

[Citation + Full Text](#)[Print](#)**Top 10 Historical Fiction: 2011.****Hooper, Brad (author).**FEATURE. First published April 15, 2011 (*Booklist*).

Imagine the difficulty of selecting the 10 best historical novels over the past year at a time when the historical novel is both good and plentiful; imagine, too, the reading pleasure presented by the outstanding selection we came up with.

**Agaat.** By Marlene van Niekerk. Tr. by Michael Heyns. Tin House, paper, \$19.95 (9780982503096).

This novel, about two women—one white, one black—living on a farm in South Africa at a time when the nation is undergoing huge racial and social change, stuns with its powerful sense of the rigors of farm life and the comfort of a long and complex relationship.

**Beautiful Maria of My Soul.** By Oscar Hijuelos. Hyperion, \$25.99 (9781401323349).

Hijuelos returns to his 1990 Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, but this time he tells the story from the point of view of Maria, the young Cuban woman with whom Nestor Castillo fell in love and about whom he wrote the Mambo Kings' hit bolero, "Beautiful Maria of My Soul." A novel of wondrous language and a multifaceted story line.

**Clara and Mr. Tiffany.** By Susan Vreeland. Random, \$26 (9781400068166).

Welcome to the wonderfully articulated world of Clara Driscoll, whom Vreeland has brought to light from the archives of Tiffany Glass Company to establish what is most probably her rightful place in the history of American decorative arts: she conceived the famous Tiffany leaded-glass lamp shade.

**The Elephant's Journey.** By José Saramago. Tr. by Margaret Jull Costa. Houghton, \$24 (9780547352589).

In 1551, King Joao of Portugal makes a startling diplomatic move by giving Archduke Maximilian of Austria the elephant housed on Portuguese royal grounds. The elephant's trek across Europe to its new home is followed in this extremely amusing, historically resonant, fablelike, and technically challenging narrative.

**The Matchmaker of Kenmare.** By Frank Delaney. Random, \$26 (9781400067848).

In memoir format, narrated by a man in old age, the plot finds its provocative place in the WWII years and the immediate postwar years; in substance, it combines the charm of an Irish yarn with the excitement of a political thriller and the romance of a 1940s war movie.

**Percival's Planet.** By Michael Byers. Holt, \$27 (9780805092189).

Early-twentieth-century scientist Percival Lowell's Arizona observatory made it possible for the 1930 discovery of Pluto. This insightful, witty novel traces the painstaking search for what, in the years before Pluto's discovery, Lowell's astronomical heirs called Planet X.

**Promises to Keep.** By Ann Tatlock. Bethany, paper, \$14.99 (9780764208096).

Award-winning inspirational-fiction author Tatlock continues to excel in her latest coming-of-age tale, about an 11-year-old girl; even as it moves along at a comfortable pace, the story is peppered with suspense.

**Revenants: A Dream of New England.** By Daniel Mills. Chomu, paper, \$15 (9781907681035).

This atmospheric, even stunning, novel is set in 1689, 14 years after King Philip's War, which pitted Native Americans against English colonists. Otherworldly fiction from a promising new talent.

**Rodin's Debutante.** By Ward Just. Houghton, \$26 (9780547504193).

Just extends his grand inquiry into family, honor, and injustice in his beguiling and unnerving seventeenth novel, set on the author's home ground, northern Illinois, where a massive prairie mansion is turned into an ill-conceived boys' school at the onset of WWI.

**West of Here.** By Jonathan Evison. Algonquin, \$24.95 (9781565129528).

In this audacious novel, the author creates an almost absurdly complex narrative structure, bridging more than 100 years of life in Washington State and encompassing multiple points of view, and then he grounds the

sublime architectonic whole in the vividly realized daily lives of characters who exist completely in their individual moments but whose actions reverberate back and forth across time.

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