

## The Best Books of 2009

*Tales of marriage, mystery, and murder—plus the vampire novel you can't miss in 2010.* **BY STEPHEN KING**



**S**O MANY BOOKS, so little time! I read about 100 in the last year (which, because of EW's deadline requirements, actually runs from December of '08 to December of '09), and these are the 10 best. Because I'm a commentator rather than a critic, I don't feel tied to just the new stuff, but for the record, most of these books *were* published in 2009. One that doesn't appear here is Justin Cronin's forthcoming novel, *The Passage*. This epic vampire novel won't be out until summer 2010, but you'll want to mark your calendar. Take it from Uncle Stevie, this is your basic don't-miss reading experience. Otherwise, check out these:

**10. *Rough Country*, John Sandford** Sandford's mystery-suspense novels are rich explorations of what it is to be a plain old American guy. This tale of police detective Virgil Flowers' exploits among the Minnesota lesbians is rich, satisfying, and frequently hilarious.

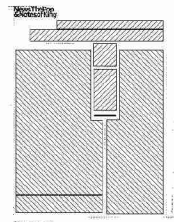
**9. *Ravens*, George Dawes Green** Bad boys Shaw McBride and Romeo Zderko decide to cut themselves in on a big lottery win by taking the Boatwright family hostage. When Green isn't making you laugh, he's making you bite your nails down to the bleeding point.

**8. *Gone Tomorrow*, Lee Child** If you're not hip to rambling adventurer Jack Reacher, you've missed a mother lode of escapist entertainment. Much of *Gone* is set in the New York subways. In the wonderfully tense opening, Reacher spots a late-night rider who looks like a suicide bomber. The thrills build from there. Child's writing is lean and wiry.

**7. *Drood*, Dan Simmons** The last years of Charles Dickens, as narrated by his increasingly unstable colleague Wilkie Collins. This is a beautifully realized historical novel, but it's also a modern tale that chronicles the descent of a great mind into dope-fueled madness.

**6. *Shatter*, Michael Robotham** Plenty of people saw the naked woman jump to her death, but professor Joe O'Loughlin discovers the lady was afraid of heights. Someone out there has become an architect of suicide, and soon he's got his sights set on O'Loughlin's family. The most suspenseful book I read all year.

**5. *2666*, Roberto Bolaño** This surreal novel can't be described; it has to be experienced in all its crazed glory. Suffice it to say it concerns



what may be the most horrifying real-life mass-murder spree of all time: as many as 400 women killed in the vicinity of Juárez, Mexico. Given this as a backdrop, the late Bolaño paints a mural of a poverty-stricken society that appears to be eating itself alive. And who cares? Nobody, it seems.

**"The Little Stranger is a terrifying ghost story—but it's so much more."**

**4. *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie** 1,001 children are born in India at midnight on Aug. 15, 1947; this epic social comedy follows one of them through a lifetime of adventures worthy of Dickens.

**3. *Hollywood Moon*, Joseph Wambaugh** Only Dream City could produce cops as cool as Flotsam and Jetsam (surfer cops), Nate Weiss (the aspiring-actor cop), and Dana Vaughn (the cynical, fortysomething mom-cop). The best of Wambaugh's Hollywood Station novels.

**2. *Revolutionary Road*, Richard Yates** Thank God I read the novel before seeing the movie, which is a pale imitation in spite of great acting. Set in 1955, *Road* focuses on a

suburban couple living what looks like the American postwar dream. But Frank Wheeler's fantasy life as an intellectual rebel is just a hollow pose, and when April makes the mistake of believing he's serious about busting out of the rut they've dug for themselves, tragedy ensues. Skip the DVD; read the book.

**1. *The Little Stranger*, Sarah Waters** This is a terrifying, engrossing ghost story set in the English countryside not long after World War II, but it's so much more. The ghost haunting Hundreds Hall may or may not be real, but the malevolence Waters evokes is unquestionable, and the first evil manifestation—involving an unpleasant little girl and a normally good-natured dog—is an authentic shocker. Although told in straightforward prose, this is a deeply textured and thoughtful piece of work. Several sleepless nights are guaranteed.

That's the list, and everything on it is available at a bookstore near you. So why not buy yourself an early Christmas present? Or go whole hog and buy all 10? If you read carefully and don't spill anything on them, you can still give 'em away as Christmas presents! ■