Rogan’s List
Best of 2021

2020
2021
2022?

Merry List-mas to all, & to all a joyous '22.
**Fiction 2021.** Best way to make sense of our jumbled past, abnormal present, & opaque future.
- Elliot Ackerman & James Stavridis, *2034.* Eerily believable “pre-history” of next world war.
- Naima Coster, *What’s Mine and Yours.* From ’90s Piedmont NC to today’s LA & Paris, epic.
- Andy Weir, *Hail Mary.* Imagineer of *The Martian* trains his creative eye on interstellar space.
- Maggie Shipstead, *Great Circle.* “I was shaped to the earth like a seabird to a wave.”
- Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were.* A step up from her spellbinding *Behold the Dreamers.*
- Morgan Jenkins, *Caul Baby.* “Something was bound to happen to Laila’s baby”: did it ever.
- Chip Schorr, *The Price.* Gripping political thriller; bends but doesn’t break plausibility meter.
- Ash Davidson, *Damnation Spring.* Naturalist’s ‘70s NoCal: Stephen King’s best read of year.
- Rumaan Alam, *Leave the World Behind.* Microcosmic dystopia: grid goes down…or does it?
- Terry Roberts, *My Mistress’ Eyes Are Raven Black.* Dean of southern fiction turns eye north.
- Leesa Cross-Smith, *This Close to Okay.* Star of Bookmarks-fest delivers a redemptive gem.
- Steve Nedvidek, *Jekyll Island Chronicles: A Last Call.* Absorbing trilogy thunders to close.
- Haruki Murakami, *First Person Singular.* Eight stories, displaying a breathtaking inventive range, from an imaginary Charlie Parker album to an appealingly believable talking monkey.
- Amor Towles, *The Lincoln Road.* Such realized characters I dreamt I’d joined their epic trip.
- Chang-Rae Lee, *My Year Abroad.* Title meant ironically; therein lies unputtable-down tale.
- Dana Spiotta, *Wayward.* As if an Anne Tyler lead fetched up in a very dark place.
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun.* Poses new Turing (fictional AI) test: emphatic teary ‘yes.’
- Anthony Doerr, *Cloud Cuckoo Land.* David Mitchell x Madeline Miller, to staggering effect.

**A Game/B Game** [Great novelists not at best--& still top others ’ A game. Hat-tip to Drew L.]
- Russell Banks, *Foregone.* Exquisite prose stylist’s most cantankerously unloveable protagonist.
- Louise Erdrich, *The Sentence.* Love her writing so; this an uneven mix of ghost story & reality.
- Mieko Kawakami, *Heaven.* *Breasts & Eggs* a 2020 smash; this a newly-translated early work.
- Stephen King, *Billy Summers.* Surprisingly moving anti-hero’s journey; up there with *1963.*
- Margaret Verble, *When Two Feathers Fell From the Sky.* Engaging; fell short of *Maud’s Line.*
Non-Fiction ‘21. Deep gratitude to those who, amid plague, wrote on every imaginable subject.

- **Autobiography**: Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys & Sorrows*. The unlikely rise of a true artist.
- **Biography, Collective**: Rebecca Traister et al., *Take Up Space*. AOC phenomenon in vignettes.
- **Biography, As Told To**: Winfred Rembert, *Chasing Me to My Grave*. Art-making in Jim Crow.
- **Biography**: Peter Bergen, *The Rise & Fall of Osama bin Laden*. Amazing access to details.
- **Humanism**: Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed*. Searing, poetic survey of slavery’s legacy.
- **Int’l Relations**: Kahl & Wright, *Aftershocks*. Rise & fall of international order. Thanks Beth!
- **Life-Inspiration**: Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*. Wasn’t a believer until COVID, but now—
- **Literary Masterclass**: George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. Sign me up.
- **Memoir**: Nastassja Martin, *In the Eye of the Wild*. Head-spinning trip opens with bear attack.
- **Moral Philosophy**: Christian Miller, *Honesty*. 1st serious study of this crucial topic in years (!).
- **Pandemic**: Michael Lewis, *The Premonition*. True heroes who kept COVID from being worse.
- **Poetry**: Rita Dove, *Playlist for the Apocalypse*. Better than anything you’ll find on Spotify.
- **Political Culture**: George Packer, *Last Best Hope*. American passion for equality may save us.
- **Political Philosophy**: Kei Hiruta, *Hannah Arendt & Isaiah Berlin*. Honest clash of ideas.
- **Religion**: Henry L. Gates Jr., *The Black Church*. How the Word was also passed. H/tip Mycha.
- **Science**: Carlo Rovelli, *Helgoland*. Quantum revolution accessibly dissected.
- **Social Media**: Pete Davie, *Dedicated*. “Case for commitment in an age of infinite browsing.”
- **South, History**: Mary Tribble, *Pious Ambitions*. Honor to blurb this sterling recovery of a life.
- **Sport**: Matt Sullivan, *Can’t Knock the Hustle*. Brooklyn Nets hoops & social justice in Covid.
- **Urbanity**: Annalee Newitz, *Four Lost Cities*. A telling & heartbreaking quartet; rec-thx Maria.
- **Wine**: Ian Taplin, *The Napa Valley Wine Industry*. Fresh illuminations on every page; cheers!
Longreads 2021
So many vibrant new journals…thankfully, with so many new topics to ponder. Besides variants.

· Matthieu Aikins, “Inside the Fall of Kabul,” NYT Mag. Harrowing read. H/tip to Adam.
· Anne Appelbaum, “The Bad Guys Are Winning,” Atlantic. 21st c. as totalitarianism rising.
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· Linda Holmes, “What I Learned From Watching Every Sport at Tokyo Olympics,” NPR.
· Herminia Ibarra, “3 Phases of a Major Life Change,” HBR. Worth a look, whatever your lot.
· Christopher K, “Is There Still a Space for Long Hip-Hop Albums?” OKPlayer. Maybe….
· Eric Klinenberg, “Infrastructure…Is About the Society We Want,” NYT. Amen, brother.
· Lauren Markham, “The Crow Whisperer,” Harper’s. We’ve come a long way, Dr. Doolittle.
· Alexis McCrossen, “Why Do We Count Down to the New Year?” Zocalo. New since ‘70s (!).
· Ligaya Mishan, “Hayao Miyazaki Casts One Last Spell,” NYT Style. Artisanal filmmaker’s last.
· Mandy Nguyen, “Animals that May Exist in a Million Years,” Vox. As imagined by biologists.
· Gabriella Paiella, “How the Maestro Got His Hands Back,” GQ. The wonders of bionic gloves.
· Shane Parrish, “How to Remember What You Read,” FS. Useful how-to (for a list-keeper, eg!).
· Samantha Subramian, “No One Knows How $80b in Climate Financing Was Spent,” QZ. Damn.
· Sharon Suh, “Loving Lies,” Airmail. Stephen Glass, 20+ years on, telling one last (lovely) lie.
· Boen Wang, “The 21st Chromosome,” SLR. Who decides whose life is worth living?
· Graeme Wood, “Putin’s Potemkin Paradise,” American Scholar. Read it and плакать.
Films/TV 2021
If you’re seeking…

- 1940s noir drama set in…carnivals & mentalists: Nightmare Alley. Toni Collette: ditto.
- Understated buddy film with Colin Firth & astonishing Stanley Tucci: Supernova.
- Understated true tale of WWII-ene treasure-trove UK find, a gem in own right: The Dig.

- 60s music/cultural scene reinvigorated, documentary style, I: The Velvet Underground.
- 60s (etc.) II, exhuming glorious 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival: Summer of Soul.
- 60s (etc.) III, Peter Jackson’s gripping reconstruction of Hobbits Beatles history: Get Back.
- New Ryusuke Hamaguchi joint: Drive My Car. New to this deft magical minimalist? Enjoy!

- Best offbeat series since Fleabag: Only Murders In the Building. Martin/Short/Gomez: 🆙
- Best gambling film since Rounders: The Card Counter. Has Oscar Isaac ever disappointed?
- Best ‘70s period piece since Boogie Nights: Licorice Pizza. Well hello, Haim baby sister!
- Best Star Wars since Star Wars: Space Sweepers. Our dystopian moment, via South Korea.

- Beats Squid Games at own game: Vincenzo. Ironic/dark comedy at its finest, in any language.
- Beats WandaVision at own game: Loki. Far better than expected. (And I liked WandaVision!)
- Beats COVID at own game: Station Eleven. Star of my 2015 novels list reborn as must-see TV.
- Beats every magic show ever: Derek Delgaudio/In & Of Itself. Gob-smacking. H/tip Matty.

- Unclassifiable Ivory Coast drama, evoking Scheherazade/1001 tales: Night of the Kings.
- Unclassifiable Nic Cage return to screen triumph, evoking Michael Pollan: Pig.

- Italians dream of truffles: The Truffle Hunters. Old men & their truffle dogs (not pigs!).

- Superb nonfiction TV adaptation: Dopesick. Arresting without turning overly preachy.
- Superb sad-cop series: Mare of Easttown. Kate Winslet a richly deserving Emmy winner.

- Politics movingly onscreen, I: Mayor. Charismatic leader of troubled Ramallah (Palestine).
- Politics (etc.), II: Judas & the Black Messiah. Unflinching account of Fred Hampton murder.
- Politics (etc.), II: Belfast. The Troubles a shadow in Kenneth Branagh love letter to his youth.
**Tunes 2021:** A cornucopia of musicians kept us centered. [Spotify link](#) (w/a few bonus tunes).

- A Winged Victory for the Sullen, *So That the City Can Begin to Exist.* Lives up to its name.
- Bela Fleck, *Charm School.* Best picker alive jams merrily with equally gifted bluegrass-mates.
- Bhi Bhiman, *Paranoid.* “Think I’ll lose my mind/If I don’t find something to pass it by.”
- Brandee Younger, *Reclamation.* Greatest jazz harpist of our time w/strong new album.
- Brandi Carlile, *Right on Time.* Precocious alt-country darling stronger in 40s. [Video](#) good too.
- Buena Vista Social Club (!), *Vincenta.* 25 years on, remastered/rereleased & still transporting.
- Daisy the Great, *Record Player.* Indie-folk Brooklyn duo cut ’21’s most fun record. H/tip Ash!
- Dar Williams, *Time, Be My Friend.* First saw her in ’93; time’s been her muse, at least.
- Death Cab for Cutie, *King of Carrot Flowers Pt. 1.* Neutral Milk Hotel classic, 4-star cover.
- Donna Missal, *sex is good (but have you tried).* A cappella lilt, parental-consent lyrics.
- Freedom Fry, *Stayin’ Alive.* Even better en français: “Oui tu peux voir, que dans ma demarche.”
- Jenn Grant, *Sons & Daughters.* Close harmony, soaring spirits: Unbroken Circle, please cover!
- Jenny Lewis & Serengeti, *Gasoline.* Even better en français (& digital 0010110s, etc.).
- Juice WRLD, *Life’s A Mess II.* And still we beat on, boats against the current &c.
- Kabza De Small, *Folasahe.* Breakout amapiano hit, South Africa’s signature joyous sound.
- Lana Del Rey, *Text Book.* Mesmerizing as ever; love *Arcadia* too, but no resisting this title…
- Lo Village, *Lost in America.* Propulsive trip through modern US: “Tell me what’s going on?”
- Lorde, *Fallen Fruit.* Anti-global warming anthem, with video to strengthen message.
- Maisie Peters, *John Hughes Movie.* Fave title of year; song allllmost lives up to it.
- Mannequin Pussy, *Control.* On verge of losing theirs throughout this fever-pitch banger.
- Masked Wolf, *Astronaut in the Ocean.* The simile for our past 22 pandemic months.
- Mitski, *Working for the Knife.* #MeToo—and #FlexWorkersUnite—in stirring song form.
- Moby (et. al.), *Natural Blues.* Greatest vegan DJ remakes—w/guests—all-time classic *Play.*
- Of Monsters & Men, *Phantom.* Iceland’s finest produce their best since *I of the Storm.*
- Paul McCartney & Beck, *Find My Way.* 60s moiptop, 90s badboy, 70s (*Talking Heads*) sound.
- Rita Payés & Elisabeth Roma, *Quien lo Diría.* Timeless tune & sorrowful tale.
- Silk Sonic, *Leave the Door Open.* All-star cast reinvents Seventies R&B; check it out.
- Snøw, *Spilled My Coffee.* Lads’ microcosmic bad day lament, Lo-fi style.
- Valerie June, *Call Me a Fool.* Soulful gospel-born voice recalls Aretha. Even better on video.
- Vic Mensa, *SHELTER.* “There’s a war goin’ on outside…” With genius Chance guest turn.
- The Weather Station, *Atlantic.* Could listen all year to Tamara Lindeman’s voice.
Found Poem: Generational Voices
(Lyrics all penned by 20-somethings.)

I used to think I'd be done by twenty
Now at twenty-nine, the road ahead appears the same
Though maybe at thirty I'll see a way to change
That I'm living for the knife
(Mitski, Working for the Knife)

Thinking I should get all this dying off of my mind
I should really know better than to read the headlines
Does it matter if I see it?
No really, can I not just cover my eyes?
(Weather Station, Atlantic)

Thought I had it under control
But it shook me, gripped me, grabbed my soul
Heard it pound, it knocking on the door
(Valerie June, Call Me a Fool)

The darker the berry you feel a way
From Satchmo to Cab Calloway
Lost in America: Real saints of the latter day
(Lo Village, Lost in America)

Quién lo diría
ay mira que ironía (que ironía)
(Rita Payés & Elisabeth Roma, Quien lo Diria)

Grace far beyond my grasp
The rest is silence
(Arooj Aftab, Last Night)

I am just a man on a rock
Who can’t even find a matching pair of white Nike socks
That's a problem with my faith, I re-wire it, why do I even trip
But whatever, got this coffee, I'm taking another sip
(Snow, Spilled My Coffee)

Can you help me
Occupy my brain?
(Bhi Bhiman, Paranoid)
**2021 Food:** Blessed pre-Delta window’s memorable meals included Clancy’s (NOLA), NYC’s Rezdora & Blue Willow, Salt (Great Pond USVI), & John Currence’s Oxford MS latest, Bouré. COVID still meant much Winston takeout as well as UPS delivery from beloved spots below.

Parkway Po’Boy (NOLA)  
Antique Bakery (NYC)  
Louie Mueller BBQ (Taylor TX)

The Grey (Savannah)  
Ambassador General (London)  
Langer’s Deli (LA)

Skyline Chili (Cincinnati)  
Emmy Squared (Bklyn)  
Stüber Tuff (PDX). In homage.

**2021 Podcasts:** All these great ‘casts; so little time...

**Blind Date with a Book.** Dating game matching guests with…a terrific new book. Good recs too.

**Crime Story.** Annual list-lead; from Ahmaud Arbery murder to Robert Durst trial, spellbinding.

**Dish City.** Pandemic-era food delivery, examined fully; politics & delectability in equal measure.

**Hit Parade.** Eclectic pop-music history & trivia; episodes on punk’s rise & fall will hook you.

**Mr. Difficult.** Novelist Jonathan Franzen dissected. Still reading Freedom so that episode’s next.

**Not Past It.** History’s downstream lessons; try how Nazi occupation of Norway led to ABBA.

**Science Talk.** Sheer breadth of topics stunning; listen in & you’ll have a STEM honorary degree.

**Sweet Bobby.** A true-life catfishing episode so disturbing you’ll writhe along with Kirat Assi.

**This Is Love.** Esp. “What Gets Told,” with 100-year old civil rights activist Betty Reid Soskin.