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## Best books of 2008: Robert Olen Butler to Stephen King

By Chauncey Mabe  
1/5/2009

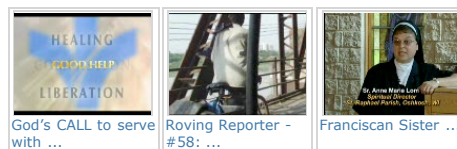
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Sun Sentinel (MCT) - So many books, so little time. To name only three of the important books I wish I'd read this year: "Unaccustomed Earth," by Jhumpa Lahiri; David Carr's "The Night of the Gun," and most regrettably, Roberto Balano's "2666."

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Yet 2008 proved exceptionally good for the books I did choose, especially over one period in late spring/early summer, when almost every week brought some new joy: Robert Olen Butler's prose poems, "Intercourse"; Xiaolu Guo's coming-of-age-in-Beijing novel, "Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth"; Elizabeth Subercaseaux's domestic thriller, "A Week in October"; Paul Auster's affecting vision of an alternative America, "Man in the Dark"; Hannah Tinti's "The Good Thief," an old-fashioned yarn of a boy among con artists; James Tate's disturbing, funny poems, "The Ghost Soldiers."

The year's other gems included Cynthia Ozick's brainy but entertaining quartet of novellas, "Dictation"; John Barth's short-story collection, "The Development"; Kirsten Menger-Anderson's creepy first collection, "Doctor Olaf van Schuler's Brain"; Curt Leviant's post-Holocaust comic novel, "A Novel of Klass."

In nonfiction, Dexter Filkins' "The Forever War" is a masterpiece of war reporting. Thomas Frank's "The Wrecking Crew" is required reading for liberals. Taking neither sides nor prisoners, Andrew Bacevich's "The Limits of Power" should be read by everyone.

It may not be precisely accurate to call Richard Price's "Lush Life" a crime novel, but it does follow the conventions of the police procedural on its way to literary excellence. Nobelist Imre Kertesz likewise mimics the police procedural, to different effect, in "Detective Story." Slightly pulpier, Colin Harrison's "The Finder" solidifies his standing as the Tom Wolfe of crime fiction. Stephen

King's "Duma Key" is one of the year's great pleasures.

**I don't read many religious books, but two good ones caught my eye:** Brian McLaren's "Finding Our Way Again" offers a path for Christianity to regain its spiritual heritage. **"Light Comes Through,"** by Dzigar Kongtrul, is an excellent primer on Buddhist spirituality.

As sometimes happens, I've changed my mind about a couple of books. Neal Stephenson's sci-fi epic "Anathem" remains burdened by too many esoteric discussions of philosophy and physics, but the parts with actual storytelling are satisfying, indeed. And I was excessively hard on Julia Glass' drama of sisters and family, "I See You Everywhere." The writing is fine, the characters vivid, and the story, overdetermined and melodramatic it may be, nonetheless lingers in the mind.

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