

"Finally, a book to live by." —ANN PATCHETT

A TRUE TALES FROM THE LIVES
AND WORKS OF WRITERS FOR
EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR

Reader's
Book of
Days

Tom Nissley

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the Lives and Works of Writers
for Every Day of the Year*



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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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*To all my days with
Laura, Peter, and Henry*

Do not remit the practice of writing down occurrences as they arise, of whatever kind,
~~and be very punctual in annexing the dates. Chronology, you know, is the eye of~~
history; and every man's life is of importance to himself.

—DR. JOHNSON TO MRS. YHRALE, September 6, 1777

I hate books and articles which begin with a date of birth. Altogether I hate books and articles which adopt a biographical and chronological approach; that strikes me as the most tasteless and at the same time the most unintellectual procedure.

—THOMAS BERNHARD, *Concrete*

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Introduction

I was the guy in the library with books piled all around him, new ones every day. I'm sure they had a name for me behind the desk. Each morning I'd walk into the stacks with a handful of authors in mind—Colette, Heinlein, Babel, Baldwin, Welty—and come back with as many fat volumes as I could balance on my laptop: biographies, diaries, novels, complete correspondences. I lived between PG and PT in the Library of Congress system, with occasional forays upstairs to BX, D, E, F, and HV and down to QH and Z. I pulled out a half-dozen Brontë books at a time, and I blew the dust off the Franz Werfel biography from the auxiliary stacks that no one had checked out for years.

And every day I foraged for stories: moments in the lives of writers, or the invented lives of the characters, that I could connect to a particular date but also to something larger. Moviemakers have never really known how to dramatize the lives of writers—how many balled-up pages thrown into the trash can you show?—but writers have always left a vivid record of the lives they lived, as well as the ones they imagined. They gossip and despair in their diaries, they grouch and boast in letters, they transform their struggles into fiction. They drive themselves into poverty to write a masterpiece, badger their agents, fall in and out of love, crash cars and planes and motorcycles, stoke feuds, read books they hate and adore, dream of fame and regret it, discover their talent and drink it away.

The book I wanted to create would hold all those things and more, not just the usual almanac staples of births and deaths and publication dates. April 15, after all, isn't just the day that *Robinson Crusoe* was published, Henry James was born, and Edward Gorey died. It's also the day that Walt Whitman mourned the death of Lincoln, Charles Dickens called the Mississippi the "beastliest river in the world," George McGovern's political director told Hunter S. Thompson he was worried about his health, and Thomas Higginson received four poems from a woman named Emily Dickinson with a note that began, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?"

In the piles of books around me I looked for historic events (the day Charles Dodgson invented Wonderland for Alice Liddell and her sisters, the night Mary Shelley imagined Frankenstein's monster), but I also had my eye out for moments that were less momentous, the way the days in our lives usually are, and I've filled the corners of this book with reminders (Susan Sontag going to the double feature, Herman Melville playing croquet, David Foster Wallace describing his new tobacco-chewing habit to Jonathan Franzen) of the sheer daily-ness of even the most eventful of lives.

Best of all was when I could find these two things—the historic and the humdrum—in the very same event. I knew how important the day Franz Kafka met Felice Bauer was to his literary life, but I didn't know that he stepped on her foot in the revolving door when he dropped her off at her hotel. And June 14, 1950, I learned, is not only the day Charles M. Schulz signed the syndication contract for his new comic strip. It's also the night he came home and celebrated by asking red-haired Donna M. Johnson to marry him. (She turned him down.)

I spent a whole (and happy) year that way, collecting a year's worth of stories for the 366 days of this book. Caught up as I was in other days—consuming books, at times, as if the dates they contained were their only fruit—I never knew what day it was in my own life. Any book I opened I read with a strange and narrow radar. I skimmed indexes, tracked anecdotes from reference to reference, typed “january,” “february,” “march,” etc., into search boxes, and developed a particular appreciation for epistolary novels and a grudge against writers who didn't date their diary entries (John Cheever, that means you). My first question, when my wife told me about a book she was reading, was always “Does it have any dates?”

Just as many of the best of these tales connect the lives of writers with the books they created, I also wanted to do something in this book that I hadn't seen anywhere else: tell stories from the invented lives of fiction alongside those of the writers themselves. January 8 is the day Jane Austen wrote her sister about dancing with Tom Lefroy on his birthday, but it's also the day Callie, or Cal, Stephanides was born in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*. L. Frank Baum finished the book he called then *The Emerald City* on October 9, the same day the mysterious title organization in Arthur Conan Doyle's “The Red-Headed League” closed its doors. Sometimes writers have connected the two themselves, knitting crucial days from their lives into their fiction. Bloomsday, James Joyce's book-length celebration of the day he met Nora Barnacle, is the most familiar example, but Toni Morrison, Truman Capote, and J. K. Rowling are among the many who have made their own birthdays important dates in their novels.

Dates in books, I realized as I combed for them, are a literary tool like any other—dialogue, geography, physical description—to be deployed or withheld according to the effect desired. A novelist might choose, or choose not, to tell you that something happened on October 21, just as she might tell you, or not, that a character has gray eyes or lives in Knoxville. Diaries, biographies, epistolary novels, histories, and explorers' accounts are all built on the bones of dates, as are mysteries, with their reliance on evidence and the tick-tock of police procedure. Memoirs, though, turn out to be concerned more with memory than evidence; it's a rare memoirist, even one as careful as Mary Karr, who gets specific about the days things happened. Science fiction, to my surprise, often uses dates as a way of grounding its speculations, but fantasy rarely does, although Tolkien did pay attention to the calendars of Middle Earth. Poets mostly prefer months to days. (An exception is when they want to mark an occasion in their title: Wordsworth above Tintern Abbey, Yeats after the Easter Rebellion, Frank O'Hara on his lunch hour.) “April” is poetic; “April 18” is not. It's too specific, too pedestrian. It's the stuff of journalism or letters or train schedules, the muckier genres that novelists have always dirtied themselves with.

Specific dates carry with them the lure of the real that the novel has always dangled, the straggling facticity every good storyteller or con man knows can put a tale over. Some novelists are maestros of the date: Nabokov, Joyce, Philip K. Dick, Zadie Smith. Lovecraft's unnameable horrors are made more dreadful by the precision of the days on which they occur, and much of the pleasure of Conan Doyle's stories of detection comes from the details of their setting: the geography of London, the variety of its carriages, and the exact day—January 4—the five orange pips arrive. In some books a single date becomes a talisman: the August 4th the sad story in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* keeps circling back to, or the memory of an April 27 that becomes a fetish in Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*.

Not every story cares about the calendar, of course. Do you ever know what day—or even month—it is in one of Kafka's novels? Time there is both too urgent and too infinite for the mere particularity of dates. Time has a different character in Virginia Woolf's novels too. *Mrs. Dalloway*, like *Ulysses*, is set on a single day in the middle of June, but she never says which one, leaving us no Dallowayday.

to celebrate the way we do Joyce's June 16, 1904. In fiction, her sense of time had less to do with what day it was than with, as *Mrs. Dalloway's* working title put it, *The Hours*, or, as she named one of her essays, "The Moment."

But outside their fiction, Kafka and Woolf were two of the great artists of daily life—Kafka in his diary and especially his letters to his eternal fiancée Felice Bauer, and Woolf in her letters and especially her incomparable diary. They are among those writers whose daily impromptu autobiographies, like the diaries of Pepys, Thoreau, and Victor Klemperer or the letters of Flannery O'Connor or the James family, have become literature too. Then there are those who have their everyday art of their lives recorded by others: Dr. Johnson by his Boswell, of course, but also Herman Melville, who was no diarist but whose days appear again and again in these pages thanks to the blessed obsessiveness of biographers like Jay Leyda and Hershel Parker, and literary characters like Zora Neale Hurston and Jack Kerouac, whose self-creation made their days lastingly vivid.

Now you know how I read to make this book. How should you read it? If you're like me, you'll look up your birthday first. Some readers will simply open it at random, or seek out favorite names in the index, or read a single page on its appointed day before moving on to the next one, or even sit down and read it straight through. Most of all, I hope you will get detoured from this book to start opening some of the other books it's made of. That's what I'm going to do now that I've finished writing it.

Seattle, Washington
March 28, 2013

January You'd think more books would start in January. Does it not feel original enough to open a story with the new year? Or do we find more natural beginnings in the spring, or when we return to work or school after the summer? What, after all, is born in the dead month of January besides a new calendar?

There are exceptions. There's Archie Jones, in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, roused to life on New Year's Day from his attempt to gas himself in his car in the delivery zone of a halal butcher's shop, and Bridget Jones, sourly recording in her diary the fourteen alcohol units, twenty-two cigarettes, and 5,424 calories she consumed on New Year's Eve the day (and night) before. And there are January beginnings that seem like endings: the death just hours after midnight on January 1, 2021, of the last human born before the species became infertile in P. D. James's *The Children of Men*, and the New Year's deadline haunting Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, when the crowded but temporary Jewish settlement in Sitka, Alaska, is set to revert to local control.

Calendars do begin in January, although that wasn't always the case. In 1579 March was still officially at least, the first month of the year in England, but Edmund Spenser justified beginning his pastoral poem *The Shepherdes Calender* in January because it was the first month after the rebirth of the "decayed world" through the birth of Christ. In colonial America the calendar was a printer's bread and butter: an almanac was often the only book a household would buy during the year, which drew Benjamin Franklin, like many of his fellow printers, to create his own. The first edition of *Poole's Richard's Almanack*, which soon became the colonies' favorite, included a tongue-in-cheek prediction that one of his main rivals, the *American Almanac's* compiler Titan Leeds, would die, "by my Calculation made at his Request," at 3:29 P.M. on October 17 of the coming year. (Leeds was not amused, but survived the year.)

In his *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold was more content to observe than predict, and for his the barely detectable stirrings of January in Wisconsin—the venturing forth of a skunk from hibernation, the skittering of a meadow mouse from the melting shelter of the thawing snow—made observation "almost as simple and peaceful as snow, and almost continuous as cold. There is time not only to see who has done what, but to speculate why."



A Calendar of Wisdom by Leo Tolstoy (1909) 🌀 What did Tolstoy, in his last years, believe was the great work of his life? *War and Peace*? *Anna Karenina*? No, this anthology he spent fifteen years gathering, which mixed his own aphorisms with those of the “best and wisest thinkers of the world” organized by a theme for each day of the year.

At the Mountains of Madness by H. P. Lovecraft (1936) 🌀 As the southern summer opens up the South Pole for exploration, a scientific expedition led by professors Dyer and Lake discovers behind a range of unknown Antarctic mountains a vast, dead, and ancient city, one of the most evil and benighted of Lovecraft’s inhuman horrors.

“New Year Letter” by W. H. Auden (1940) 🌀 With hatreds convulsing the world “like a baffling crime,” Auden composed one of his great long poems as a letter to “dear friend Elizabeth,” whose hospitality in his adopted home of New York helped him toward this vision of order in art and life during a time of tyranny.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick (1968) 🌀 Many more people know *Blade Runner* than its source novel, set on a single January day in a post-nuclear 1992, which features rather than Ridley Scott’s rainy, neon glamour, Dick’s equally thrilling and disturbing brand of stripped-down noir.

Airport by Arthur Hailey (1968) 🌀 Arthur Hailey wrote blockbusters like no one else, earnest and fact-filled dramas set in a series of massive industrial monoliths: banks, hotels, power plants, and, in this case, Lincoln International Airport in Illinois during the worst winter storm of the decade, with one jetliner stuck at the end of a runway and another coming in fast with a bomb on board.

“In California: Morning, Evening, Late January” by Denise Levertov (1989) 🌀 Levertov’s pastoral is unseasonal in the temperate lushness of its California winter, and unsettling in its vision of the industrial forces invading and managing its beauty.

The Children of Men by P. D. James (1992) 🌀 Another novel overshadowed by its movie adaptation, *The Children of Men*, in a startling departure from James’s Adam Dalgliesh mysteries, uses the premise of a world in which human fertility has disappeared to examine the nature and lure of power.

White Teeth by Zadie Smith (2000) 🌀 Smith’s debut, which begins with Archie Jones’s failed January suicide, has too much life to begin with a death: it overflows with not only the variety of multiethnic London but the exuberance of Smith taking her brilliant talent for its first walk out on the stage.

The Omnivore’s Dilemma by Michael Pollan (2006) 🌀 One of the omnivore’s dilemmas is how to navigate a world whose technology and global trade have accustomed even New Englanders to unseasonal luxuries like sweet corn and asparagus in the middle of January.

January 1

BORN: 1879 E. M. Forster (*Where Angels Fear to Tread, A Room with a View*), London

1919 J. D. Salinger (*The Catcher in the Rye, Franny and Zooey*), New York City

DIED: 2002 Julia Phillips (*You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*), 57, West Hollywood, Calif.

2007 Tillie Olsen (*Tell Me a Riddle, Silences*), 94, Oakland, Calif.

1803 Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the rise of the restaurant in post-revolutionary France coincided with the rise of the restaurant guide. On New Year's Day a man-about-town named Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de La Reynière published his first *Almanach des Gourmands*, a pocket-sized, almost annual guide to eating aimed, with a slyly decadent style, at the "purely animal pleasures" unleashed by the upheaval of the Revolution (through which Grimod himself had successfully maneuvered, despite his noble birth). The judgments of the *Almanach* were drawn in part from the Jury Dégustateur, a group of gourmands who met weekly at Grimod's mansion for five-hour tasting sessions: the Michelin or Yelp of their day.

1926 Isaac Babel confessed to his diary that he hadn't "done a thing as far as serious literature goes for about ten months, but have simply been hanging around in Moscow in search of big pay-offs."

1947 In a *Guide to Your Child's Development* she has purchased for the purpose, Charlotte Haze notes on the twelfth birthday of her daughter, Dolores, that the girl is fifty-seven inches tall and possesses an IQ of 121. She also completes an inventory of the child's qualities: "aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate." For Charlotte's new husband, Humbert Humbert, this list of epithets is "maddening" in its viciousness toward the girl he calls Lolita and claims to love. But he has his own reasons to revolt at the child's birthdays: after just a few more of them she'll no longer be a "nymphet," and soon after that she'll be —"horror of horrors"—"a 'college girl.' "

1970 Detached from the rhythms of any planet's orbit or rotation, the star-faring trading culture of the Qeng Ho in Vernor Vinge's 1999 Hugo-winning novel, *A Deepness in the Sky*, measures time in seconds rather than days or years: kiloseconds, megaseconds, gigaseconds. When did their clock begin ticking? Not, as many assume, at the moment thousands of earth-years before, when the first human set foot on the moon, but about fifteen megaseconds later, at "the 0-second of one of Humankind's first computer operating systems": the Unix system, which indeed started its counter at midnight on New Year's Day in 1970. It's a telling shift in the history of science fiction, which has mirrored modern technology by turning its imagination from the exploration of space to the development of machine intelligence.

BORN: 1951 André Aciman (*Call Me by Your Name*, *Out of Egypt*), Alexandria, Egypt

1956 Lynda Barry (*Ernie Pook's Comeek*, *What It Is*), Richland Center, Wis.

DIED: 2000 Patrick O'Brian (*Master and Commander* and the rest of the Aubrey-Maturin series), 82, Dublin

2008 George MacDonald Fraser (*Flashman* and the rest of the Flashman series), 82, Isle of Man

1960 Donald Malcolm, in *The New Yorker*, on Robert Ruark's *Poor No More*: "With breathtaking ingenuity, he has managed to include between a single set of covers a representative example of nearly every kind of bad novel . . . a sort of Golden Treasury of Commercial Narrative."

1995 "The escape from Glades Correctional Institution seemed the stuff of movies," wrote one local Florida paper, and in time it would be, but only after Elmore Leonard used it to inspire the first big scene in *Out of Sight*, published just a year after the jailbreak. To the real-life story of Cuban inmate tunneling twenty-five yards under the prison chapel, Leonard added the characters of Jack Foley, a recidivist bank robber with even more than the usual Leonard cool who tags along with the Cubans on the way out, and Karen Sisco, a U.S. Marshal who soon discovers her weak spot for charming bank robbers. Two years later George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez, as Jack and Karen, climbed into the trunk of a car and heated up the finest of all Leonard film adaptations, which date back to 1957's *3:10 from Yuma*.

1998 On this day in London, one of the patron saints of entertainingly excessive knowledge, Frank Muir, passed away at the age of seventy-seven. Paired for decades with Dennis Norden, Muir was ubiquitous in postwar Britain as a bow-tied wit both behind the scenes as a writer for BBC Radio and on TV and a panelist on the quiz shows *Call My Bluff*, *My Word!*, and *My Music*, the latter two of which introduced him to American audiences via public radio. In their trademark *My Word!* segment, Muir and Norden spun out ingeniously convoluted shaggy-dog tales that ended on a punch-line pun, which were collected in a half-dozen books that, like his anthologies, the *Oxford Book of Humorous Prose* and *The Frank Muir Book: An Irreverent Companion to Social History*—and like his particular brand of learned drollery—are by now well out of print and fashion.



January 3

BORN: 1892 J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Hobbit, The Fellowship of the Ring*), Bloemfontein, Orange Free State

1973 Rory Stewart (*The Places in Between, The Prince of the Marshes*), Hong Kong

DIED: 1923 Jaroslav Hašek (*The Good Soldier Švejk*), 39, Lipnice nad Sázavou, Czechoslovakia

2005 Will Eisner (*The Spirit, A Contract with God*), 87, Lauderdale Lakes, Fla.

1889 In 1888, as he fought off the encroachment of his madness, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote some of his most lasting works: *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, and *Ecce Homo*. By December, though his self-grandeur was overflowing—he called himself a clown and a god, plotted to destroy the German Reich by provoking a war, and wrote that “quite literally, I hold the future of humanity in my hand.” And on this day, just after the turn of the year, he collapsed in Turin, putting his arms—as the stories say, and they seem to be true—around a mistreated workhorse and falling unconscious to the street. It was the letters he wrote to friends the next day, speaking delusions far beyond his earlier grandeur, that brought them to Turin to place him in the psychiatric care under which he spent his last silent decade.

1951 Precocious in all things, Susan Sontag was just seventeen when, after a short engagement and an even shorter courtship (they became engaged ten days after meeting), she married her twenty-eight-year-old sociology instructor at the University of Chicago, Philip Rieff. “I marry Philip with full consciousness + fear of my will toward self-destructiveness,” she recorded in her diary, in a note far more terse than her passionate entries in the same journal on the female lovers she called “H” and “I.” Soon after, she would later recall, she read *Middlemarch* for the first time and “realized not only that I was Dorothea but that, a few months earlier, I had married Mr. Casaubon.” They divorced in 1959.

1992 “Dial and see; just try me.” Rick Deckard wants his wife, Iran, to dial their Penfield mood organ to a productive setting this morning—perhaps 481, “awareness of the manifold possibilities open to me in the future,” or at least 594, “the desire to watch TV, no matter what’s on it”—but she prefers the setting she has planned for the day, “self-accusatory depression.” The mood organ is one of the features of the near-future world Philip K. Dick invented for *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* that Ridley Scott didn’t include when he adapted it into *Blade Runner* (the electric sheep of the title which Deckard keeps as a pet because he can’t afford a high-status real animal, didn’t make it either, but both book and movie are concerned with the question that drove all of Dick’s visionary fiction: in an age of machines, what is real, and what is human?)

January 4

BORN: 1943 Doris Kearns Goodwin (*Team of Rivals, No Ordinary Time*), Brooklyn

1962 Harlan Coben (*Tell No One, Gone for Good*), Newark, N.J.

DIED: 1986 Christopher Isherwood (*The Berlin Stories*), 81, Santa Monica, Calif.

2005 Guy Davenport (*The Jules Verne Steam Balloon*), 77, Lexington, Ky.

1912 “Two desperate and notorious criminals,” reported the *San Francisco Call*, took “French leave from the Ingleside jail on this day, escaping their steel cells for parts unknown: Harry Davenport, well-known pickpocket, and “Thomas Callaghan, alias Jack Black, ‘dope fiend,’ burglar, murderer, thug, about to go to Folsom to serve a term of 25 years.” Fourteen years later, that same Jack Black was the librarian of that same *San Francisco Call*, having in the meantime reformed himself, more or less, and written *You Can’t Win*, a bestselling memoir of his underworld life that was kept alive for decades by the appreciation of William S. Burroughs, who borrowed its style—and a hoodlum character named Jack—for his first novel, *Junky*.

1946 After a four-day bender with his second wife, Margery Bonner, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, the survivor of the alcohol-soaked dissolution of his first marriage, Malcolm Lowry noticed—and hoped his wife wouldn’t—a tree in the Borda Garden carved with the message “Jan and Malcolm December 1936—Remember me.”

1958 Lewis Mumford, whose *The Culture of Cities* had made him a leading voice on urban America for two decades, found an ally and a protégée in Jane Jacobs, the Greenwich Village neighborhood activist and writer. “There are half a dozen publishers who’d snap up a ms. of yours on the city,” he wrote her on this day. “There’s no one else who’s had so many fresh and sensible things to say about the city.” But when it came out three years later, Jacobs’s book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, dismissed *The Culture of Cities* as a city-hating “morbid and biased catalog of ills.” Mumford returned fire in *The New Yorker*, praising her fresh and shrewd activism but dismissing her “schoolgirl howlers.” Nevertheless, in the same month his review came out, Jacobs and Mumford joined forces to help block Robert Moses’s proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway.

1991 It’s “like V-E Day and V-J Day all rolled into one” when Frannie Goldsmith has her baby, Peter, in the tiny Free Zone community in Boulder, Colorado. With one immune parent, there’s a chance he’ll be the first child born in the Free Zone to survive the superflu that wiped out 99.4 percent of humanity since it escaped from a U.S. Army lab, although after a couple of days Peter too started showing the familiar signs of illness. There are dozens more pregnant women in the Free Zone, so now everything is riding on his survival; nevertheless, the hopes of the small community of survivors—and of all those who have read the thousand or so pages of Stephen King’s *The Stand* to that point—rest on his tiny shoulders.

BORN: 1932 Umberto Eco (*The Name of the Rose, Foucault's Pendulum*), Alessandria, Italy

1938 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (*The River Between, Wizard of the Crow*), Kamiriithu, Kenya

DIED: 1987 Margaret Laurence (*The Stone Angel, The Diviners*), 60, Lakefield, Ont.

1996 Lincoln Kirstein (*What Ballet Is All About*), 88, New York City

1889 Mark Twain's enthusiasm for business ventures was as unquenchable as his judgment was poor. And no investment was more disastrous than the Paige Compositor, a typesetting machine Twain was certain would make such previous innovations as the telephone and the locomotive seem "mere toy simplicities." Twain took over full ownership of its development in 1886 and on this day thought he had witnessed history: "Saturday, January 5, 1889, 12:20 PM. EUREKA! I have seen a line of movable type, *spaced and justified by machinery!*" The temperamental machine, though, lost the race to market to the more reliable Linotype, and Twain was driven into bankruptcy after \$300,000 in losses, believing all the way that James W. Paige, its inventor, was a "Shakespeare of mechanical invention."

1895 Too nervous to attend the opening night of his own play, *Guy Domville*, Henry James, who had spent five years attempting to conquer the London stage, distracted himself by going instead to Oscar Wilde's latest success, *An Ideal Husband*. Returning in time to witness his play's final lines, he missed one hostile exchange—when his hero lamented, "I'm the *last*, my lord, of the Domvilles!" a shout from the audience was said to have replied, "It's a bloody good thing y'are"—but wasn't spared the wrath of the gallery when, in response to the cheers of his friends in the crowd, he took a curtain call and was met with howls and catcalls from the cheap seats. The fiasco—"the most horrible hour of my life"—forever haunted James, but it also cured him for good of the theater bug and returned him to the grand fictional ambitions of his late period.

1920 The successful London stage premiere of A. A. Milne's *Mr. Pim Passes By*, starring Leslie Howard (the future Ashley Wilkes), made the author's fortune before he ever wrote about a silly old bear.

1943 Eleven novels into a career always promising to tip over from critical to popular acclaim, David Powell had an idea for her twelfth. "I could write a novel about the Destroyers," she wrote in her diary, "that cruel, unhappy, ever-dissatisfied group who feed on frustrations (Dorothy Parker, Wolcott Gibbs, Arthur Kober, etc.) . . . If people are in love, they must mar it with laughter; if people are laughing, they must stop it with 'Your slip is showing.' " Five years later, the book became *The Locusts Have No King*, both a satire of ambitious literary New Yorkers that many fans consider her finest and, in her words, a "great true romance" of love held tightly in spite of the Destroyers (and the atom bomb).

January 6

BORN: 1883 Kahlil Gibran (*The Prophet, Broken Wings*), Bsharri, Ottoman Syria

1931 E. L. Doctorow (*Ragtime, The Book of Daniel, The March*), Bronx, N.Y.

DIED: 1944 Ida Tarbell (*The History of the Standard Oil Company*), 86, Bridgeport, Conn.

2000 Don Martin (*Don Martin Steps Out, The Mad Adventures of Captain Klutz*), 68, Miami, Fla.

1892 As homebound women living in the heart of New England's intellectual ferment who turned their brilliance inward in private writings only published and celebrated after their deaths, Emily Dickinson and Alice James have often been compared. James lived just long enough to make the comparison herself, quoting Dickinson's lines with approval in her diary just two months before her death: "How dreary to be somebody / How public, like a frog / To tell your name the livelong day / To an admiring bog!" "Dr. Tucky asked me the other day whether I had ever written for the press" like her brothers Henry and William, she added. "I vehemently disclaimed the imputation. How sad it is that the purely innocuous should always be supposed to have the trail of the family serpent upon them."

1952 Amos Oz ends *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, his memoir of his youth in the early days of Israel with the event the book has been circling around: his mother's suicide, when she was thirty-eight and Oz was twelve. Worn down by sadness and insomnia while visiting her sister, she spent the day walking the cold and rainy streets of Tel Aviv following her doctor's prescription to "look for handsome young men" and then took all her sleeping pills at some point during the night and never woke up. At their apartment in Jerusalem, meanwhile, her husband and son, who was still a few years away from running off to a kibbutz and changing his name from Klausner to Oz, spent the same evening reading, writing, and playing checkers before going off to bed.

1975 She made her first appearances in the Talk of the Town section of *The New Yorker* as "Sasha Antigua Jamaica Kincaid," whose observations were quoted extensively by her friend George W. Trow; on this day, in a report on lunchtime disco dancers, she confessed her favorite song was "Kung Fu Fighting." But in those days Talk of the Town pieces didn't carry bylines, so it was only when her name *didn't* appear in the magazine that Kincaid really started writing for it. With her first book still almost a decade away, she gathered her forces under the magazine's cloak of anonymity, apprenticing on subjects such as taking the train from Cleveland, a promotional event for cheese, and Boz Scaggs.

1975 John Updike, in *The New Yorker*, on Iris Murdoch's *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*: "Let it be asked now: What other living novelist in the language is the peer of Iris Murdoch at inventing characters and moving them fascinatingly, at least as long as the book is in our hands?"

January 7

BORN: 1891 Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), Notasulga, Ala.

1957 Nicholson Baker (*The Mezzanine, U and I, Vox*), New York City

DIED: 1967 David Goodis (*Down There, Dark Passage*), 49, Philadelphia

1972 John Berryman (*The Dream Songs*), 57, Minneapolis

1877 Completed on this day when its author was not yet fifteen, *Fast and Loose: A Novelette* certainly promises illicit fun. As one reviewer noted, “The very title suggests something desperate. Who is fast? What is loose? . . . We prophesy 128 pages of racy trash & are glad to think we shall be wasting our time agreeably.” The reviewer, though, was none other than the author, Edith Jones, who not only wrote the book (for the enjoyment of a friend) but attached three wittily scathing reviews—“the whole thing a fiasco,” said another—mocking her own efforts. Eight years later, Miss Jones married and became Edith Wharton, but despite this precocious beginning it wasn’t until she was thirty-eight that she published her first novel, *The Touchstone*.

1938 Stabbed by an unknown assailant on a Paris street just after midnight, Samuel Beckett woke in the hospital to see his concerned employer, James Joyce, who soon brought him a reading lamp and paid for a private room for his recovery.

1950 “I shall keep a diary.” Those words have been known to start a novel—and of course any number of diaries—but in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, they don’t appear until a third of the way through the story. Finding herself turning a household event into a short story, Anna Wulf asks, “Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? . . . Obviously, my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself.” And so she begins recording her life more directly, in her Blue Notebook. Or so she thinks. In Lessing’s nested story of self-discovery, the notebook proves no more satisfactory than the others: “The Blue Notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them.”

2000 What was a “McG”? To the cognoscenti, they were portraits of the recently deceased—usually those with only a fleeting or obscure relation to the mainstream of history—crafted on deadline for the *New York Times* obituary page by Robert McG. Thomas Jr. with an unusual and sympathetic enthusiasm for the eccentricities of personality and fate. In the short period of his flourishing in the late 1990s, as celebrated in the collection *52 McGs*, Thomas profiled, among many others, “Lewis Gorin Jr, Instigator of a 1930’s Craze,” “Charles McCartney, Known for Travels with Goats,” and “Toots Barger, the Queen of Duckpins’ Wobbly World,” but on this day his own name came up on the *Times* obit assignment desk. The headline the next day read, “Robert McG. Thomas Jr., 60, Chronicle of Unsung Lives”: “The cause was abdominal cancer, said his wife, Joan.”

BORN: 1909 Evelyn Wood (speed-reading impresario), Logan, Utah

1942 Stephen Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*), Oxford, England

DIED: 1642 Galileo Galilei (*Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*), 77, Arcetri, Italy

1896 Paul Verlaine (*Romances sans paroles*), 51, Paris

1796 The earliest surviving letter by Jane Austen began with birthday greetings to her sister Cassandra, but its strongest sentiments were reserved for one whose birthday was the day before, young Irishman named Tom Lefroy. At “an exceeding good ball” that night, Jane reported, “I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything more profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together.” But in Austen’s England the promising young Lefroy, who in old age confessed a “boyish love” for Austen, couldn’t court a woman without property. Marrying an heiress instead, he returned to Ireland, where, a half century later, long after Austen’s death, he became Lord Chief Justice.



1938 At the age of thirty-eight, with his father nearing death, Jorge Luis Borges began his first full-time job, as an assistant at a remote branch of the Buenos Aires Municipal Library. Told by his colleagues to slow his cataloguing of the library’s paltry holdings or else they’d all be out of a job, he limited his work to an hour a day and spent the remainder reading and writing while his co-workers talked about sports and women. Though he was despondent at the “menial and dismal existence” he made for himself from his aristocratic legacy, during these years he wrote his most distinctive work—the stories of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, including “The Library of Babel,” the tale of an archive whose infinite contents drive its librarians to despair.

1960 As she tells us on the first page of Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, Callie—or Cal—was born for the first time on this day, as a girl in Detroit. Even before that day, though, two genes, “a pair of miscreants—or revolutionaries, depending on your view,” had given her a genetic and genital legacy that would result, fourteen and a half years later, in a discovery that she calls her second birth, as a boy, in a hospital in northern Michigan—Hemingway country, fittingly. But on this day, however complicated her eventual path from Callie to Cal, her father proudly took part in the simple, binary ritual of handing out cigars ribboned in pink.

BORN: 1901 Chic Young (*Blondie, Dumb Dora*), Chicago

1908 Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex, The Mandarins*), Paris

DIED: 1324 Marco Polo (*The Travels of Marco Polo*), c. 69, Venice

1923 Katherine Mansfield (*The Garden Party, The Journals*), 34, Fontainebleau, France

1873 Twenty years after he wrote “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and sixteen since he’d last published a novel, Herman Melville’s own position as a self-effacing clerk was given a poignant portrait in a letter from his brother-in-law to George Boutwell, the secretary of the treasury. Was there anything Boutwell could do to assure Melville “the undisturbed enjoyment of his modest, hard-earned salary of \$4 a day as a customs inspector? Making no mention of Melville’s forgotten fame as an author, the letter emphasized his principled ability to, like Bartleby, say no: “Surrounded by low venality, he put it all quietly aside,—quietly declining offers of money for special services,—quietly returning money which has been thrust into his pockets behind his back.”

1922 At 74 rue Cardinal Lemoine in the Latin Quarter, Ernest and Hadley Hemingway rented the first Paris apartment.

1927 Writing to his mother that everyone at Oxford was either “rich and vapid or poor and vapid,” Henry Yorke, with his first novel already published the previous fall under the name Henry Green, left without his degree to work instead on the shop floor of the Birmingham manufacturer of bathroom plumbing and brewery equipment owned by his father. After two years he rose to management, a career that ran alongside, and even outlasted, his writing life as Henry Green, whose best-known novels—all of them subtle and thrillingly innovative—inhabit both sides of Yorke’s life: *Living*, the workers on the factory floor, *Party Going*, the upper class into which he was born, and *Loving*, an upstairs-downstairs tale of both.

1944 Francis T. P. Plimpton, one of the most prominent lawyers in New York City, was a man of great discipline and industry, and expected the same from his children. His eldest, George, was less able to harness his own considerable energies, and when he ran into trouble at Exeter his father sent him on New Year’s Day a typed list of eight “Resolutions,” twenty-six “Supplementary Resolutions” (among them “I will not day dream” and “I will stand up straight, and walk as if I were carrying a pail of water on my head”), and four justifications for immediate withdrawal from the school, including failure to write his parents “every day.” Young George did make an effort—in his letter on this day he reported “Followed schedule perfectly”—but just weeks before his graduation he was, to his shame, expelled for surprising his housemaster with a Revolutionary War–era musket and yelling, “Bang bang! You’re dead.”

January 10

BORN: 1928 Philip Levine (*What Work Is, Ashes*), Detroit

1953 Dennis Cooper (*Closer, Frisk, Try, Guide, Period*), Pasadena, Calif.

DIED: 1951 Sinclair Lewis (*Main Street, Babbitt, Elmer Gantry*), 65, Rome

1961 Dashiell Hammett (*Red Harvest, The Maltese Falcon*), 66, New York City

1776 Published: *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* by “an Englishman” (Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia). (Its author, Thomas Paine, donated his considerable profits, from 500,000 copies sold in the first year, to the Continental Army.)

1846 Be careful what you ask for. That appears to be the lesson of the “*Corsair* affair,” one of the strangest in the odd and passionate philosophical career of Søren Kierkegaard. Stung by attacks on his writing in the *Corsair*, a satirical scandal sheet read by everyone from servants to royalty in Copenhagen, Kierkegaard made a perverse public request for more abuse. He got it, and was especially wounded by caricatures in the paper that depicted him as a hunchbacked eccentric who had the cuffs of his trousers cut at different lengths as a sign of his genius. Once a proud walker of the city who delighted in speaking to anyone he met, Kierkegaard found himself a laughingstock, a wound he nursed for the rest of his life. Even his tailor suggested he take his business elsewhere.

18– The metamorphosis of respectable Dr. Jekyll into murderous Mr. Hyde is a basic scene in our mythology of horror, but in the original tale, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, it’s the reverse transformation that is so terrifying it kills the man who witnesses it. Given the choice, just after midnight on this day, *not* to see the effects of the chemical mixture he had delivered, on Jekyll’s request, to Mr. Hyde, Dr. Lanyon replies, “I have gone too far in the way of inexplicable services to pause before I see the end.” The end he sees is the terrible Hyde turned before his eyes, “like a man restored from death,” into his friend Henry Jekyll. “I must die,” Lanyon wrote afterward, “and yet I shall die incredulous.”

1953 Writing in her journal at midnight in her parents’ house in London, Iris Murdoch recounted one of her first nights with Elias Canetti: “We laughed very much, C. keeping up a stream of pompous-sounding discussion in an audible voice for my parents’ benefit in intervals of kissing me violently. For three years they kept up a secret affair and for forty years a friendship, until his death. Dominating both in his arrogance and his intense receptiveness, Canetti seemed to her that night like a “beast” and an “angel,” and his presence can be seen in the terrible attraction of characters in many of her novels, from *The Flight from the Enchanter*, published the year after their breakup, to *The Sea, the Sea*, which won the Booker Prize in 1978, three years before Canetti received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

BORN: 1842 William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*), New York City

1952 Diana Gabaldon (*Outlander, Dragonfly in Amber*), Arizona

DIED: 1928 Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Jude the Obscure*), 87, Dorchester, England

1980 Barbara Pym (*Excellent Women, Quartet in Autumn*), 66, Finstock, England

1842 On New Year's Day, John Thoreau Jr. cut a tiny piece of skin off the tip of his ring finger while stropping his razor. He hardly gave it a thought until seven days later, when he removed the bandage and found the wound had "mortified." The next day, the terrible spasms of lockjaw took hold, and on this day, having calmly said to his friends, "The cup that my father gives me, shall I not drink it?" he died in the arms of his younger brother, Henry, with whom he had founded a grammar school and taken the trip Henry later memorialized in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. For a time afterward, Henry grieved quietly, but then, on the 22nd, though he had no injury to cause it, he began to suffer from the precise symptoms of lockjaw himself. He convulsed for two days before recovering and for the rest of his life suffered awful dreams on the anniversary of his brother's death.

1844 Having just struck up a correspondence with the botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker, Charles Darwin broached a delicate subject with an almost shameful hesitancy: "I am almost convinced (quite contrary to opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable." He added, "I think I have found out (here's presumption!) the simple way by which species become exquisitely adapted to various ends.— You will now groan, & think to yourself 'on what a man have I been wasting my time in writing to.'— I shd, five years ago, have thought so." His hesitancy would remain: it was another fourteen years before he announced his theory in public, and a year after that until the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

1914 The *Nouvelle revue française* was one of the publishers that rejected the first volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*—they hardly read it, put off by "its enormous size and because Proust had a reputation as a snob"—but Proust's revenge was quick and sweet. After the book was published, André Gide, novelist and editor of *NRF*, wrote with his abject apologies: "For several days I have not put down your book; I am supersaturating myself in it, rapturously, wallowing in it. Alas! why must it be so painful for me to like it so much?" Proust replied that his joy at Gide's change of heart far outweighed the pain of the earlier rejection: "I finally obtained that pleasure, not as I hoped, not when I hoped, but later, and differently, and far more splendidly, in the form of this letter from you. In the form, too, I 'recaptured' Lost Time."

January 12

BORN: 1949 Haruki Murakami (*Norwegian Wood*, 1Q84), Kyoto, Japan

1969 David Mitchell (*Cloud Atlas*, *number9dream*), Southport, England

DIED: 1965 Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blancs*), 34, New York City

1976 Agatha Christie (*Murder on the Orient Express*), 85, Wallingford, England

1926 A hurricane brought in the new year, sweeping nearly everything aside on the Samoan island of Ta'u. As the storm rose, Margaret Mead, coming of age herself at twenty-four while she did the fieldwork for what would be her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, was “absorbed in the enormous and satisfying extravagance” of making hard sauce for a holiday fruit cake, but the winds started tearing the village to shreds. Taking refuge with two babies in the bottom of an emptied water tank, Mead rode out the storm and emerged in the morning to a village “weaving furiously” to reconstruct itself. Finally, on this day, in response to frantic telegrams from her teacher and friend Ruth Benedict, who had heard of the hurricane in New York, she wired back a single word, “Well.”

1957 Robert Phelps, in the *National Review*, on *The Old Farmer's Almanac*: “The wish for a chronology of significant events is as persistent as it is involuntary . . . Simply to know, to be squinting, amateur witness to so much precision and progression, is delightful.”

1974 A groundbreaking scrapbook of three hundred years of African American history, *The Black Book*, published on this day, is now itself a piece of history, a record of a moment when someone like Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House and the author of a single novel, had gained the authority to see a project like it into print. Working with collectors who had been gathering the materials for decades, Morrison and Middleton Harris curated a loving hodgepodge of newspaper clippings, minstrel-show placards, slave-auction records, patent diagrams, biographical sketches, voodoo spells, and portraits of the famous and the anonymous. “I was scared,” Morrison said at the time, “that the world would fall away before somebody put together a thing that got close to the way we really were.”

1997 You don't find out the birthday of one of the most memorable of modern characters until late in the story, when Dave Bowman, stranded on a spacecraft half a billion miles from Earth, realizes he needs to destroy the only other intelligence left on the ship. As he removes its memory blocks, the mind of his companion is reduced to its most basic elements: “I am a HAL Nine Thousand computer. Production Number 3. I became operational at the Hal Plant in Urbana, Illinois, on January 12, 1997. If you can't help but hear the disturbingly soothing voice of Douglas Rain speaking those words . . . you read Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, don't worry you're doing literature a disservice. *2001* was a rare novel written *alongside* the screenplay, as two versions of the same imagined world.

BORN: 1940 Edmund White (*A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*), Cincinnati

1957 Lorrie Moore (*Self-Help*, *The Gate at the Stairs*), Glens Falls, N.Y.

DIED: 1599 Edmund Spenser (*The Faerie Queen*, *Epithalamion*), c. 46, London

1941 James Joyce (*Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*), 58, Zurich

1898 Émile Zola had written on the Dreyfus Affair before, in essays so scathing that *Le Figaro* refused to print any more, but his open letter to French president Félix Faure in the newspaper *L'Aurore*—known immediately by its headline, “*J'accuse*” (given it by the paper's publisher, future prime minister Georges Clemenceau), galvanized the entire country. Putting his life and his position as France's leading novelist on the line amid anti-Semitic riots, Zola defended Major Dreyfus, the Jewish officer who had spent four years on Devil's Island after a trumped-up conviction for treason, and courted arrest for libel by naming those he thought responsible. He was indeed twice convicted, but the force of his essay and the evidence brought out in his libel trials transformed public opinion and led to Dreyfus's exoneration in 1906.

1909 On his first anniversary as a lawyer at the American Bonding Company, Wallace Stevens wrote his future wife, “I certainly do not exist from nine to six, when I am at the office . . . At night I struggle with my individual state once more—soon in a night-cap.”

1934 M. F. K. Fisher, reading Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, wished “to have, someday, a style one *n*th as direct.”

1970 It was just a few months after the Stonewall riot, at which he had been a skeptical but interested observer, that Edmund White, on his thirtieth birthday, decided to shake off the shame of not yet having a book to his name by moving to Rome. He didn't make the most of it—his friend and mentor Richard Howard wagged his finger from afar, “Here you are in the central city of Western culture and you've managed to turn it into some kinky version of Scranton”—and when he returned after six months to New York he found that “the 1970s had finally begun,” the gay, post-Stonewall '70s, that is. “I couldn't believe how unleashed New York had become.”

1987 There may be no better window into the passive-aggressive hothouse of *The New Yorker* during the later William Shawn years than the account in Renata Adler's *Gone* of a mass staff meeting on that day word got out that Shawn, the magazine's editor for thirty-five years, was being replaced. A chorus of voices, variously querulous and strident, were raised about whether or not to write a letter of protest to the magazine's owner, Adler, an active courtier in the palace intrigue herself, filtered the inconclusive proceedings through her imperious style, cutting toward her enemies, alternately adoring and exasperated with Shawn himself, and mournful for a magazine that to her mind, no matter its later incarnations, was now forever gone.

January 14

BORN: 1886 Hugh Lofting (*The Story of Doctor Dolittle*), Maidenhead, England

1947 Taylor Branch (*Parting the Waters*), Atlanta

DIED: 1898 Lewis Carroll (*Through the Looking Glass*), 65, Guildford, England

1977 Anaïs Nin (*Delta of Venus, Henry and June*), 73, Los Angeles

1928 Dr. Seuss's first contribution to the common language was not "A person's a person, no matter how small" but "Quick, Henry, the Flit!"—the tagline for his series of ads for Standard Oil insecticide, which became a '30s catchphrase on radio and in song. (Seuss was hired after the wife of an ad exec saw his cartoon in this day's issue of *Judge*, a satirical weekly, with the punch line "Darn all, another Dragon. And just after I'd sprayed the whole castle with Flit!") As Seuss often said, his work for the petroleum giant directed the course of his later career: "I would like to say I went into children's book writing because of my great understanding of children. I went in because it wasn't excluded by my Standard Oil contract."

1939 "When I read through this book I'm *appalled* at myself!" Tennessee Williams wrote in his journal just after moving to New Orleans. "It is valuable as a record of one man's incredible idiocy! . . . Am I all animal, all willful, blind, stupid *beast*?"

1973 The date and the year are unnamed, but let's assume that it's on this January Sunday that the New York Giants, starring Billy Clyde Puckett, stud hoss of a running back, and Shake Tiller, semi-intellectual split end and fellow ex-TCU All-American, take on the dog-ass New York Jets in the Super Bowl in front of 92,000, among them Barbara Jane Bookman, a childhood friend to both Giant and Jet, and "so damned pretty it makes your eyes blur." It's the most amiable of love triangles in the most foul-mouthed of sports classics, Dan Jenkins's *Semi-Tough*, as narrated by Billy Clyde himself with a glass of Scotch and a little tape recorder in his and Shake's "palatial suite here at the Beverly Sta Hotel in Beverly Hills, California."

2010 Tony Judt's essay "Night," in the *New York Review of Books* on this day, began with a statement of fact shocking to readers who had known him only as a prolific historian and essayist: "I suffer from a motor neuron disorder, in my case a variant of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS): Lou Gehrig disease." A further shock came on its heels: his disease had progressed enough that he was, more or less, a quadriplegic, living in the cage of his own body, nearly immobile but still able to feel sensation and, with full clarity, think. And so, having recently completed a massive and masterful work of synthetic history, *Postwar*, Judt turned to tiny, hard-won essays of memory, observation, and reflection, composed during his lonely, sleepless nights, dictated during the days, and collected after his death that summer in *The Memory Chalet*.

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