

20 Books I loved this year/Shaucna Singh Baldwin

Below are the 20 books I loved in 2014, along with mini reviews.

Enjoy!

Shauna

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Pastoral by Andre Alexis.

Stone Mattress by Margaret Atwood.

Coolie Woman by Guitra Bahadur

Waiting for the Man by Amit Basu

The Betrayers by David Bezmozgis

Nothing for you Here, Young Man by Marie Claire Blais. Tr. by Nigel Spencer.

Sweetland by Michael Crummey

Planet Lolita by Charlie Foran

The Answer to Everything by Elyse Friedman

The Confabulist by Steven Galloway.

The World Before Us by Aislinn Hunter.

Tell by Frances Itani.

My October by Claire Holden Rothman

Watch How We Walk by Jennifer Lovegrove.

Us Conductors by Sean Michaels.

Moving forward Sideways like a Crab by Shani Mootoo

The Girl Who was Saturday Night by Heather O'Neill.

Paradise and Elsewhere by Kathy Page

Local Customs by Audrey Thomas

The Ever After of Ashwin Rao by Padma Viswanathan.

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[Pastoral by Andre Alexis.](#)

This non-Christian approached *Pastoral* with some trepidation, since it's a story about a priest. Yet I inhabited the little town of Barrow quite happily and found myself enjoying this novel's many insights. Alexis raises philosophical questions and doesn't answer them for his reader. That's art.

[Stone Mattress by Margaret Atwood.](#)

Atwood plunges us into her witty, witchy world of revenge, murders and mayhem in this riveting collection of stories. Each replete with humor, pathos and rage against aging. The collection is feminist to the core, taking the world as battleground and offering language and art as the only saviors. Atwood is stretching beyond her usual, as this collection even has a non-Euro-Canadian character or two. My copy is well-underlined. Do read it!

[Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture by Guitra Bahadur](#)

There might be less speculation in this book if *Coolie Woman* were fiction, but Guitra Bahadur began from her search for a real person, her grandmother who was indentured in India. She then enlarges her inquiry to explore other womens' stories of indenture, passage from India, arrival in Guyana and working on the plantations. Some of us are aware of this only as His-story. Then Bahadur goes even farther, inquiring in Scotland about the history of plantation owners. An achievement of investigation and research, Bahadur tells and manages her complex story with verve. And as we relive the colonial violence she asks that we interrogate its legacy, expressed in current forms of violence against Caribbean women.

[Waiting for the Man by Amit Basu](#)

A gently, savagely truthful story that reveals the effects of the net/technology, globalization, success, reality shows, media, the invention of God (nevermentioned as deity, but maybe herein called the Man).

Waiting for Godot in contemporary USA, with narrative shifts between NYC and Montana. This novel will have you crying "Ouch! Ouch!" all the way, it's so rueful, ironic, wise and -- well, plain cool. Former advertising executive Joe could be short for Joseph or several names of other origins. A Quebecoise girlfriend brightens his bleakness for a while. His mum makes Italian food, coleslaw, and chicken curry -- thus Basu leaves us guessing as to heritage. Written with a second-generation immigrant sensibility, this novel interrogates both our selfish desires and acts of altruism. **Longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.**

[The Betrayers by David Bezmozgis](#)

A hotel reservation gone awry lands Israeli politician Baruch Kotler and his mistress in a private home in Crimea. And so a man who has just betrayed his wife meets someone who betrayed him years ago, sending him to thirteen years of hard labour in the Soviet Union. Their encounter is handled with depth and compassion by this sensitive novelist. This novel is multi-layered, complex and generous. Though heavily political, and dealing with Israeli settlements,

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the novel consigns the Palestinians to its negative space. At every point, you'll ask yourself the question every novel should raise: what would you do if you were offered these moral choices?
Finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

[Nothing for you Here, Young Man](#) by Marie Claire Blais.

Translated by Nigel Spencer.

I've loved Marie Claire Blais's books for many years, and this one is as large and generous as I expected. Stream of consciousness and pov shifts at the end of those massive sentences don't promise an easy read but I imagine they are much tougher on the writer. A line from the book that also describes the writing: "a frantic force driving him to see the world in its totality." Despite it's cerebral quality, there's such great energy and movement in the writing. By page 45 we've gone from a soliloquy on nuclear weapons to one on Hurricane Katrina, to the Columbia explosion as described in music, and Mengele shows up around pg 100. The characters are broken losers, the dramatic questions are slight -- will Petite Cendres get out of bed and then what? Will Daniel ever catch his plane? but I was captivated, losing count of the characters as I flitted in and out of their heads. The translation from the original French is a huge achievement.

[Sweetland](#) by Michael Crummey

A Crabby old geezer named Sweetland refuses to leave his island when the government decides it is too expensive to provide services any longer. An absorbing tale, with beautiful descriptions of the maritimes and many psychological insights. Well-structured, excellent flow.
Finalist for the 2014 Governor General of Canada Prize.

[Planet Lolita](#) by Charles Foran

A story crammed with plausible situations resulting from the impact of tech in the form of Facebook, phones, and texting. Delving into the sex trafficking and porn issues for teenagers. Great dialogue, excellent characterization. This male writer writes in the point of view of a 15-year-old girl and isn't afraid to describe her first menstruation -- now that's real progress.

[The Answer to Everything](#) by Elyse Friedman

Mavis Gallant said a novel is either dead on the page or alive...This novel is alive. It drew me in from the first sentence, revealing its story about the rise of a modern guru Eldrich and his disciples. No one goes to India for enlightenment in this novel -- they hang out in downtown Toronto and take over a house in Rosedale. The novel is so carefully plotted and edited you won't notice the craft till you reread it. The book design is cool but not intrusive, with different fonts for the journalist's pov, and page frames that set off web site entries. Friedman sympathetically renders the guru Eldrich and several diverse points of view of other disciples, including a bible thumper, without a single false note. You will be touched by the heart-wrenching stories of the disciples, and understand the human need that draws us together in religions for comfort. I predict Elyse Friedman will have a long stellar career.

[The Confabulist](#) by Steven Galloway.

Stephen Galloway's transparent prose, deft plotting and tenderness towards Houdini -- indeed all his characters -- made this book an engrossing read. His exploration of Houdini's anti-spiritualism should be required reading for the easily impressed. In Wisconsin, where I live, Houdini is a legend and Galloway has woven in just about every Houdini tale I've ever heard -- even the spy stories. All the while, challenging us to question what's real and what's illusion in our memory of loss, and in memory loss. In contrast to his last novel, *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, Galloway has posed a different set of questions, challenging himself and us. The reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* must have only read about three quarters -- if only he had finished the book he might have appreciated the magic trick the author pulls off at the very end.

[The World Before Us](#) by Aislinn Hunter.

The third person collective point of view, we, goes almost unused in literature. But Aislinn Hunter is a contrarian, and it's appropriate to this tale of an archivist searching for a person missing from history. The quest reveals how her own life is was affected by a missing child incident when she was just a teen babysitter. Stylish and densely layered, this novel stretches the art. Don't worry if you lose the story somewhere in this book -- just enjoy the language.

[Tell](#) by Frances Itani.

Every word feels simple, right, and natural in Frances Itani's *Tell*. You'll notice that in your second reading. In your first, you're immersed in the mystery: Who gave up a baby for adoption, and why? Itani peels back time to show us Kenan, a damaged and disfigured WWI soldier readjusting to life in Ontario, and his marriage to Tress. Itani inhabits many voices with ease, pathos and humor. Her choice of details expertly builds our understanding of her characters' times, foibles and moral choices, and she connects them in a hugely satisfying ending. *Tell* is a treasure: serious with humorous moments, potent and controlled, subtle yet deeply moving. **Finalist for the 2014 Scotiabank Giller Prize.**

[Watch How We Walk](#) by Jennifer Lovegrove.

Lovegrove writes about a Christian minority sect, the Jehovah's Witnesses, with love and compassion but could be writing about any group with but one source of authority, or whose questions have answers. Once I succumbed to the child point of view, I was swept away by the writing, and many beautiful lines from this former poet. I identified both as a Sikh and as a family member who is a Jehovah's Witness. This is a powerful depiction of girls who can only rebel against the minority group norms by conformity with the mainstream, and the mainstream may not be in line with their personal choices either. The parents in this novel are so caught up in the inner logic of the group that their daughter becomes no more to them than any honor killing victim is to her parents...the book is chilling and heartbreaking yet has many amusing moments. **Longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.**

[Us Conductors](#) by Sean Michaels.

A love story, a spy story, cross-cultural fiction, historical bio fiction about Dr. Leon Teremin, inventor of the theremin. Fabulous -- from research to plotting and editing. Every line should be savored, and many are wisdom lines. Lyrical descriptions of New York in the twenties. Harrowing, yet beautiful descriptions of a Soviet labor camp. Perfect metaphors, none overdone. And it was fun to find we share an editor (Anne Collins of Random House of Canada edited my last novel, *The Selector of Souls*). **Scotiabank Giller Prize winner.**

[Moving forward Sideways like a Crab](#) by Shani Mootoo.

This immersive experience of a novel is creatively plotted. The sexuality and identity of the lesbian couple at its core is not the problem. Mootoo's secular white Torontonion character tries to understand his mother's sex change. And it's out of love, not consumerism or opportunism. At one point, this secular white Torontonion is shown participating in a Hindu funeral, lighting the pyre. The funeral wasn't presented as performance *for* him and hence education for the reader. Mootoo writes with so much love for Canada and Trinidad, that you'll fall in love with both countries as well. She's a daring, sensitive writer who treats her characters and readers with honest respect. **Longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.**

[The Girl Who was Saturday Night](#) by Heather O'Neill.

A pair of twins have been child stars with their famous father and must figure out how to live ordinary lives in Montreal in 1995. You may not be enamored of these characters in the first twenty pages, but Noushka's voice, generosity and brokenness will eventually seduce you. Like English and French Canada, the twins don't want to know who was born first. In the backdrop for most of the novel, is the pending referendum of 1995, an event of great identity turmoil for anyone born in Quebec. O'Neill's warm, funny, heartbreakingly honest novel examines where the personal, public and political intersect. For instance, Who are you if your country declares you linguistically and genetically undesirable? Her minor characters (Russian, Uzbek, etc) point to why and how the vote became Non, though she doesn't name "Les ethniques" as then Quebec Premier Jacques Parizeau famously and contemptuously called us in his concession speech. Be prepared for a surprising, but fitting ending. **Finalist for the 2014 Scotiabank Giller Prize.**

[Paradise and Elsewhere](#) by Kathy Page

I was swept into trance state reading *Paradise and Elsewhere*. It is written with a borderless intelligence and sense of history, set in unnamed countries and times. Few can follow Calvino well, and Kathy Page does in her own way. These are provocative, beautiful stories. Their combined impact is greater than each story. This is a collection to treasure. **Longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.**

[My October](#) by Claire Holden Rothman

In diamond prose that never intrudes on this mesmerizing tale of a family attempting to separate, Rothman reveals the dilemmas of Quebec. For her finely-drawn Montrealers, the personal and political are inseparable, relationships inseparable, and two languages insufficient for modern times. Writing with clear-eyed honesty and authority, reframing histories that invoke nationalism and ethnic identity, *My October* asks that we question stories we think we know. This nuanced and heartwarming work of political fiction deserves to become a classic.

Longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

[Local Customs](#) by Audrey Thomas

A delightful, clever novel -- vintage Audrey Thomas. Set in 1830s, the just-post-slavery period, the novel follows Letitia Landon (Letty) as she watches herself marry and move to a colony in Africa. The characters in *Local Customs* are trying very hard to stay English while marooned in a colonial environment on the gold coast of West Africa.

[The Ever After of Ashwin Rao](#) by Padma Viswanathan.

Scotch-drinking, McGill-educated, marriage-averse psychologist Ashwin Rao uses Narrative Therapy to help his patients in New Delhi, and wrote a book on the effects of India's state-sponsored anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984. In 2004, he returns to Canada for another book on comparative grief, attending the trial over the 1985 bombing of Air India 182, a bombing that claimed 329 lives, including his sister and her two children. Guided by Vishwanathan's ever-compassionate gaze, and her ability to render a polyglot world in English, Ashwin meets Canadians bereaved and affected by the tragedy. One extended family, the Sethuratnams, has members as complex and guarded as he. This often droll, fiercely-intelligent novel with its cat's-cradle of a plot, challenges the twin deadly lures of religious fundamentalism and racism, revealing the learning and unlearning at the core of the immigrant experience.

Finalist for the 2014 Scotiabank Giller Prize.

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