Best of 2015: Non-Fiction Books

written by Entropy | December 4, 2015

Continuing with our series of “Best of 2015” lists curated by the entire CCM-Entropy community, we present some of our favorite selections as nominated by the diverse staff and team here at Entropy.

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

In no particular order:

1. The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson (Graywolf Press)

“A loose yet intricate tapestry of memoir, art criticism and gently polemic. . . . It’s a book about using the writings of smart, even difficult writers to help us find clarity and precision in our intimate lives, and it’s a book about the no less intimate pleasures of the life of the mind. . . . The Argonauts is a magnificent achievement of thought, care and art.”—Los Angeles Times

2. Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates (Spiegel & Grau)

“I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates. The language of Between the World and Me, like Coates’s journey, is visceral, eloquent, and beautifully redemptive. And its examination of the hazards and hopes of black male life is as profound as it is revelatory. This is required reading.”—Toni Morrison

3. Citizen by Claudia Rankine
   (Graywolf Press)
“Marrying prose, poetry, and the visual image, *Citizen* investigates the ways in which racism pervades daily American social and cultural life, rendering certain of its citizens politically invisible. Rankine’s formally inventive book challenges our notion that citizenship is only a legal designation that the state determines by expanding that definition to include a larger understanding of civic belonging and identity, built out of cross-racial empathy, communal responsibility, and a deeply shared commitment to equality.”—National Book Award Judges’ Citation


“Ander Monson loves the world with such powerful desperation—even/especially the awful parts—and he loves, maybe even more, all our failed attempts at representation. Being inside his mind for a few hours, being in such close quarters with all that love, is perhaps the greatest pleasure of reading *Letter to a Future Lover*, but it is not, by a long shot, the only one.”—Pam Houston, author of *Contents May Have Shifted*


“Hollywood Notebook is an inspiring glimpse into a writer’s mind, and Ortiz is a writer in every sense of the word…Ortiz’s distinct voice is evident in her beautiful, vivid descriptions…Hollywood Notebook is a case study in one writer’s writing process.”—Hippocampus Magazine


*Exercises in Criticism* is an experiment in applied poetics in which critic and poet Louis Bury utilizes constraint-based methods in order to write about constraint-based literature. By tracing the lineage and enduring influence of early Oulipian classics, he argues that contemporary American writers have, in their adoption of constraint-based methods, transformed such methods from apolitical literary laboratory exercises into a form of cultural critique, whose usage is surprisingly widespread, particularly among poets and “experimental” novelists. More, Bury’s own use of critical constraints functions as a commentary on how and why we
write and talk about books, culture, and ideas.

7. **Reconsolidation: Or, it’s the ghosts who will answer you** by Janice Lee (Penny-Ante Editions)

“The book begins to feel alive. It is thinking within its own Wittgenstein-like thinking. It has its own brain and its own heart, one as replenishing in spirit as it is haunted. I can’t remember reading a book that so precisely and empathetically allows the reader to consider death and existence so directly. Its openness and willingness to search for meaning in the midst of pain is refreshing in its calmness.”—Blake Butler, *VICE*

8. **The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong** by David Orr (Penguin)

“The most satisfying part of Orr’s fresh appraisal of “The Road Not Taken” is the reappraisal it can inspire in longtime Frost readers whose readings have frozen solid. The crossroads between the poet and the man is where Frost leaves his poems for us to discover, turning what seems like a fork in the road into a site of limitless potential, ‘in which all decisions are equally likely.’”—*The Boston Globe*

9. **Ongoingness** by Sarah Manguso (Graywolf Press)

“Manguso offers another kind of structural challenge to the traditional confessional style. . . . Her prose feels twice distilled; it’s whiskey rather than beer, writing about writing about life. . . . Manguso [delivers] some beautiful un-forgotten moments, their visceral immediacy brought into even sharper relief by the book’s largely abstract topography.”—Leslie Jamison

10. **Intersex** by Aaron Apps (Tarpaulin Sky)

A book of time and because of it: “Time stopped queerly.” Not a book but an essay: a “vibration...along lines.” Or the book as “gesture,” intervening with: the other possible, “faintly
disembodied” mid-line “trajectories.” Aaron Apps’ Intersex is all feral prominence: a physical archive of the “strange knot.” Thus: necessarily vulnerable, brave and excessive. Book as trait. Book as biology without end: modified, pulsing, visible, measured, folded then folded again: an “animal self.” I felt this book in the middle of my own body. Reading, your own organs stir. In this way, Apps indicates the “creature” that you are too. Where do you “reside”? Where do you “collect”? Like the best kind of memoir, Apps brings a reader close to an experience of life that is both “unattainable” and attentive to “what will emerge from things.” In doing so, he has written a book that bursts from its very frame. —Bhanu Kapil

11. **My Body Would be the Kindest of Strangers** by Fiona Helmsley (Paragraph Line Books)

Including essays on art and persona, the rejection of the word “victim,” and an imagined meeting between Joan Vollmer Burroughs and Patti Smith at the Chelsea Hotel, Fiona Helmsley’s *My Body Would be the Kindest of Strangers* presents a gritty and moving portrait of life on the fringes at the turn of the millennium.

12. **Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave** by Sean Prentiss (University of New Mexico Press)

“Prentiss successfully demonstrates his ability to write an intriguing and compelling story that simultaneously informs, inspires, and entertains. His vivid imagery and unique interviewing style adds depth and passion to his search, resulting in an exceptional narrative that flows smoothly and conveys his admiration for Abbey and the American West. *Finding Abbey* is a journey well worth taking.”—Foreword Reviews

13. **The Motion** by Lucy K Shaw (421 Atlanta)

When you open *The Motion*, you’re invited to leave your brain in the hands and consciousness of Lucy K. Shaw much in the way she describes entering then navigating the darkness of a James Lee Byars installation—leaving you “secret and high.” Shaw states, “Throw your body around in the same ways that I do and try to keep all of the feelings in.” I did just that and didn’t mind when the feelings seeped through. *The Motion* is an invitation into a
remarkable interiority that I hope I get to return to again and again via Shaw’s distinctive lens. – Wendy C. Ortiz

14. *Where Bears Roam the Streets* by Jeff Parker (Harper Perennial)

You know those travel memoirs written from the veranda of a swank hotel, where all the “natives” are reduced to cameo roles as lovably inscrutable waiters? Readers, rejoice: *Where Bears Roam the Streets* is not that. Parker goes deep and asks the hard questions. Together with his compatriot Igor – a true poet savant of the Russian Condition – Parker crisscrosses the country, embracing paradox wherever he goes. His encounters with crusading fashionista journalists, Chechen-vet paintball warriors, and basically the entire phylum of drunkards, will pare your nerve endings like a cucumber. I never wanted this book to end, I honest-to-God loved it so much.”– Alina Simone, author of *You Must Go and Win*

15. *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, Edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, Max King Cap (Fence Books)

“In occasioning *The Open Letter Project*, Claudia Rankine did the literary world, along with the world at large, a great, necessary service, in providing a platform for writers of all kinds to grapple with crucial questions about race and whiteness in the 21st century; in putting together this anthology, she and Beth Loffreda have expanded and concretized the offering. Their graceful, trenchant introduction should become required reading across the land; that it is followed by dozens of acts of genuine reckoning from all quarters makes the collection momentous. That these acts are often as aggravating and turbulent as they are edifying and inspiring should come as no surprise: when it comes to the racial imaginary, our editors remind us, ‘It’s messy, and it’s going to stay messy’ (as if we needed reminding). But as Loffreda says, this mess is a start—one worthy of not only our gratitude, but also our most profound engagement.” –Maggie Nelson

16. *Site Cite City* by David Buuck (Futurepoem)

“In David Buuck’s *Site Cite City*, the detective novel meets the
essay meeting the poem in prose, which, somewhere along the way, has already bisected machine language and passed through the byways of psychogeography, making for a text as mysterious and entertaining as it is activist and knowledgeable. An invaluable contribution to everything.” — Renee Gladman

17. Why Not Me? by Mindy Kaling (Crown Archetype)

In Why Not Me? Mindy Kaling has solidified her position as “most valuable friend.” Just like Mindy, these essays are exuberantly funny, deeply introspective and refreshingly thoughtful. From her relationship with BJ Novak and the guy who worked for the president, to creating her TV show and announcing the Emmy nominations, Mindy’s just-between-us-friends approach makes you love her just a little bit more after each story, and you’ll even question if Mindy is your soup snake. By all conventional measures Mindy Kaling should not be where she is, and that is the beauty of the stories she shares—“Work hard, know your shit, show your shit, and then feel entitled.” Accessible and empowering, Why Not Me? makes you want to stand up and shout, “Why not me, too?”—Deborah Bass

18. ZERO Edited by Dirk Pörschmann, Margriet Schavemaker, Text by Antoon Melissen, Johan Pas, Francesca Pola, Thekla Zell, Mattijs Visser, Daniel Birnbaum (Walther Konig)

Published to accompany an exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, the result of a collaborative research project that also produced a comprehensive exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and an upcoming show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, ZERO brings together the work of 45 artists from the ZERO network more than 50 years after the founding of the movement. Devoted not only to the first founding artists—Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker—nor even just to those international artists associated with the network like Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana, this volume also seeks to document the contributions of lesser-known artists such as Hermann Goepfert, Oskar Holweck and Hans Salentin. Organized by the ZERO foundation and including some 200 objects, ZERO is one of the most comprehensive resources available on this self-consciously avant-gardist international movement.

"*Conceived in Modernism* sheds new light on the relation between Anglo-American modernist aesthetics and the early birth control movement. It intervenes forcefully in debates about modernist sexualities and the history of birth control and reproduction. Aimee Armande Wilson’s politically informed and theoretically sophisticated readings of a range of canonical and lesser-known literary authors and birth control activists are illuminating and inspiring. Interdisciplinary in scope, the book makes an important and timely contribution to the intersecting inquiries of modernist studies, the history of sexuality, feminist criticism and sexuality studies.” —Jana Funke, Advanced Research Fellow in Medical Humanities, University of Exeter, UK

20. *Last Mass* by Jamie Iredell (Civil Coping Mechanisms)

"*Last Mass*, truly, is about mass—not just as ritual to perform, but as land to claim, wealth to seize, people to conquer, murder to commit, and psychosis to drive it all. An elegy, that’s this book, and a history, and a poem, too. And while of course it’s about the sorrow of last things, it’s still more about what makes the story of California, and of Jamie Iredell himself, a Californian Catholic. But within these stories lies another yet, and, in the wrangling of the bind it presents, another sort of mass. How do you reconcile your love for the California you call home, for your deeply pious Californian family, with the history—protracted and hellish—that is the father of both? Iredell navigates his world with deftness, beauty, brutality, and light. In the face of so much, it’s a feat next to holy.” —D. Foy, author of *Made to Break*


“Perhaps the book this year that best aligns itself with Kenneth Burke’s idea of stories as ‘equipment for living,’ Walters’s *Multiply/Divide* bends the boundaries of fiction, nonfiction, and lyrical essay, while at the same time crossing osmotically through the hyper-realities of American life—especially those guiding matters of race and gender.” —Flavorwire
22. *Communion* by Curtis Smith (Dock Street Press)

“What you feel first is the simplicity—of sentences, of tone, of description—but then before you know it, complexity has crept in on every level, and by the end of each of these stories you are left marveling at the layers of life history and humanity Curtis Smith has evoked.” – Robin Black, author of *Life Drawing* and *If I loved you, I would tell you this*

23. *Tender Points* by Amy Berkowitz (Timeless, Infinite Light)

“Trauma is nonlinear,” writes Berkowitz. I am impressed by the sensing form she makes. That has the day in it, as well as the night. The body, that is, in variable settings, frames and weathers. The stairs that “climb up my arms and neck.” The “I am bitterly jealous of people who can always go back to being a barista for a while.” This book is a kind of clutching and being there for real, and that is what I like. A book. That takes up. A visceral form. – Bhanu Kapil


“It seems unfair that Felix Bernstein should both be born into the position of heir to a famous poetry surname and be something of a genius—should such a slim boy be burdened with both? It’s enough to make one flap one’s humid veil like a frog-duenna. Yet this book is one of sheer pace and fitful pleasures, post-conceptualism’s ‘death of the work’ a reinvention of zero, as intrepid Felix nimbly parries with the spectre of Kenny Goldsmith, with various twentieth-century proper nouns, with family/literary history, and, always, with himself, a tail-chasing enterprise which traces another zero which is also an infinitesimal stage.” – Joyelle McSweeney

25. *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald (Grove Press)

“In addition to being an excellent memoir of loss and grief, *H is for Hawk* is a wonderful exploration of how birds of prey can
function as metaphor to produce art and a roadmap for human lives. Read it and enrich your life.” —Dan O’Brien


“Brave and moving, Trans is necessary reading for anyone who cares about gender, power, freedom and desire. Juliet Jacques deals with the forces of cruelty and ignorance with a hard-won clarity and calm. A vital voice in our turbulent times.” — Olivia Laing, author of The Trip to Echo Spring

27. The Point of Vanishing: A Memoir of Two Years in Solitude by Howard Axelrod (Beacon Press)

“Axelrod is a master of metaphor, presenting familiar sights and sounds in unforgettable new ways. His writing is propulsive, unabashedly visionary, and strikingly fresh. This book will have you turning down pages, returning to sentences just to savor them, and reading passages aloud to anyone who will listen...The Point of Vanishing is a profoundly immersive narrative. One is struck again and again by the quality of the writing: by the vividness of its characters, by the accomplished lyricism of its language, by the brilliant acuity of its observations, and by the wisdom and humor that permeate its pages. What lingers most of all are Axelrod’s sharply wrought landscape descriptions. Setting is definitely an active character in this story...This memoir feels like a gift in a way that few books do...If you read it with an open heart, it has the power to change your life.” —The Rumpus

28. The Irresponsible Magician: Essays and Fictions By Rebekah Rutkoff (Semiotext(e))

“Rebekah Rutkoff’s fertile mind disrupts the conventional, leaping over the usual ways of seeing and thinking. She embraces the imagination, refuses oppositions, say, between rational and irrational, and, like H.D., welcomes dreams as the mind’s unconscious, helpful messenger. Her lovely, rhythmic sentences are delightful, as is her special comprehension of the visual and written.” —Lynne Tillman
29. **On the Move: A Life & Gratitude** by Oliver Sacks (Knopf)

“The summation of a life lived with so much breadth and depth that it serves as a primer for how to navigate human existence with humor, humility, passion, speed, intelligence, and ongoing grace—the tale tying together all the stories Sacks has published in his lifetime…. In this book, Sacks reveals himself as a writer, laying bare the process, which was sometimes exquisitely painful and sometimes straightforward; it’s a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse into how one of this country’s most beloved physicians and authors actually plies his craft…. Sacks is so vulnerable, so naked, so exposed in the telling of his life that the reader wants to fall in love with him, because what else can you do when a person such as Sacks gives you the gift of such honesty?…. On the Move can be read in many different ways…. In the end, though, what the reader walks away with, or rather, what this reader walked away with, was a field guide on how to live an excellent life, moment by moment, mile by mile, making each droplet count.” — Lauren Slater, Los Angeles Review of Books

“My predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved. I have been given much and I have given something in return. Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.” — Oliver Sacks

30. **TrenchArt Monographs: hurry up please its time**, Edited by Teresa Carmody and Vanessa Place (Les Figues Press)

From 2005–2013, the TrenchArt book series was the cornerstone of Les Figues Press. The series took its name from “trench art”—artistic creations produced by soldiers made in wartime using whatever material was at hand, from shell casings to scrap metal to bone. It is art born of conflict and forced community: here we are, together in the trenches. Each year, the Press published four TrenchArt titles. Accompanying and preceding the release of each annual set was one hand-bound collection of aesthetic essays distributed exclusively to Les Figues members. **TrenchArt Monographs: hurry up please its time** collects these essays and brings them, for the first time, to a wider readership.