

Best of 2023

By Laura Stoll, Assistant to the Director

When I was a kid, we lived out in the country and didn't have cable television. I remember hanging out at my Uncle Bill and Aunt Betty's house on New Year's Eve in 1986. They lived closer to the city and in addition to cable, they had computers, video games, and even a police scanner! On that day, I was glued to their television as MTV counted down the top music videos of the year. When they got to The Bangles' "Walk Like an Egyptian," my 11-year-old heart felt validated to see one of my favorite bands recognized for their fine work.

Fast forward to the next century and I still love a good "best of" list at the end of every year. Here are some of the best books from 2023 that I have yet to read. I can't wait to start 2024 with one of these highly recommended books.

Among the "New York Times" best books of the year is "The Bee Sting" by Paul Murray. From the publisher: "The Barnes family is in trouble. Dickie's once-lucrative car business is going under. His wife, Imelda, is selling off her jewelry on eBay and half-heartedly dodging the attention of fast-talking cattle farmer Big Mike, while their teenage daughter, Cass, formerly top of her class, seems determined to binge drink her way through her final exams. As for twelve-year-old PJ, he's on the brink of running away. If you wanted to change this story, how far back would you have to go? To the infamous bee sting that ruined Imelda's wedding day? To the car crash one year before Cass was born? All the way back to Dickie at ten years old, standing in the summer garden with his father, learning how to be a real man?"

Barnes & Noble's 2023 Book of the Year is James McBride's "The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store." From the publisher: "In 1972, when workers in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, were digging the foundations for a new development, the last thing they expected to find was a skeleton at the bottom of a well. Who the skeleton was and how it got there were two of the long-held secrets kept by the residents of Chicken Hill, the dilapidated neighborhood where immigrant Jews and African Americans lived side by side and shared ambitions and sorrows. When the truth is finally revealed about what happened on Chicken Hill and the part the town's white establishment played in it, McBride shows us that even in dark times, it is love and community—heaven and earth—that sustain us."

Book Riot, the largest independent editorial book website in North America, recommends "The Vaster Wilds" by Lauren Groff. Book Riot reviewer Katie Moench said, "After reading and loving Groff's 'Matrix,' her first historical fiction novel, I eagerly anticipated 'The Vaster Wilds' to see her take on another time period. Taking place in colonial America, this is the story of a young woman who flees from the settlement where she is a servant in a wealthy household. Set against the — to her — unknown wilderness, this is both a primal survival story and a fable of early American history. It is compulsively readable, and watching Groff play with story and language is a gift."

"North Woods" by Daniel Mason appears on the New York Times and Washington Post's lists, among others. From the publisher: "When two young lovers abscond from a Puritan colony, little do they know that their humble cabin in the woods will become the home of an extraordinary succession of human and nonhuman characters alike. An English soldier, destined for glory, abandons the battlefields of the New World to devote himself to growing apples. A pair of spinster twins navigate war and famine, envy and desire. A crime reporter

unearths an ancient mass grave—only to discover that the earth refuse to give up their secrets. A lovelorn painter, a sinister con man, a stalking panther, a lusty beetle: As the inhabitants confront the wonder and mystery around them, they begin to realize that the dark, raucous, beautiful past is very much alive.”

I hope everyone has a happy new year filled with good books, good friends, and good health!