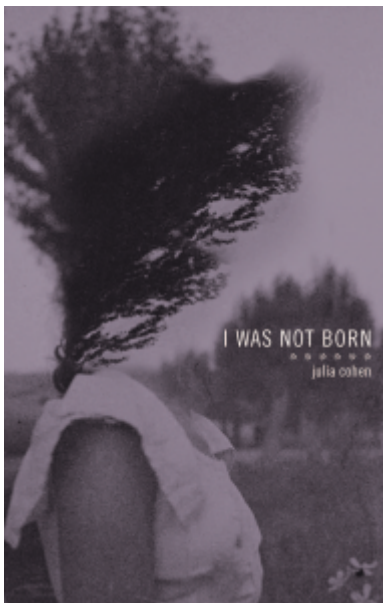
“In examining his life as teacher, father, husband, son, Griswold causes us to consider our own lives and how we spend them. These essays are wise, hilarious, and necessary.” –John Warner

29. *Good Chinese Wife: A Love Affair with China Gone Wrong* by Susan Blumberg-Kason (Sourcebooks)



“A harrowing story of abuse and terror. Susan Blumberg shares her story with women and shows that domestic violence, sadly, pervades every culture. A must read.” – *Cayocosta72*

30. *I Was Not Born* by Julia Cohen (Noemi Press)



“In *I Was Not Born*, Julia Cohen kindles a pillar of fire that reminds us that we do not always get out alive, that not everyone survives her or his youthful dreams. Like “... breaking into an apple,” the nourishment, the seeds, the core of life pulses throughout this accomplished work.” – Brenda Coultas