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Ten Books To Help Know the World from 2014

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I did a fair amount of reading in 2014 – as usual about half fiction and the rest a mix of non-fiction disciplines.

People often ask me what I have read recently, so in no particular order, here are ten that truly impressed me over the past 12 months, with a word about each:

An Officer and a Spy, by Robert Harris. This is a fictionalized but utterly accurate account of the infamous Dreyfus affair in France, a sort of 19th century “O.J. Simpson” controversy that dominated France and revealed deep fissures in its politics and culture. Gripping and absorbing from the first page, it reveals the trumped up spying scandal in all its tawdry dimensions, and helps us understand the complex currents of modern day politics in Europe. Robert Harris has written a slew of superb works of historical and imagined fiction (*Enigma*, *Fatherland*, *Imperium*), but this is his best. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/04/books/an-officer-and-a-spy-is-robert-harriss-latest-novel.html>

1914, by Jean Echenoz. A brief novella set a century ago as war comes to France – bitterly if not unexpectedly. This captures in a few lean pages the confusion, terror, opportunity, and adventure of what is to come in the next three decades of war, following five French soldiers through the early days of the conflict. A brilliant evocation of the zeitgeist of middle-class Europeans poised unaware on the edge of the apocalypse a hundred years ago. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/books/review/1914-by-jean-echenoz.html>

The Death of Vishnu, by Manil Suri. Modern Indian society is the least understood of all the major cultures in the world outside the borders of its own country. Reading the many superb Indian novelists helps provide a window into this superpower civilization, one to which we should all be paying more attention. This 2001 novel captures the meager life and imagined death of a very common servant and the reactions of the middle-class apartment dwellers who know him. <https://www.nytimes.com/books/01/01/28/reviews/010128.28gorrat.html>

My Promised Land, by Ari Shavit. This is a clear-eyed look at Israel by one of its native sons who is unafraid to criticize where necessary. So much of the key to the Middle East is bound up in the journey of Israel, and this is a superb book of contemporary observation that helps us understand modern Israeli society. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/books/review/my-promised-land-by-ari-shavit.html?pagewanted=all>

In the Kingdom of Ice, by Hampton Sides. There is an enormous, untapped, and largely unknown world to the north of us: the Arctic. In this fast-paced and brilliantly written history of the doomed voyage of the US exploration ship, *Jeanette*, in 1877, the reader can sense the unrelenting brutality of the High North in all its glory. A fine sea voyage, with page turning suspense in the outcome of the heroic crew, this book crackles with energy and illuminates a part of the world we need to understand far better. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/17/books/review/in-the-kingdom-of-ice-by-hampton-sides.html>

Station Eleven by Emily St John Mandel. What if Ebola had been easily transferable through a simple cough like a highly virulent flu? The world after a pandemic is an ugly thing to consider, and in this National Book Award nominee, we see a sort of gentle dystopia descend across the globe after 99.99 percent of the world's population is wiped out in a matter of months. Unlike brutal, hard-to-read apocalyptic novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, this is the story of what might happen if humanity by and large decided to work together, remembered what was lost and haltingly tried to rebuild some semblance of a civilization. The heroine is a former child actress and—predictably in these post-Hunger Games days—a self-trained expert with a weapon: in this case the thrown knife. But she is also a member of a traveling troupe of Shakespearean actors and concert musicians who wander the somewhat dangerous but not impassable roads of the upper Midwest performing what they loved so deeply before all was lost. Along the way, there is time to ponder the mysteries of Station Eleven itself, a graphic novel whose tale provides a kind of DNA to the back story of this gorgeously written and seamlessly assembled book. The final scenes in the *Station Eleven*, as several plot lines converge, will stay with you like the closing bars of a symphony in hopeful and lovely tones long after you put it down. Hope springs eternal, and this is just the novel to remind us of that.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/books/review/station-eleven-by-emily-st-john-mandel.html>

Redeployment, by Phil Klay. Actually a collection of short stories by a veteran, this astonishing short book captures both sides of the long wars of Iraq and Afghanistan. While actually set mostly in Iraq, it also has plenty of time on the home front where the troops have “redeployed” or come home in military jargon. Written in a variety of voices up and down the socio-economic, racial, and cultural divides, these stories are dead on accurate and provide an honest vision of what we ask of our servicemen and women.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/09/books/review/redeployment-by-phil-klay.html>

Flashpoints, by George Friedman. We have begun a four year cycle of commemorating the events of the First World War, and a century ago Europe was plunged into 31 years of turmoil and two enormous conflicts that killed perhaps 50-75 million people. Despite all the tensions of the Cold War, the years since 1945

have been largely peaceful in Europe. George Friedman lays out a thoughtful, personal, and analytic case that war has not fully been driven out of the European world. Illuminating the “flashpoints” from Ukraine to the Caucasus to the Balkans to the southern Mediterranean, he makes a compelling case that the world has not seen the last of significant European violence. This is a well-written cautionary tale, and it is well worth paying attention. <http://www.amazon.com/Flashpoints-The-Emerging-Crisis-Europe/dp/0553399098>

A Map of Betrayal, by Ha Jin. This stylish novel by a master writer portrays the duality of life for many immigrants through the eyes of a young Chinese man who becomes a spy for China in the United States, working eventually at the CIA. Throughout his career in espionage, he loves both the China he was forced to leave and the new nation in which he has spent his entire working life. This book offers a portrait of today’s China, the tangled history of US-Chinese relations over the past decades, and ultimately of the broken heart of an immigrant who learns to love his brave new world all too well – but in the end, betrays it. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/books/review/a-map-of-betrayal-by-ha-jin.html>

World Order, by Henry Kissinger. As a marvelous and controversial career comes to a close, this new volume has a sense of summing up about it. The “world order” to which Dr. Kissinger refers is the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War in Europe in the 1600s and created – in the broadest sense – the concept of nation states as we know it today. Yet as he surveys the global scene, there are many places from Iraq to Syria to the European borderlands to Africa and beyond where there is anything but order. Outlining the tools of realism neatly and succinctly, this book is a fitting bookend to his *Diplomacy*, published four decades ago. As one-stop shopping on the state of the world today and the approach of realpolitik, this is a superb addition to the literature of diplomacy from a master practitioner. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/09/books/in-world-order-henry-kissinger-sums-up-his-philosophy.html>