

best since *What a Carve-Up*, is a mash-up of cozy crime novel and state-of-the-nation satire. Lastly, for those dreading Christmas, Ysenda Maxtone Graham's *Screams* (Abacus, \$10) about the horrors and pleasures of modern life — from being stuck in a loop of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* while you hold the phone for the tax office to finding an unexpected parking place. Written with consummate wit and illustrated by Nick Newman.

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## Philip Womack

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This year, John Freeman's novella *Hit and Run* (Everard, \$12) really stood out from the crowd: a small but beautifully shaped piece of fiction about the aftermath of a car accident that manages to be gripping, eerie and thoughtful. Mark Haddon's collection of short stories, *Dogs and Monsters* (Knopf Doubleday, \$28), contains some splendid riffs on the Greek myths, from the Minotaur to Actaeon's turning into a stag. Lovely stuff.

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## Harry Mount

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From 1954 to 1981, Maeve Brennan, an Irish journalist, sat in Manhattan's bars and wrote down what she saw for the *New Yorker*. Her collected pieces were published in 1969 under the title *The Long-Winded Lady* (Counterpoint, \$17), from her nickname in the magazine's office. Brennan (1917-93) was the greatest outsider to get New York: "New York is not hospitable," she wrote. "She is very big and has no heart. She is not charming. She is not sympathetic... When she glitters, she is very, very bright, and when she does not glitter, she is dirty... At home or away, we are homesick for New York not because New York used to be better but because the city holds us and we don't know why." In 1958, Brennan wrote fondly of a bar on 168th Street and "a warm but very soothing Martini, which cost me only 50 cents." Those were the days.

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## Anne Sebba

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I loved *Precipice* by Robert Harris (HarperCollins, \$30), a meticulously researched, fast-paced account of the World War One love triangle between sixty-one-year-old prime minister H.H. Asquith, twenty-six-year-old Venetia Stanley and the man she ultimately married, Edwin Montagu. This true story has fascinated me for

decades but as only one side of the correspondence has survived it needed a novelist of Harris's caliber to fill in the other side and create a few characters too. Is Harris sympathetic or does he ultimately despise his protagonists' rampant entitlement? A little of both, I think.

Jane Thynne also takes a real situation — *Midnight in Vienna* (Quercus, \$30) in 1938 — and brilliantly weaves fictional characters into the factual crisis, like Harris evoking atmosphere and period detail in thrilling ways. For an uplifting, heart-healing novel of interlinked stories I'd recommend James McBride's *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* (Penguin, \$28). Balm for troubled times.

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## David J. Garrow

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My two best books of 2024 are by good friends, a caveat that must be noted, but both Patrick Parr's *Malcolm Before X* (University of Massachusetts Press, \$30) and David Greenberg's *John Lewis: A Life* (Simon & Schuster, \$35) will be receiving widespread review attention this winter. I've called Parr's superbly original work "the most richly documented book about Malcolm's early life that we will ever have." In similarly praising Greenberg's, I've described it as "an authoritative and indeed definitive biography of a lovely and deeply principled man who was a true American hero."

Of the ten or so books I've reviewed this year, the clear number one is General Kenneth F. McKenzie's *The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century* (Naval Institute Press, \$35) which I praised here as "a rich and powerful testament to the qualities that our best military commanders bring to their service to the nation."

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## Clement Knox

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The best fiction I read this year was Lawrence Osborne's short story collection *Burning Angel* (Hogarth, \$27). The title story (about a wealthy Brooklyn couple who hire a deaf maid through a shady agency) is the best, but they are all brilliant and have lingered in my mind for months. I greatly enjoyed reviewing Steve Coll's new book *The Achilles Trap: Saddam Hussein, the CIA, and the Origins of America's Invasion of Iraq* (Penguin, \$35) for *The Spectator*. Coll's account of how the United States government built up and then tore down Saddam's regime has the flavor of epic. A mock-epic I enjoyed (published in 1967) was Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* (NYRB, \$17), a deliciously indiscreet memoir of lit-

erary celebrity that reads like a Philip Roth novel.

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## Christopher Sandford

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*Power and Glory: Elizabeth II and the Rebirth of Royalty*, by Alexander Larman (St. Martin's Press, \$32) is a well-researched and fast-paced history of the British throne from the years 1945-53. It's a familiar enough tale in its broad detail, but Larman meticulously fills in the tiny black dots — the Buchanesque saga of Prince Philip's life before he married Elizabeth in 1947, for instance — that make up the whole picture. He is also good at capturing the physical atmosphere of the London of the 1940s, seemingly permanently winter-bound and sulfurously foggy, very much still the Victorian city, haunted by the past.

I also enjoyed Nicholas Shakespeare's *Jan Fleming: The Complete Man* (HarperCollins, \$45). How much of himself did Fleming put into his most celebrated literary creation, James Bond? Quite a lot, Shakespeare suggests, at least in terms of the character's smoking, gambling and womanizing, if not his fabled obsession with gadgets. At 864 pages, the book might have offended Fleming's own gift for clinical brevity, but otherwise stands as the definitive treatment of its subject.

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## Daisy Dunn

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A.N. Wilson's new biography of Goethe, *His Faustian Life* (Bloomsbury, \$35), is weighty but splendid. It spins cleverly out of *Faust* and demolishes the barriers which have until now kept us at arm's length from the polymath and his work. Goethe, Wilson argues, is just like us in his global thinking, post-Christian faith and disapproval of nationalism. To lay bare a mind as complex as his is Wilson's astonishingly beautiful feat. *Love From Venice: A Golden Summer on the Grand Canal* (Hodder, \$29) by debut author Gill Johnson, who turned ninety-two this year, made me nostalgic for a time long before I was born. Johnson spent the summer of 1957 as a nanny to two young boys of the Brandolini d'Adda family in Venice. Drawing on the letters she sent her fiancé, Johnson vividly recaptures the glamour and *sprezzatura* of life on the Lido and beyond.

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## Andrew Roberts

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Adam Zamoyski's *Izabela the Valiant: The*