

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

BOOKS

The 2009 Globe Books 100

Biography, memoir and correspondence

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FRED ASTAIRE

By Joseph Epstein, Yale University Press, 191 pages, \$26.75

This is as much an attempt to set the record straight as it is an appreciation of a preposterously famous man who somehow managed to preserve an air of mystery about him. Nicely paced, almost scientifically analytical in explaining why Astaire became a legend while others merely became movie stars, and filled with illuminating asides and unexpected wisecracks, *Fred Astaire* manages to draw a direct line from Denis Diderot to Alexis de Tocqueville to Marcel Proust to Fred Astaire. My top hat's off to this guy. *Joe Queenan*

THE BARD: Robert Burns, A Biography

By Robert Crawford, Princeton University Press, 466 pages, \$39.95

The mercurial quality of Scottish poet Robert Burns, whose 250th anniversary it was in 2009, is not easily captured. But Robert Crawford does so with assurance and fluency. He manages to combine narrative richness with a close reading of the work that sets it in both its literary and historical context. In lengthy, deeply rewarding chapters, Crawford brings a poet's ear and a novelist's technique to bear to bring a lost world to life. *John McTernan*

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL BECKETT

Cambridge University Press, 750 pages, \$52

Samuel Beckett's letters are essential reading for any admirer of his work. The letters are tricky, amusing, bitter, filled with puns in several languages, accounts of his sadness, criticism of writers Beckett is reading (Jane Austen is "the divine Jane"), appreciations of music (loves Beethoven's late string quartets but finds his *Sixth Symphony* vulgar) and painting (his words about Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* are striking). Reading these is like being let into a writer's laboratory. *André Alexis*

ANGELS AND AGES: A Short Book about Darwin, Lincoln, and Modern Life

By Adam Gopnik, Alfred A. Knopf, 211 pages, \$27.95

How Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln (born the same day in 1809) established "moral modernity" is the broad subject of *Angels and Ages*. The two are emblematic figures in the spread of what Gopnik calls "bourgeois liberal democracy." With his own memorable tropes and bounding, often giddy prose, along with passionate storytelling, Gopnik shows that Lincoln and Darwin weren't only inspired and brave, they were also eloquent and persuasive. *Charles Foran*

NOT YET: Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying

By Wayson Choy, Doubleday Canada, 208 pages, \$27.95

In this memoir, Wayson Choy almost dies twice, his heart failing him a second time, four years after the 2001 multiple cardiac events. His representation of illness and recovery is as sensitively and sensuously rendered as immigrant experience was in his novel *The Jade Peony*, with the same degree of candour, humour and authenticity. Choy's craft enables his book to

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transcend the illness and suffering he endured and to become a virtual journal of his fighting through the soul's darkness to light. *Keith Garebian*

ENTER MOURNING

By Heather Menzies, Key Porter, 240 pages, \$21.95

Though the memoir of losing a parent or partner to the devastations of dementia may be all too familiar, Heather Menzies takes fresh ownership of this tale by looking at how daughter and mother find new ways to connect as disease hacks away old ones. It is this constant psychological tension, along with Menzies's exploration of self and language, that elevates *Enter Mourning* from a lament to a magnificently memorable memoir. *Paula Todd*

MY JUDY GARLAND LIFE

By Susie Boyt, Bloomsbury, 285 pages, \$27.50

If there has been a more candid, insightful, empathetic, intelligent, endearing, poignant and surprising work of non-fiction published in the past few decades, I haven't read it. Susie Boyt yanks truths out of her messy life and Judy Garland's messier career like teeth, roots dripping with awkward candour. This is thoughtful, tempered writing, the product not only of decades of interest in a celebrity, but years of introspection on the nature, purpose, value and results of the attachment millions of us feel to famous people we've never met. *Bert Archer*

THE MUSIC ROOM

By William Fiennes, Random House Canada, 216 pages, \$29.95

William Fiennes's family's estate was a broad-moated medieval castle in Oxfordshire. But memories of the great hall and glorious grounds were tempered by fear and anguish caused by the Fiennes' eldest son Richard, brain-scarred by epilepsy, who would erupt violently. With an exactitude of diction that makes lingering thoughts shine all the brighter, this is a memoir of subtle word music and even subtler patterning of consciousness about an extraordinary childhood challenged by a brother's major dysfunction. *Keith Garebian*

THE BOY IN THE MOON

By Brown, Random House Canada, 293 pages, \$29.95

In attempting to make sense of the life of his radically disabled son, Walker, Globe writer Ian Brown reveals himself as a raw, flawed man in search of his mute, unknowable boy, or at least a way to be proud of him. More than anything, that's the secret of this book's success: Brown boldly goes where even he – smart-mouthed, combative scribe – has never gone before, into the very core of compassion and anger and pain. *Paula Todd*

BURMESE LESSONS: A Love Story

By Karen Connelly, Random House Canada, 463 pages, \$32

This recounting, re-imagining, of Connelly's several months in the mid-1990s on the Thai-Burmese border, including several weeks in Rangoon, reveals a brave, even foolhardy, idealistic, beautiful young woman utterly seduced, co-opted, transformed by Burmese culture, but one who at the same time was in the fertile, pre-writing soil of a novel, the award-winning tale of dissidence and punishment, *The Lizard Cage*. *Marian Botsford Fraser*

THE STRANGEST MAN: The Hidden Life of Paul Dirac, Mystic of the Atom

By Graham Farmelo, Basic Books, 539 pages, \$37.95

Anyone interested in the psychology of genius will find physicist Paul Dirac's story, as told in this superb biography, compelling. The book is also a wonderful romp through the golden age

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of quantum physics and a cast of characters including Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg and Fermi. The story is set against a background of epochal world events: the regimes of Hitler and Stalin, the Second World War and the atomic bomb. *Chet Raymo*

AFTER THE FALLS

By Catherine Gildiner, Knopf Canada, 342 pages, \$32.95

Psychologist Cathy Gildiner takes up the delightful tale she began in *Too Close to the Falls* in this coming-of-age (barely) memoir. The new story is as engaging as the first, though it is farther-reaching, covering, as it does, the breakdown of 1950s conservatism, acid trips, a murder and brushes with the FBI over her civil-rights activities. Throughout, Gildiner's period references remain as bang-on as they were in her earlier memoir, and her caustic humour is much in evidence. *M.A.C. Farrant*