List 2018

Cherished Deacon Families! A complicated year, across our nation and here on campus—leading me to engage more deeply in the cultures surrounding us, alternately a balm and provocation. Though I know only a few personally, am brimming with thanks to the artists, chefs, writers, curators, directors/ producers, & musicians who help keep us whole.

As does a wonderful company of friends, in whom I am surpassingly fortunate. And here you are among them, holding this year’s List! If you’re new to this odd enterprise: fire off disputes with the choices here, or tell me what ’18 gem I missed…and even better, during the coming year send a recommendation as you encounter a superb…film, book, production/show, longread, tune, or restaurant. Gets you next year’s list as well, maybe a hat-tip (thanks ZZZ!) therein, & ideally an extended conversation about culture high and low. Of which meaningful encounters one can never have too many.

Leaving the last introductory wintry word to Margaret Atwood (thanks Karen!) because Margaret Atwood:

This is the solstice, the still point
of the sun, its cusp and midnight,
the year’s threshold
and unlocking, where the past
lets go of and becomes the future;
the place of caught breath, the door
of a vanished house left ajar.
Fiction
22. Hallgrímr Helgason, *Woman at 1,000 Degrees*. Instant-classic 1st line: “I live here alone in a
garage, together with a laptop computer and an old hand grenade.” Gets better from there.
21. Sam Graham-Felsen, *Green*. Closest you’ll get to 13 again (excepting film *Eighth Grade*).
18. Rachel Kushner, *The Mars Room*. Always love Kushner; this unflinching trip through her
anti-heroine’s terrible childhood, ’70s-era excesses, and imprisonment is often hard to read.
for definitive biographical version, see Emily Wilson’s *Three Sisters/Val-Kill*, last year’s list.
14. Andrew Martin, *Early Work*. As if Fitzgerald had skipped inventing Daisy & all the rest and
merely (equally eloquently) chronicled his/Zelda’s hard-drinking, mostly self-loathing lives.
13. Tommy Orange, *There There*. Not so blown away as critics, but a rollicking morality tale.
12. Idra Novey, *Those Who Knew*. Familiar territory—unnamed island nation, political intrigue
—with unnerving twists. Novey a delight; also translates indie novels into/from español.
10. Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*. Her beautifully wrought Native American
themes shifted to post-apocalyptic landscapes...& wind up exploring similar ground.
obscure daughter, whose gifts emerge slowly & surely. Echoes new Pat Barker (see #1 below).
apty-named Payne College, with lovably overmatched Prof.-turned-Chair (!) Fitger.
3. Stephen Markley, *Ohio*. Beautifully-wrought intertwined tales of Middle America’s middle-aged,
navigating scarred landscape of Iraq/Afghanistan wars, opioid scourges, economic trials.
writing about artistic creation, eerie paranormalities, & nuanced tale of love’s disappointments.
1. Pat Barker, *Silence of the Girls*. With Madeline Miller, second 1st-rank novelist to retell Greek
myth via a minor character (here, Briseis). Barker’s at level of her extraordinary *Regeneration*.

A Game/B Game [Annual category: tried/true authors’ ‘B’ work still outdoes most others’ A]
· Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest & Relaxation*. Felt flat, esp. compared to magical *Eileen*.
· Barbara Kingsolver, *Unsheltered*. Perhaps unfair to set bar at her golden *Poisonwood Bible*.
· Aminatta Forna, *Happiness*. Similarly, in shadow of her *Memory of Love*.
· Peter Carey, *A Long Way From Home*. Australia’s best novelist explores Aboriginal outback.
· Jonathan Coe, *Middle England*. Brexit satire approaches hilarity of his *What a Carve Up!*
· Anne Tyler, *Clock Dance*. Like, um, clockwork, annual Tyler book displays her many virtues.
· Jo Nesbo, *Macbeth*. Even bought & read in Scandanavia...but *The Snowman* still sets his pace.
· Stephen King, *Elevation*. Eerie rather than King-terrifying novella; ending beautifully poignant.
Non-Fiction
21. Giles Whittell, *Snow: The Biography*. All about the frosty stuff…with agonizing warning that, over the next quarter-century, snow may disappear entirely from our world.
15. Michele Obama, *Becoming*. Pitched higher than most political memoirs…and mostly connects.
12. Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces For the People*. Persuasive ode to “social infrastructure”: libraries, barbershops, diners, bookstores, & other places we gather—to enhance & even save our lives.
8. James and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns*. Perfect title for this kaleidoscopic note of hope.
5. Kiese Laymon, *Heavy*. Year’s most revealing memoir; also riveted by Nicole Chung’s *All You Can Ever Know*. Both powerful stories of self-discovery amid impossible circumstances.
1. Tara Westover, *Educated*. Hope we in higher ed can reach/help inspire many more Taras.

Also Worth Abandoning Instagram For
· Biography: David Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 2nd only to Douglass own autobiographical trio; Jane Sherron DeHart, *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, so-far definitive life; Diarmaid Mc Culloch, *Thomas Cromwell*, a boon literary companion to Hilary Mantel’s magnificent *Wolf Hall* & sequel(s).
· Food: Pride of Asheville, small-plates *Curate* my fave cookbook; Marion Nestle & David Katz each wrote important books, on US food system (Katz) and Big Food’s meddling with science.
· Military: Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy*. Light on the DC politics (Pentagon Papers, etc.) that dominate ‘Nam accounts, Hastings focuses on ordinary soldiers—on all sides.
· Thriller: Always look forward to Lee Child, & gulped *Past Tense* down in a sitting. And even better: Tara Isabella Burton’s *Social Creature*, by turns hilarious/gory send-up of NYC club life.
Longreads

- Adrianne Jeffries, “How to Succeed in Advertising…” *Breathtaking*: how Brian O’Kelley & Mike Walrath (& a hi-schooler) invented the modern Internet. [https://nym.ag/2TeM6dm](https://nym.ag/2TeM6dm)
Movies. If you’re looking for…

∙ Fun superhero nonsense: *Avengers: Infinity War*, whose talented cast has a great time. Likewise arch & watchable is *Thor: Ragnarok*. Cate Blanchett’s villainous Hela worthy of Anton Chigurh. Also *Deadpool 2*, which somehow manages to out-snark the original.
∙ Superhero nonsense with compelling moral core: *Black Panther*.
∙ Bizarre but irresistible collection of Russian dashboard-camera highlights: *The Road Movie*.
∙ Subtle allegory of Putin misrule, via riveing tale (young Russian lad’s disappearance): *Loveless*.
∙ Mystifying thriller you can’t turn off: *Annihilation*. Evidently I’m susceptible to the Shimmer.
∙ Head-spinning thriller that’s like *Gone Girl* with good acting: *A Simple Favor*.
∙ Agonizing-to-watch thriller you’ll whisper about for days: *A Quiet Place*.
∙ Absurd thriller that will nonetheless keep your heart a-pounding: *Mission Impossible/Fallout*.
∙ Present-day American politics laid bare: Dick Cheney biopic *Vice* (Mei, thanx for preview!).
∙ Present-day American politics as superheroism: *RBG*. Eagerly awaiting Felicity Jones version.
∙ Present-day American politics, nostalgically recalled: *The Final Year*. Obama agonistes.
∙ Whimsical escapism, by that genre’s master Wes Anderson: *Isle of Dogs*.
∙ Whimsical escapism, by rising master Jon Chu: *Crazy Rich Asians*.
∙ Semi-whimsical realism, by incomparable/indescribable Spike Lee: *BlacKkKlansman*.
∙ Superb acting, bleak if redemptive tale: Ethan Hawke in *First Reformed*.
∙ Superb acting, bleak if redemptive tale: Mahershala Ali & Viggo Mortensen in *Green Book*.
∙ Superb acting, bleak and ambiguous tale: Emma Thompson in *The Children Act*.
∙ Superb acting, bleakest of tales: dear friend David Schachter in reissued gem *Buddies*.
∙ Best Western in years, with Australian Aboriginals in protagonist roles: *Sweet Country*.
∙ Best mock-doc since *Blair Witch: Dragonfly Eyes*, Xu Bing’s astonishing film made up entirely of edited surveillance videos, some with actors strategically placed. Well chosen, RiverRun!

And an octet of 2018 films you just shouldn’t miss:
∙ *Three Identical Strangers*. Whoa. True ‘80s story of identical triplets separated at birth who met by chance at 19…& stunningly nefarious reason they (& many identical twins) were kept apart.
∙ *Burning*. Lee Chang-Dong, back after a decade with a thriller based on Haruki Murakami story.
∙ *Let the Sunshine In*. Juliette Binoche at her most radiant; outshines all cads who dare approach.
∙ *Cold War*. Post-WWII rom-drama by Europe’s arguably-best filmmaker, Pawel Pawlikowski. Think *Once* with traditional Polish folk songs and more chemistry between central couple.
∙ *Eighth Grade*. Hard to get through, just like your 8th-grade experience…and sweetness incarnate.
∙ *Roma*. Alfonso Cuarón’s indelible homage to his Mexico City youth, in luminous b&w.
∙ *The Death of Stalin*. Unlikeliest material ever for howler of a comedy—but magnificently succeeds, thanks to terrific acting & madcap action. Even nails the historical high points.
∙ *Leave No Trace*. From the director who found Jennifer Lawrence, meet Thomasin McKenzie.
**Music: My personal genres-crossing/mixing Top 40 of 2018.**

40. Burkini Beach, #xmas2017. Hashtags infiltrate indie, after conquering pop.
38. State Preferences, *Death Champion*. Left-for-dead alt.country genre, melodiously revived.
33. Wind & Wave, *Neon Prayer Flags*. “Every other week I sit my ass in therapy/And talk it out.”
32. Phoebe Bridgers, *Friday I’m in Love*. 2018’s best cover; that Cure tune couldn’t be bettered.
31. Future, *Cuddle My Wrists*. Implausible rap title turns out to be paean to loneliness at the top.
28. Roseanne Cash, *She Remembers Everything*. Been awhile; mighty good to have her back.
27. Chloe x Halle, *Happy Without Me*. “And it breaks my heart/To see you happy without me.”
23. Gregory Alan Isakov, *Caves*. Isakov’s best use of symphony orchestra since *Day in the Life*.
20. Amen Dunes, *I Believe*. “When I was a kid I was afraid to die/But I’m grown up now.”
13. Kasey Musgraves, *High Horse*. “Who kills the buzz/Every time they open up their mouth?”
12. Sylvan Esso, *PARAD(w/m)E*. Title well captures that discontinuous Sylvan sound.
11. Drake, *God’s Plan*. Not much to add, with 1.2 billion Spotify listens. God’s plan, indeed…
8. Tallest Man on Earth, *Somewhere In the Mountains….Six new 2018 singles; loved ‘em all.
7. Courtney Barnett, *Need A Little Time*. “You seem to have the weight of the world/Upon your bony shoulders; hold on.” Aussie indie genius an annual List fixture since her smash ’15 debut.
4. childish gambino, *This Is America*. Fewer strong political anthems this year than expected given polarized times; do-everything Donald Glover expertly fills void. [https://bit.ly/2JZ2Q3R](https://bit.ly/2JZ2Q3R)
3. Avett Brothers, *Roses and Sacrifice*. Live audiences will be singing along for years to come.
2. Al Green, *Before the Next Teardrop Falls*. The Reverend’s 1st release in a decade is…a 1975 Freddy Fender cover. (We’ll explain Mr. Fender another time, millennials.) And still.
1. John Coltrane, *After the Rain*. This summer’s discovery of “lost” 1963 album is, per Sonny Rollins, “like finding a new room in the Great Pyramid.” No less fresh for waiting 55 years.
Restaurants
With all the rules of my academic field—US politics—in tatters, one precept still worth living by: don’t settle for a bad meal. Travelling? Check out a local’s food blog for recs. Eat at Mel’s every Monday b/c you live a block away? Turn the other direction this week. And so forth. Revisited several old favorites this year, & got lucky with a couple dozen new ones. To wit:

- **The Cooper**, Palm Beach FL. Locavore has deeper meaning when growing season is all year.
- **eLoong Dumplings**, Westlake Village CA. Mia Liu’s are best *xiao long bao* east of Beijing.
- **Salt**, Amelia Island GA. Attended conference, gave a talk, tried house restaurant: DAMN.
- **Baest**, Copenhagen. Denmark’s best pizza (some say Europe’s), at shared tables family-style.
- **Mastro’s**, Houston ‘Cos sometimes you just want comfort food. Thanks fabulous D’Antonis!
- **The Durham**, NC. Home of *Bull Durham* all fancied up; Cart & Perri expert food navigators.
- **Ariete**, Miami. Understated dining excellence, esp. for Coconut Grove. Geniuses at work:

- **Passion**, Punta Cana DR. Local flavors from resident genius of eponymous Bersategui (below).
- **Havana Bar & Grill**, Arlington TX. Stuck at DFW? Tasty Cuban, 20 mins away; order paella.
- **Barlow**, The Hague. On center city’s main café square; relaxed Euro-vibe with subtle flavors.
- **Kith and Kin**, DC. New Wharf buildings open like daily; Fateems’ fab new downstairs joint.
- **Cucina**, Vegas. Recent Puck family addition; perfect reward for #WFUWorkday crew’s labors.
- **Caves Henri IV**, Aix-en-Provence. Fancy name for a welcoming spot with chef-magician.
- **Sachet**, Dallas. There near opening, so frenetic; ‘Ibirico Secreto’ (shhh) dish is worth the fuss..
- **Pacific Standard Time**, Chicago. Chez Panisse comes to Erie St. Eat the “Mt. Lassen trout.”
- **Olmsted**, Brooklyn. Alinea/Per Se vet finds nirvana in Prospect Heights…happily near bRat.
- **Atelier September**. Eater.DK: “A café where infuriatingly good-looking Copenhageners drink matcha & eat sliced rye bread and cheese…you may be tempted to start every day there.” Yep.
- **Unconventional Diner**, DC. Moroccan Grits best new dish of ’18, at KT’s best new find.
- **Alma Mexicana** and **Canteen**, Winston-Salem NC. Lawyer-turned-genius restauranteur Claire Calvin adds to her Tex-Mex empire with Alma; Canteen a terrific Southern version of Eataly.
- **The Amsterdam**, Rhinebeck NY. Celebrated Kelly’s heart transplant; cuisine a delectable plus.
- **Le Coucou**, Soho NYC. Classic(ish) French in rustic-chic surroundings. Thanks Dishners!
- **Rasika**, DC. Still a hot table, this ethereal Indian; scored for our GWU review group thanks to Cheryl. Little disappointed no Rogan Josh, but with Bengali fish curry, cheered right up.
- **Holy Roller**, Austin TX. Irreverent décor, deliciously irreverent chef. Matchless all over again.
- **Reverence Farms Cafe**, Graham NC. Indeed revere this middle-of-nowhere gem; salut Perri.
- **Kadeau**, Copenhagen. Hamiltons landed & scoped finest tasting menu in Europe. *Tusind tak*!
- **Frenchette**, Tribeca NYC. Continuing the neo-Francais revival in France’s fave American cité.
- **Sheng Yong Xing**, Beijing. City’s ‘Best New Restaurant 2018,’ rightly sez *Time Out Beijing*.
- **Martín Berasategui**, San Sebastian SP. Worth the trip from Madrid or Barca or, sure, Winston-Salem. His hake *kokotxas* (Basque-style, w/insanely good Pil-Pil sauce) my best bite of 2018.