

The Best Books of 2008

Thrills, chills, narrative mastery—our columnist's top picks to replace movie night. **BY STEPHEN KING**

OKAY, GANG, PAY ATTENTION: In 2007, according to the National Association of Theatre Owners, the average price of a movie ticket was \$6.88. Let's say it goes up to \$7.00 in 2008. And say that you and your sweetie buy \$10 of snacks (featuring your Uncle Stevie's famous "heavy" bag of popcorn). Even leaving out the babysitter and the cost of gas, that's \$24 for two hours' entertainment. For that same \$24—less, with a discount—you can buy a new book and be entertained for days. Plus, your sweetie can read it when you're done (or first, if he or she's the grabby type). My point? Books are still the best bang for your entertainment buck, and 2008 was a great year for reading. Below are my personal best for the last 12 months. (And I've indicated the ones in paperback—even cheaper!) My advice is get them all. Immediately.

10. *The Good Guy*, Dean Koontz While not up with his best (*Intensity*, the incomparable *Phantoms*), this is Koontz at his Hitchcockiest: Nice guy is mistaken for contract killer, mayhem ensues. Koontz can be preachy. Not here, though. (PB)

9. *Old Flames*, Jack Ketchum Remember Glenn Close as the bunny-boiler scorned in *Fatal Attraction*? Raise that to the 10th power and you get Dora Welles, the crazy ex-girlfriend in this short chiller. (PB)

8. *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, Stieg Larsson Instead of a locked-room mystery, this is a "locked-island" mystery in which a disgraced journalist is hired to investigate a decades-old crime. He discovers something a lot more awful than a missing girl. The good news is that Larsson delivered two more novels with this one. The bad news is that he died of a heart attack shortly after doing so.

7. *Hollywood Crows*, Joseph Wambaugh This sequel to *Hollywood Station* doesn't live up to its predecessor...but it's close, and still a fine, funky read with an all too believable murder plot. Wambaugh's Hollywood is an open-air psycho ward where even the cops need Valium. (PB)

6. *Heartsick/Sweetheart*, Chelsea Cain We've been down Hannibal Lecter Avenue many times, and these two books shouldn't work...but they do. Chalk it up to excellent writing and Cain's ferocious sense of humor. The Portland (Ore.) setting is refreshing too. (PB: *Heartsick*)

5. *Nixonland*, Rick Perlestein Nonfiction that has the sweep of an epic novel, with The Great American Political Vampire at the center of the action. It's the best history of the turbulent '60s I've ever read.

4. *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Stef Penney A search for a boy missing in the chilly Canadian wilderness of 150 years ago, a love story, a



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historical mystery. All told in lyrical, marvelously readable prose. If you liked *Life of Pi* and *The Secret Life of Bees*, this is for you. (PB)

3. *When Will There Be Good News?*, Kate Atkinson The third, the best, and hopefully not the last Atkinson novel featuring private eye Jackson Brodie. There's a train crash, a smart and plucky teenage girl named Reggie, a missing lady doc...but the plot defies description, and I'd be a hound to even try. As a reader, I was charmed. As a novelist, I was staggered by Atkinson's narrative wizardry. You can't believe all the tangled threads are going to come together, but they do—and Atkinson makes it look

easy. Dear reader, easy it is not.

2. *The Garden of Last Days*, Andre Dubus III I've written about this before, so I won't belabor you with the details. Just know this: It's terrifying, unputdownable, and the best novel so far about 9/11.

1. *The novels of Robert Goddard* I discovered Goddard, a British mystery/suspense novelist, last year, almost by accident. In *Pale Battalions*, his second novel, was the first book I read on my new Kindle. Since then I've read eight more and have about seven to go. I'll parcel them out, because they're too good to gulp. There are missing heirs, stolen fortunes, mistaken identities, raffish con men, hot sex, and cold-blooded murder. These books have more twists than a box of macaroni, all rendered in Goddard's clear-eyed prose. You discover a guy who's doing work on such a high level, and the disturbing question occurs: Who else have I missed that's this good? (PB)

Scary question. Maybe that's why the T-shirt my wife gave me for my birthday reads, *Quot libros, quam breve tempus*: So many books, so little time. ■