ROGAN’S LIST 2020
ANNALS OF MOSTLY-GOOD THINGS FROM A MOSTLY-BAD YEAR.

How it started…

Sunrise, North Pole/Arctic Circle, 11:11 AM, Jan. 1, 2020

How it ended…

Sunset, Winston-Salem, NC, 5:11 PM, Dec. 21, 2020
(“Christmas Star” planetary convergence, last seen ~800 years ago).

And much in between. This List mostly silent on subjects on which we’ve heard enough.

Sent with love and ardent wishes for a much-improved year ahead.
2020 Books: Fiction

22. Ernest Cline, Ready Player Two. Fans of original (me, yep) will thrill to the story continued.
20. Carl Hiaasen, Squeeze Me. Signature madcap Hiaasen/S-Florida joint, topically timely.
18. Lily King, Writers & Lovers. “I have a pact with myself not to think about money in the morning.” Heroine(ish) Casey wonderfully drawn; reminder that Gen Xers had ¼-life crises too.
17. Cara Black, Three Hours in Paris. 2nd-best thriller of a year when escapism mattered most.
16. Chip Schorr, The After. Best thriller—and by a newcomer to the genre, no less!
15. Jill McCorkle, Hieroglyphics. Dean of NC storytellers centers her latest on—a storied house.
14. Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Mexican Gothic. After Untamed Shore, her best work.
9. Lydia Millet, A Children’s Bible. Allegory of our times; may the rising generation lead us!
8. Colum McCann, Apeirogon. Heart-rending drama set in Israel/Palestinian borderlands; is there any novelist with greater range than McCann, from Zoli to “Great World/Spin” to this?
7. Elena Ferrante, The Lying Life of Adults. As seen through precocious child’s eyes.
5. David Mitchell, Utopia Avenue. ’60s-70s UK music scene—with usual eerie Mitchell twists.
4. James McBride, Deacon King Kong. Sportcoat most morally interesting character of the year.

Their B Game Beats Your A Game: Top-class writers whose new work not their best…& still.

Ottessa Mossfegh, Death in Her Hands. Year/Sleeping a joyous surprise; here, familiar moves.
Emma Straub, All Adults Here. Not hardly, turns out, in this mostly-fun Hudson Valley tale.
Sue Miller, Monogamy. Back to Good Mother themes, farther along; loved central couple.
Lee Child, The Sentinel. Eminently readable, though adding his son as co-author not a plus.
2020 Books: Nonfiction/Poetry.

- Biography. Les Payne & Tamara Payne, The Dead Are Arising. Any Malcolm X bio must be measured against his own supremely-woven story; this comes closest. Also loved Abe, David Reynolds’ even-handed Lincoln treatment, & Hilary Holladay on The Power of Adrienne Rich.
- Economics. Thomas Piketty, Capital & Ideology. Yeah, it’s long…& insights on every page.
- Eulogies. Ed Wilson, Songs of Wake Forest. Lyrical tributes, including to Maya Angelou.
- History, NC. David Zucchino, Wilmington’s Lie. Terrible tragedy retold. Thanks Rev. Queen!
- Memoir. Natasha Trewethy, Memorial Drive. Like Mary Karr or Maya Angelou, poet turned memoirist draws strength from both. This at once heavier than tragedy & lighter than joy.
- Music. Elizabeth Clendenning, American Gamelan & the Ethnomusicological Imagination. To see her ensemble perform is transporting; this field guide to gamelan is superb foundation.
- Nature. Helen Macdonald, Vesper Flights. Author of best-in-years ’14 memoir H is for Hawk, back with more beautiful winged meditations—& revelations, like the title’s beautiful origin.
- Perspective. Rutger Bregman, Humankind: A Hopeful History. Just when we need it most
- Poetry II. Jane Hirshfield, Ledger. ‘So few grains of happiness/Measured against all the dark.’
- Politics. James Morone, Republic of Wrath. Eloquent retracing of how we got so damn mad.
- Presidential Memoir. Barack Obama, A Promised Land. Poignant to read this superbly-crafted (ghostwriter-free!) revisiting of historic first term, in light of all that has come after.
- Social Science. Joseph Heinrich, The WEIRDest People in the World. Best Times review in years —merited. Are we products of culture, institutions, or psychology? All three…& more.
- Sociology. Isabel Wilkerson, Caste. Replete with insights…just ask WFU students (next p.)!
- Techworld. Anna Wiener, Uncanny Valley. Silicon Valley, via Ida Tarbell’s muck rake.
- Trumpworld. Mary Trump, Too Much & Never Enough. Best-written of massive Trump tell-all corpus—reflects Cousin Mary’s psychological training as well as unmatched family insights.
- Visual Art. Black Refractions. Luminous selections from Studio Museum/Harlem collection. Also drank in Blake Gopnik’s definitive Warhol bio (thanks Wes/Missy for pointing the way!).
2020 Nonfiction moments: Just another WFU voluntary student reading group visit from author, at bottom right (class organized by Prof. Teresa Sanhueza)…

And Wilkerson’s lovely post on Instagram, affirming star-struck students’ awesomeness:

*Image of Instagram post*
2020 Screens (Film, TV, Longform Video). If you’re in the mood for...


Old-fashioned war picture, set at sea, w/exquisite attention to 1940s detail: Greyhound. New-fangled pop picture, set more/less in Iceland, detail-free: Eurovision Song Contest.


World-class actor, final role: Brian Dennehy in Driveways. World-class actor, debut role: Radha Blank (also wrote/directed) in The 40-Year Old Version. World-class actor, Oscar(?) role: Frances McDormand in Nomadland.

5th-best documentary I saw this year: City Hall. Frederick Wiseman at 90, expertly filleting Boston governance via this insider-insider’s view. If not clocking in at 4.5 hours, my #1. 4th-best: Jimmy Carter, Rock ‘n Roll President. “He’d quote my songs back to me.” –Dylan

3rd-best: Welcome to Chechnya. Even if you ignore politics, see this for the digital wizardry. 2nd-best: Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets. Wild premise, set in a Vegas bar’s closing night. 1st-best: Crip Camp. Sweetness on celluloid…& the Camp had mighty politico-cultural reach.


2020 Longreads. Not all longform writing was about Trump or COVID.


William Antholis & David Marchick, “Transitions in Crisis,” Miller Center. Belongs atop Biden & incoming team’s must-read list (much to learn for departing administration members as well).


Cody Cassidy, “How to Escape a Sinking Ship (Like the Titanic),” Wired. Surviving the plunge.

Alain de Botton, “Asking People What They Do,” School of Life. Why “people who met for 1st time shifted from asking each other where they came from to asking each other what they did.”


Daniel Dennett, “Herding Cats & Free Will Inflation,” Romanell Lecture. Most readable living philosopher turns his gimlet eye on free will. Will leave you pondering your own “choices.”


Simon Haeder, “Thinking the Unthinkable,” Milken Institute Review. Amid desperate shortage of human organs for transplant, should we consider permitting their purchase/sale?

Gabrielle Hamilton, “My Restaurant Was My Life for 20 Years,” NYT Mag. RIP, beloved Prune.


Kate Julian, “The Anxious Child & Crisis of Modern Parenting,” Atlantic. And why are so many of us—especially young Americans today—so consumed with anxiety?


Andrei Kolesnikov, “Our Dark Past is Our Bright Future,” Carnegie Moscow Center. Altering people’s collective memory was a Soviet specialty…now back in full force under Putin.


Abraham Lustgarten, “Where Will Everyone Go?” ProPublica. As climate refugee #s swell. 😃


CP & BJM, “The Go Bag Edition,” WITI. As 2020 staggers to a close, all the more a must-read.


Bud Smith, “Safety Meeting,” The Point. “At my job, I weld—shielded arc, tig and mig. I also work with cranes, read blueprints, arc gouge, cut things apart with torches, jackhammer…”

Rachel L. Snyder, “The Difficult, Beautiful Arctic Circle,” NYer. Hey, that was MY Jan ’20 trip!

Ben Taub, “Five Oceans, Five Deeps,” New Yorker. Relentless adventurer in a DIY submersible reaches deepest point in each largest ocean. Analogy: one climber summit K2, Everest…


Dayna Tortorici, “My Instagram,” n+1. And where Instagram goes, TikTok follows: also read Rachel Monroe’s illuminating Atlantic trip to the brave new Tokverse.


Amy Whitaker et. al., “Art, Antiquities, & Blockchain,” Int’l J. Cultural Policy. Striking new frontiers in art/tech/equity…thanks to Susan, Raina, Christina & others for including WFU.

2020 Music

- Bebel Gilberto, *Deixa*. Bossa nova queen still reigns, 45 years after first single.
- Beyoncé, *Black Parade*. Impossible to over-hype this forever Juneteenth anthem.
- BLACKPINK, *How You Like That?* Video all the more fun. One of many #ashfind gems.
- Chatham County Line, *Strange Fascination*. Alt-country single of the year.
- Cigarettes After Sex, *You’re All I Want*. Not exactly subtle, this trio…and what a sound.
- Father John Misty, *To R.* I mean, if he’s singing to me…. 
- Freedom Fry, *West Coast*. Among plethora of 2020 FF joys (Catalina, Happy Li’l Thoughts).
- Girlpool, *Like I’m Winning It*. Will be sheer joy to stand in sweaty crowd & shout along lyrics.
- J Jensen McRae, *Plague*. Released as COVID began spreading, still captures It All eerily well.
- Khruangbin, *Time (You & I)*. Postmodern disco beat makes (moronic) lyrics superfluous.
- L Devine, *Womxn*. Fave new (to me) electropop sensation; her sound from UK by way of Pluto.
- Leon Bridges, *Sweeter*. Already in works, this gem…then became a George Floyd homage.
- MILCK, *If I Ruled the World*. If only she did.
- Nathaniel Rateliff, *And It’s Still Alright*. Most hopeful motto imaginable in this annus perditas.
- The 1975, *Birthday Party*. Signature drifty shoegaze look & sound, complete with banjo(!).
- Old Sea Brigade, *Los Feliz*. Play this lilting affirmation on rough eves, pandemic- or other-induced.
- Ondara, *Lockdown on Date Night*. Another quasi-reportorial account of surreal coronalife.
- Phoebe Bridgers, *Garden Song*. Her Punisher my most-listened album of the year.
- Sam Hunt, *Hard to Forget*. Chicken-fried loved-’n-lost lament, with lunatic ‘Greek chorus.’
- Sharon Van Etten, *Staring At a Mountain*. As who among us didn’t, for hours & hours this year?
- Sia, *Courage to Change*. Cannot resist her anthemic, melodic-hook confections.
- Smitty Spread Love, *Doomsday Prepper*. Subverts the billionaires’ immortality plans.
- Solange, *Convéncete*. Making it a double for musical-genius Solange sisters.
- Swamp Dogg, *Please Let Me Go Round Again*. With John Prine; ‘nuff said.
- Sylvan Esso, *Ferris Wheel*. Still enthrallingly pushing musical boundaries, this Durham duo.


**Found Poem**

Select lyrics from songs above, all penned/performed by millennials (20s/30s).

I was lost/In the deep
    Found a way
    Come with me
[Old Sea Brigade]

Killed healthcare plans, they instituted travel bans
    And then the plague abandoned every one
    I’m trying to believe in something
[Jensen McRae]

I can regain myself and recover/Leaving home before I’m ready
    Standing on my feet unsteady…
[Naked & the Famous]

I heard Trump ‘bout to take us to war
    So I went and bought two army trucks (*it’s Dolph*)
God, please watch over the nurses and doctors on the frontlines (*God, please*)
    I can’t wait ‘til the clouds gone and we get sunshine (*sunshine*)
[Young Dolph]

And she’s sitting in the rain/She’s the trailer for a film
    She’s the curtain at the end
[The Japanese House]

*El tiempo se ha ido, ido*
*Pero yo no olvido, olvido*
*Las cosa’ que yo he vivido con los mio’*
*He sido más que bendecido*
[Farruko]

Oh, we’re a scene, whatever that means
    I depend on my friends to stay clean/As sad as it seems
[The 1975]

When youth departs will wisdom hold?
    Looking for the answer inside your soul
    Don’t be kamikaze now keep it cool
[Blakey]

And when I grow up, I’m gonna look up
    From my phone and see my life
And it’s gonna be just like my recurring dream…
[Phoebe Bridgers]
**2020 Food (via post!)**

Supported local eateries via takeout... & also delighted to order from these *legendary spots.*

Hattie B’s Hot Chicken (Nashville)  
McLoons Lobster Shack (South Thomaston, ME)

Ms. Chi (LA)  
Girl & the Goat (Chicago)  
Cinco Jotas (Madrid)

Bien Cuit (NYC)  
Kreuz Market (Austin)  
Kermit’s Key West Lime Shoppe

**2020 Podcasts:** Traded drive time for dog walks this year; a Top 10 of podcasts to accompany.

**Crime Story:** From David Simon *interview* to Robert Durst *trial*, astonishing breadth... & depth.

**Floodlines:** New Orleans after Katrina. Deeply moving... & warning about next time.

**The Hamilcast:** At 5 years, this weekly dive into all things *Hamilton* may outlast the show itself.

**It’s A Continent:** Lively, extended rebuttal to common notion that Africa is one big country.

**The Kicker:** All things journalism; sample *episode:* “What was Notorious RBG like as a source?”

**The Left Right Game:** Irresistible paranormality, simple premise: turn left, then right, then left...

**Rabbit Hole:** What happens to reality when our lives move online.

**Song Exploder:** Inside the music, for real. Loved *episode* on Black Pumas’ “Colors,” on ’19 List.

**Wind of Change:** Spies, secrets, Soviets... & a one-hit 90’s band. All comes together somehow.

**You’re Wrong About:** Myths, misreportings, malevolent rumors—all deftly debunked.