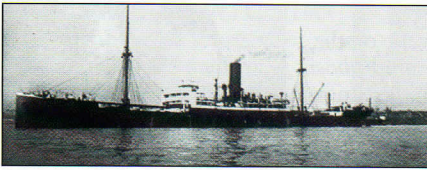


# Books of the year, 2009

From a vibrant year in publishing THE WEEK selects the best books of 2009



## Best Australian non-fiction

### The Wolf

by Richard Guillatt and Peter Hohnen

William Heinemann

232pp, \$34.95

"There isn't a dull page in this account of the adventures of SMS *Wolf* in WWI," said Owen Richardson in *The Age*. For 15 months, the disguised cargo ship prowled the Indian and Pacific oceans. Under the command of Captain Karl Nerger, the *Wolf* bailed up other vessels, pilfering their supplies and imprisoning their crews. Guillatt and Hohnen have "resisted the temptation to dress this story up". Still, the tale is so rich in incident it reads like "the most old-fashioned kind of ripping yarn".

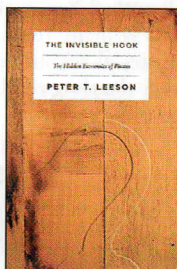
Indeed, this is precisely the genre satirised so wonderfully by Michael Palin, said Stephen Loosely in *The Australian* – only it's all fact. *The Wolf* even boasts a romantic hero in Captain Nerger, a gifted sailor – stoic and reserved – but with a keen sense of humour. A telling juxtaposition is made between the common view of Germans as sly, rapacious monsters and the noble actions of the *Wolf's* crew, said Ross Fitzgerald in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. This is truthful storytelling at its finest: *The Wolf* is one of the "most gripping books I have had the pleasure to read all year".

## Best international non-fiction

### The Invisible Hook

by Peter T. Leeson

Princeton, 271pp, \$24.95

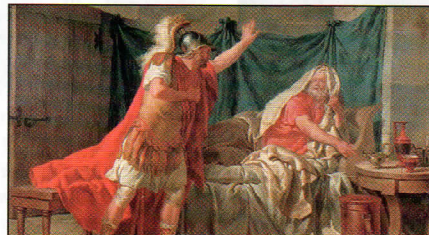


This witty book on piracy demonstrates how economic theories can illuminate unexpected historical trends, said Stephen Saunders in *The Canberra Times*. The title is a riff on Adam Smith's description of self-interest as the "invisible hand" of the market. The author's premise is that only economics can explain the classical 1670-1730 Jolly Roger-era of sea piracy. Leeson is particularly fascinated with the pirates' adoption of a one-man one-vote system – long before it became the norm in England

or America. The pirates also had the right to hire and fire captains. As Leeson writes, their "self-interested criminality facilitated democratic checks and balances".

Even more fascinating is the insight into the behaviour of "some of history's most colourful anti-heroes", said Michelle Baddeley in *The Times*. Pirate Captain Sam Bellamy summed up the ethos of the sea bandit when he said: "I scorn to do anyone a mischief, when it is not for my advantage." Thus practices such as cooking prisoners alive or forcing them to eat their own ears – techniques used to minimise the costs of capture or extract information – are shown by Leeson to be "rational, reasonable and carefully calculated strategies".

## Best Australian fiction



### Ransom

by David Malouf

Knopf 223pp \$29.95

*Ransom* is a retelling of the events of Book 24 of Homer's *The Iliad*, in which King Priam rides out in a simple cart to plead with Achilles for the corpse of his son Hector. In this theme and its treatment, Malouf fans will recognise "the lyrical density of the prose, the unhurried pacing, the author's clear, compassionate eye", said Thornton McCamish in *The Sunday Age*. Malouf boasts a vividly tactile approach to description. Old Priam regards his body as "this brief six feet of earth he moves and breathes in". Later, when contemplating death, Priam feels "the blood still warm and ticking in his wrist".

Anyone who enjoys unearthing such nuggets of style will treasure this book, said Angela Meyer in *Bookseller+Publisher*. And the ideas Malouf raises are far greater than the tale of Troy. At the centre of the book lies a discussion between Priam and the garrulous carter Somax, who transports him to retrieve Hector's body. This passage, in which a king and a commoner swap opinions on fatherhood, life and death, is "philosophical, moving and hard to shake from the senses". Indeed, these pages of *Ransom* "are nothing short of magical", said Andrew Riemer in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Malouf's delicate, marvellously alert prose is endowed with a quality that has one name only – wisdom.

## Best international fiction

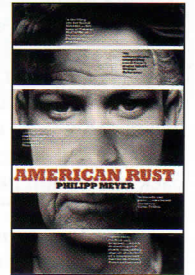
### American Rust

by Philipp Meyer

Allen & Unwin

376pp \$32.99

This book marks the return of "the novel of social protest", said Geordie Williamson in *The Australian*. The two young heroes are the modern-day counterparts of Lennie and George in *Of Mice and Men*. William Poe is a high-school football hero determined to leave the rusting steel mills of Pennsylvania's rural south-west; his companion Isaac English is a scientist savant prevented from leaving town by a crippled father. The pair strike out west to California, but the belligerent Poe starts a fight with some homeless men, and Isaac inadvertently kills one of them. Meyer cultivates a gritty "redneck realism", which never lets the reader forget they are in the midst of an American tragedy. But what makes the novel so worth reading, said Owen Richardson in *The Age*, is Meyer's sense of place: his evocative descriptions of America's moribund towns, lifeless rivers and closed-up rail yards.



## Most controversial book

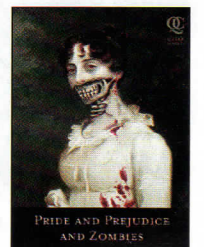
### Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

by Seth

Grahame-Smith

Quirk Books,

319pp, \$24.95



Literary-horror "mash-ups" are probably the strangest trend to have landed in our bookshops this year, said Stephanie Merritt in *The Observer*. Grahame-Smith has led the charge, immediately becoming a New York Times bestseller. The premise is simple: early 19th century England is menaced by a plague of the undead; the five Bennet sisters are accomplished martial arts warriors, trained by their father, a monster-hunter possessed of Japanese fighting skills. The success of any pastiche lies in its ability to capture the tone of that original, and in this Grahame-Smith has succeeded admirably.

He certainly has, said Lisa Schwarzbaum in *Entertainment Weekly*. The real pleasure of this book is reading it side-by-side with the original. Only then do you realise just "how smartly Grahame-Smith inserts himself in the thicket of curlicued manners that is Austen's real comic theme".