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FT readers' best books of 2020 so far

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YESTERDAY

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We had some great responses, and here's a selection — from the trail of a Nazi fugitive to a long hot Greek island summer, via John Maynard Keynes and Mohammed bin Salman. Not forgetting Hilary Mantel's "magnificent finale" to her Thomas Cromwell trilogy. Enjoy!

Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelled the Middle East, by Kim Ghattas, Headline £20

Kim Ghattas' telling of the cultural and religious transformation of the Arab and Muslim world since 1979 is an eye-opening, riveting read. She highlights how the Iranian Revolution, the siege of the Holy Mosque in Mecca and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan sparked a competition for Islamic legitimacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This rivalry re-engineered a pluralistic Arab and Muslim world and "unleashed sectarian identities that had never defined us in the past". Full of stories gathered from interviews and her archives, the book conveys a different world.

—@cam

The Mirror and the Light by Hilary Mantel, Fourth Estate £25

I relished the wholly magnificent finale of Hilary Mantel's great trilogy revealing the life and works of Thomas Cromwell. I had to put this tome down, to rest and reflect in between reading bouts, which happened to roughly divide the book into three parts. Dreading the ending, obviously known, I found the last pages almost unbearable as one walked with him in synchrony, footstep to final footstep, heartbeat to heartbeat. His life was such an extraordinary achievement, as is the writing of this book.

—Marymusic

A Theatre for Dreamers by Polly Samson, Bloomsbury Circus £14.99

The story of a group of expats living on the Greek island of Hydra during the year 1960. Among them were a few writers (George Johnston, Charmian Clift, almost forgotten now), and a young, unknown poet and singer named Leonard Cohen, who met his muse Marianne Ihlen there. It is written from the point of view of young Erica, barely 18 years old, and trying to fit in amongst this particular crowd. Beautifully crafted, this book evokes a lost *douceur de vivre*, when things were a lot simpler and more easygoing, under the Greek sun, facing the amazing blue sea.

—Phileas Frog

The Ratline: Love, Lies and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive by Philippe Sands, Orion £20

One of the best books I have ever read (and I have read a lot!). *The Ratline* is a fascinating reconstruction of how a "most wanted" Nazi – Otto Wachter – escapes on a rat line to end up under the protection of the Catholic Church in Rome. Painstakingly, Sands puts the labyrinthine twists and turns of the detective story together and it's as if John le Carré had stepped from fiction to history. A really unusual and brilliantly written book about two human beings trying to come to terms with good and evil.

—Pilgrim

How to Feed a Dictator by Witold Szablowski, Penguin £14.99

This collection of interviews with the cooks for five of the world's most notorious dictators is a fascinating read by a talented journalist. Pol Pot's cook was the most frightening. She was convinced to the end that the stories of the mass killings were lies by the Vietnamese, even though she came within a whisker of being summoned back from her diplomatic posting in Beijing and executed. Idi Amin's cook was nearly executed, too, after being betrayed by a man whom he had thought was a friend. The Albanian man who had to meet his father's executioner to find out where he was buried was heartbreaking.

—George Horsington

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Motherwell by Deborah Orr, Weidenfeld & Nicolson £16.99

A brilliant memoir of the author's early life in a declining Scottish steel town, in a bizarre and dysfunctional family where expectations of her don't at all match her own wishes and potential. Sad, funny, involving, and best of all really thought-provoking. Best book I've read this year, so far.

—Mintz

When Time Stopped: A Memoir of My Father's War and What Remains by Ariana Neumann, Scribner £16.99

I was gripped by this brilliant memoir tracing the author's father's life story, from growing up in Prague as a Jew during the second world war, to later emigrating to Caracas, Venezuela. It reads like a mystery and also has wonderful photos documenting his family's journey.

—Alphabetsy

Humankind: A Hopeful History by Rutger Bregman, Bloomsbury £20

Good news in a sea of bad news. His thesis that "most people, deep down, are pretty decent" is against the current and awesome.

—Arno Meyer

A refreshing, positive interpretation of human nature, rebuttal of the Hobbesian "vener theory" of civilisation and related studies in social psychology. And an especially timely look at approaches to policing and incarceration.

—Xerion NYC

The Price of Peace by Zachary D. Carter, Random House Audio

This new biography of John Maynard Keynes is audacious, both in its beginning and how it frames Keynes' background as a basis for his great achievements. It is the biography of a great and fascinating figure, not an economist. And of course the topics are front and centre today, just as they were in the early 20th century. My wife and I are listening together and find it a delight.

—Paul A. Myers

MBS by Ben Hubbard, William Collins £20

Mohammed bin Salman could well be in power for the next 50 years, both shaping and responding to major economic, social and political change. If he does manage to stay on top (and he's certainly laying foundations that will make him difficult to shift) then he will also be a key figure in an unstable region. Hubbard's book isn't perfect and it doesn't present a complete picture, but it makes a start with the information available. Anybody with an interest in the Middle East must try to understand MBS, and this book is a good place to start.

—Neil Fowler via [FT Books Cafe](#)