

SCRATCHPAD

A year of reading

By ERICK BENDEL
COAST WEEKEND

After I compiled my short list of book recommendations from a year of reading, a colleague pointed out that I chose some mightily depressing books.

Yeah, maybe. I am drawn to the ugly side of humanity, perhaps so that I'm not surprised when it shows its face.

This isn't a list of the most uplifting books I read

in 2018, but of the essential books, the ones that made me a better, wiser, more informed person. And that is always positive.

Here they are, in no particular order.

"Mink River" (2010) by Brian Doyle — fiction

When I interviewed Brian Doyle via email about the craft of writing some years ago, his response was witty,

touching, thrillingly eloquent and generous of spirit.

That describes his debut novel about an imaginary Oregon coastal town populated with characters impossible not to identify with.

Doyle is an acrobat with language, pulling off astonishing stylistic feats without ever appearing to show off. His familiar setting is imbued with magical realism that is sometimes subtle (e.g., a character who can sense

creatures suffering in his vicinity) and sometimes not (e.g., a talking crow).

If there is a main vein of empathy in the universe, it surely ran through Doyle's pen (he died in 2017). With "Mink River" he is less concerned with plot and more with the daily dilemma of living in tension between our noble nature and darkest demons. He tells his story with a glowing yet unsentimental fascination toward the human animal.

By the way, those emails? I printed out and stuffed them into my copy of "Mink River," in case I should find myself in need of a literary spirit guide.

"The Remains of the Day" (1989) and "Never Let Me Go" (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro — fiction

In voice and milieu, two books could hardly seem more different. But look deeper.

"The Remains of the Day" is about an English butler working at a distinguished estate as World War II draws near. During his career, his attention is entirely on his duties — running the household, managing the staff, pleasing his lord, maintaining his professional dignity.

Then, years later, the butler gradually, reluctantly realizes that the employer to whom he gave his life and gifts — for whose sake he sacrificed opportunities for love and fulfillment, even perhaps his moral compass — may not have been worth serving. His lord's wasted life is, by extension, his own.

"Never Let Me Go" follows a group of children from



THOMAS ROTT PHOTO

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a peculiar boarding school through young adulthood, all while they know — but never seem to fully absorb — that their futures don't belong to them. They, too, are duty-bound to follow the life laid out for them, marching like docile lambs to their fate.

Both books by Kazuo Ishiguro are about well-meaning people so habituated to a form of psychological imprisonment that they can't see, much less meaningfully resist, a system of evil that uses them as means to a twisted end.

"Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis" (2016) by J.D. Vance — nonfiction

An intelligent, tightly written memoir about a guy, born into an Appalachian family, who defied the odds by (1) not becoming a helpless drug addict and (2) graduating from Yale and forging a stable, happy adulthood.

The book is one man's success story and also the recognition of a tragedy that didn't come to pass, but very well could have. Vance is fortunate to have been partly raised by grandparents who may have been hillbillies but

were sophisticated enough to believe in his potential. Vance, however, still struggles with the rage and residual anxieties born of a hardscrabble upbringing.

Critics pegged "Hillbilly Elegy" as a must-read for anyone looking to understand the build-up of anger and grievances that plague red-state America, and may have fueled untold voters during the 2016 presidential election. It's easy to see how, with horizons so narrow — with nothing but opioids, poverty and Mountain Dew mouth to look forward to — some people might show little investment in a political establishment that appears not to take their plight seriously.

Vance is a proud God-bless-America-style patriot — and a sharp, sympathetic, cleared-eyed voice for his culture.

"The Apprentice: Trump, Russia and the Subversion of American Democracy" (2018) by Greg Miller — nonfiction

Of the many books from 2018 that try to reckon with

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