

OPPORTUNITY *Ohio*

2021 Best and Worst Books List

2021 proved to be a productive year for reading. I set personal bests by reading 53 books covering a record 20,421 pages. Here is my list of the five worst followed by the ten best books from 2021, with hyperlinks to Amazon so you can buy whichever books inspire you:

Five Worst

5. *Don Quixote de La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes: while entertaining in parts, this book desperately needed an editor to cull the 725 pages to a more reasonable length, which they unfortunately didn't have in 1605 or 1615 when it was written. It got repetitive and tiresome.

4. *The Hedgehog and the Fox* by Isaiah Berlin: though often lauded as a great book, I thought Berlin's essay dividing people and Leonard Tolstoy into hedgehogs (knows one big thing) and foxes (knows many things) was, frankly, boring.

3. *2030: How Today's Biggest Trends Will Collide and Reshape the Future of Everything* by Mauro Guillen: this book started off with a bang, but quickly and I mean quickly fell apart.

2. *War and Peace* by Leonard Tolstoy: I "get" books anchored in history must be read with that in mind, but I simply grew tired of reading about the tedious lives of its Russian characters and their ridiculous lives. Too long, too detailed, too mundane.

1. *The Origins of Creativity* by Edward O. Wilson: though I've liked Wilson's other books, this one came across way too much as Wilson trying to repackage material to make a few more bucks on his name.

Ten Best

10. [*Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*](#) by Victor Davis Hanson: this reflection on his own life in California by Hanson is a fascinating read for a variety of reasons. As one of America's top thinkers and writers, Hanson's lived experience in the Central Valley as it changes from the one he grew up in where everyone knew everyone and race didn't matter to the one we know from television where crime is rampant and illegal immigrants riddle the landscape is both heartwrenching and maddening. The fact that Hanson wrote this book twenty years ago yet his thrust remains as powerful as ever is a testament to the power of his mind.

9. [*Survival in Auschwitz: If This Be a Man*](#) by Primo Levi: every once and awhile I come across a book after thinking I've heard about all the good books on a particular topic. Levi's book falls into this category. Shockingly, this book was rejected by American publishers and didn't get translated to English until 1959. Levi's personal account of his arrest, imprisonment, and

survival in Auschwitz during World War II is among the best books on this topic I've ever read. The details about how he survived and endured ten months in Auschwitz goes to the heart of man's will to live.

8. [*Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*](#) by Ross King: this book marks the fourth excellent King book I've read, joining [*Brunelleschi's Dome*](#), [*Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies*](#), and [*Leonardo and the Last Supper*](#) in my library. The book details from end-to-end Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel. I found myself constantly referring to the painting and Google, as King includes fascinating elements I'd never heard about. For example, the bodies are much larger in the second half of the painting given that Michelangelo unveiled the first half and realized they needed to be bigger to get proper perspective. If you truly want to appreciate why the Sistine Chapel is the greatest painting in art history—the painting of [*Jonah alone is enough*](#), read King's highly enjoyable book.

7. [*Barbarians at the Gate: The Fall of RJR Nabisco*](#) by Bryan Burrough and John Helyar: I've owned this book for thirty years, but never got around to it. I finally tackled it in 2021 and am glad I did. The authors did an outstanding job covering the acquisition of R.J. Reynolds by Nabisco under legendary CEO F. Ross Johnson. This book detailing the leveraged buyout driven by Johnson's ego and the era of Wall Street greed is a page-turner. From fleets of jets used for personal trips to corporate-owned palaces housing executives across the country, you fully understand why corporate America needed reforms following the various downfalls that ended this crazy era.

6. [*Invisible Man*](#) by Ralph Ellison: I read this book mistakenly thinking I was reading H.G. Wells' "The Invisible Man." Instead, I read the story about a young black man from the South who is forced to move to Harlem where he becomes a key mover in the black rights community. Ellison's moving portrayal of the narrator from an innocent young man in the American South to a jaded man of experience in New York City won the 1953 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction. It is a powerful moment when the narrator finally concludes he is little more than an invisible man. If you've wondered where the black community's saying "I see you" comes from, it is from Ellison's book.

5. [*The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*](#) by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray: this book is another one I've owned for thirty years, but just got around to reading it in 2021. I've now read half-a-dozen of Murray's books and have liked most of them. This book was very controversial when it came out in the 1990s because of the claim of racism based on the parts of the books dealing with intelligence and race. I found the book to be more relevant today given the reemergence of class as a top issue in America, but think critics of the book missed the importance of the research highlighted in the book on how to make America a fairer society despite the impact intelligence has on class structure (versus racial outcomes). Too often policymakers create laws destined to fail given those laws fail to reflect the reality of how those they intend to help live. A must-read for anyone wanting to first understand the problems we face so that workable solutions can be created to "fix" America.

4. [*Among the Thugs*](#) by Bill Buford: this book is my surprise book of the year. It was recommended to me by a friend who also follows the Premier League (i.e., English football

league for those who don't know). The author inserted himself among the hooligans who plagued English football matches in the 1970s and 1980s in which mass violence between clubs typically broke out before, during, and after games. Buford got himself accepted among the thugs so gives readers an insider's view of the workings and lives of those in the hooligan movement. He details various well-known fights/riots, including one in Turin, Italy, when a bunch of English hooligans made it to Italy for a big match. In one particular chapter, Buford explores the literature on belonging and how peaceful protests can quickly turn riotous, which I found timely given the events on January 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol. Non-football fans would find this book as interesting as those of us who love the "beautiful" game.

3. [*A Soldier in the Great War*](#) by Mark Helprin: my former boss at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson, gave me this book for Christmas in 2005, but I didn't get to it until last year. I've become a fan of Helprin's writing over the years, but always skipped over this 860-page tomb. I wish I hadn't. Helprin's tale of a soldier from World War I who tells us his story on his walk home from Rome as an old man is simply one of the best pieces of fiction I've ever read. Despite its length, this book is one that makes you wish his story hadn't ended after you finish the last page. If you love a great story woven with amazing humanity and love, read this book.

2. [*False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet*](#) by Bjorn Lomborg: it is hard to know fact from fiction when it comes to the climate debate given media bias and the agenda of so many voices. Lomborg's easy-to-read, data-packed book does an amazing job separating fact from fiction so you can understand the state of play in terms of climate change. As someone who believes in climate change, Lomborg is a credible voice when it comes to questioning the hysteria surrounding the issue. He pushes for a balancing of the benefits to climate change proposals against the economic impact and ultimate change those proposals would have. His punchline: let's do what makes economic sense to do so that we limit the likely future damages of climate change at a reasonable cost. Every high school and college student should have to read this book.

1. [*Rigged: How the Media, Big Tech, and the Democrats Seized Our Elections*](#) by Mollie Hemingway: I've previously reviewed Hemingway's excellent book [here](#), so will just add that every American should read this book if they want to understand how the media, Big Tech, and the Left have rigged the game against Republicans that make winning elections much harder than it should be if the playing field was level. Hemingway provides tons of details on how the system is rigged before voting even starts that doesn't require you to be a full subscriber to Donald Trump's view that voting was rigged thereby costing him the 2020 election. As I've previously written, given how the system is rigged, it is amazing Trump only lost the 2020 election by 44,000 votes in three states. Hemingway's account of that election is gripping and a page-turner. Read it today so you can be ready for whatever mischief the media, Big Tech, and the Left comes up with in 2022 and 2024.

Happy reading in 2022!!!