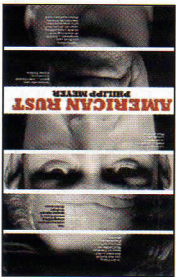


Books of the year, 2009

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From a vibrant year in publishing THE WEEK selects the best books of 2009

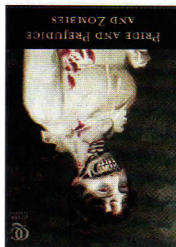
Best international fiction



American Rust
by Philipp Meyer
Allen & Unwin
376pp \$32.99

This book marks the return of "the novel of social protest", said George Williamson in his review of "the novel of the rusting steel mills of Pennsylvania's rural south-west; his companion Isaac English is a scientist savant prevented from leaving town by a crippled father. The pair strike out west to California, but the belligerent Poe starts a fight with some homeless men, and Isaac inadvertently kills one of them. Meyer cultivates a gritty "redneck realism", which never lets the reader forget they are in the midst of an American tragedy. But what makes the novel so worth reading, said Owen Richardson in The Age, is Meyer's sense of place: his evocative descriptions of America's moribund towns, lifeless rivers and closed-up rail yards.

Most controversial book



Pride and Prejudice and Zombies
by Seth Grahame-Smith
Quirk Books
319pp, \$24.95

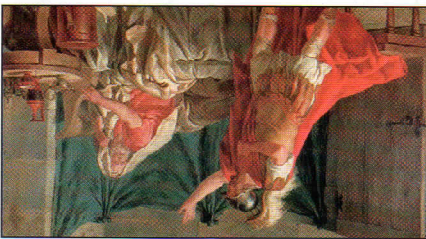
Literary-horror "mash-ups" are probably the strangest trend to have landed in our bookshelves this year, said Stephanie Merritt in The Observer. Grahame-Smith has led the charge, immediately becoming a New York Times bestseller. The premise is simple: early 19th century England is menaced by a plague of the undead; the five Bennet sisters are accomplished martial arts warriors, trained by their father, a monster-hunter possessed of Japanese fighting skills. The success of any pastiche lies in its ability to capture the tone of that original, and in this Grahame-Smith has succeeded admirably. The real pleasure of this book is reading it side-by-side with the original. Only then do you realise just "how smartly Grahame-Smith inserts himself in the thicker of curlicued manners that is Austen's real comic theme".



Best Australian non-fiction
The Wolf
by Richard Guilliat and Peter Hohenn
William Heinemann
232pp, \$34.95

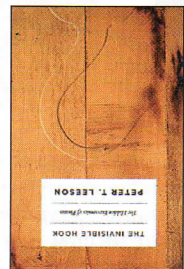
"There isn't a dull page in this account of the adventures of SMS *Wolf* in WW1," said Owen Richardson in The Age. For 15 months, the disguised cargo ship provided the Indian and Pacific oceans. Under the command of Captain Karl Neger, the *Wolf* bailed up other vessels, pilfering their supplies and imprisoning their crews. Guilliat and Hohenn have "resisted the temptation to dress this story up". Still, the tale is so rich in incident it reads like "the most old-fashioned kind of ripping yarn". Indeed, this is precisely the genre satirised so wonderfully by Michael Palin, said Stephen Loosely in The Australian – only it's all fact. *The Wolf* even boasts a romantic hero in Captain Neger, a gifted sailor – stoic and reserved – but with a keen sense of humour. A telling juxtaposition is made between the common view of Germans as sly, rapacious monsters and the noble actions of the *Wolf*'s crew, said Ross Fitzgerald in the Sydney Morning Herald. This is truthful storytelling at its finest: *The Wolf* is one of the "most gripping books I have had the pleasure to read all year".

Best Australian fiction



Ransom
by David Malouf
Knopf 223pp \$29.95

Ransom is a retelling of the events of Book 24 of Homer's *The Iliad*, in which King Priam rides out in a simple cart to plead with Achilles for the corpse of his son Hector. In this theme and its treatment, Malouf fans will recognise "the lyrical density of the prose, the unhurried pacing, the author's clear, compassionate eye", said Thornton McCamish in The Sunday Age. Malouf boasts a vividly tactile approach to description. Old Priam regards his body as "this brief six feet of earth he moves and breathes in". Later, when contemplating death, Priam feels "the blood still warm and ticking in his wrist". Anyone who enjoys unearthing such nuggets of style will treasure this book, said Angela Meyer in Bookseller+Publisher. And the ideas Malouf raises are far greater than the tale of Troy. At the centre of the book lies a discussion between Priam and the garulous carter Somax, who transports him to retrieve Hector's body. This passage, in which a king and a commoner swap opinions on fatherhood, life and death, is "philosophical, moving and hard to shake from the senses". Indeed, these pages of *Ransom* "are nothing short of magical", said Andrew Riemer in The Sydney Morning Herald. Malouf's delicate, marvellously alert prose is endowed with a quality that has one name only – wisdom.



Best international non-fiction
The Invisible
by Peter T. Leeson
Princeton, 271pp,
\$24.95

This witty book on piracy demonstrates how economic theories can illuminate unexpected historical trends, said Stephen Saunders in The Canberra Times. The title is a riff on Adam Smith's description of self-interest as the "invisible hand" of the market. The author's premise is that only economics can explain the classical 1670-1730 Jolly Roger-era of sea piracy. Leeson is particularly fascinated with the pirates' adoption of a one-man-one-vote system – long before it became the norm in England.