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'You will carry this suture / Into the future. / The past never passes. / It simply amasses.' —BRAD LEITHAUSER

FIVE BEST RECKONINGS WITH HISTORY

Lauren Fox

The author, most recently, of the novel 'Send for Me.'

The Story of Lucy Gault
By William Trevor (2002)

1 The violent act that sets this novel's tale in motion takes place in the time known as the Troubles. It's 1921, and Anglo-Irish landowner Capt. Everard Gault has shot a would-be Irish Republican Army arsonist. Sensing themselves under threat, the Gaults decide to leave Ireland, a plan that proves the undoing of all their hopes for a safe and peaceful life. Their young daughter, Lucy, who has run off on the day of their departure, is ultimately presumed dead. The novel is a long lament, a chronicle of isolation and miscommunication as Lucy lives out her life in her childhood home, believed dead all the while by her family, who have remained abroad. The Irish War of Independence and its aftermath are the setting for this saga, summed up in William Trevor's description as having "the terrible beauty of a destiny fulfilled" that "trailed a terrible bitterness, which haunted memories long after the conflict ended."

Wave
By Sonali Deraniyagala (2013)

2 I confess that I put off reading Sonali Deraniyagala's "Wave" for some time, intimidated by the crushing scope of her tragedy: Her parents, husband and two young sons died in the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. "Wave" is about the aftermath, but of course it's also about the before. Ms. Deraniyagala stares into the blinding sun of her losses and refuses to look away. She travels back to the destroyed hotel, where she comes across the shirt her son was wearing; she relives memories of car journeys with her family, the boys kicking each other's shins; "a gush of starlings"; a new pair of shoes. "The one time I allow my family to come alive, and that shoe trounces me. But I want to linger with them. I want to stay in our car forever." This book is a merciless reckoning with a history that is barely history, a past that is so close at hand that the author can smell it, hear it, taste it. "I trip up constantly, between this life and that."

STEVE MCCURRY / MAGNUM PHOTOS

SEEKING SOLACE Praying for the victims of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, 2004.

Belonging
By Nora Krug (2018)

3 Nora Krug's "Belonging" is an unwavering interrogation of her family's history—one that comes in the form of a meticulously curated scrapbook. Ms. Krug, who grew up in Germany, examines her father's difficult childhood, and uncovers the degree to which various family members were connected to the Nazi party. Interspersed with these inquiries are lists of observations, including reminiscences on the particulars of perfect German bread. Each detail is remembered affectionately, but also imbued with a touch of darkness: A paean to the beauty of Germany's forests includes Joseph Goebbels's proposal, in 1938, to bar Jews from entering them. Ms. Krug dissects her grandfather Willi's involvement in the war. Was his rank as a soldier low enough that he wasn't too culpable? Was he a reluctant or an eager member of the party? She asks these questions and simultaneously queries her own need to find the answers. "Perhaps the only way to find the HEIMAT [homeland] that I've lost is to look back; to move beyond the abstract shame and ask those questions that are really difficult to ask." She does so unflinchingly.

Kindred
By Octavia E. Butler (1979)

4 A vivid fever-dream of a novel, "Kindred" is at once contemporary literature, historical fiction and science fiction. Dana, an African-American woman with a white husband, is, one day in 1976, suddenly blasted back into the Southern plantation life of her black and white ancestors. In this time-travel tale, Dana moves back and forth between the normal life she had known and another excruciatingly real life as an enslaved person. The brutality of this experience is immediate and violent. She explains to her husband, who sometimes time-travels with her, that while he has the privilege—he is, after all, white—of being an observer, she does not. Returning from her final trip, she is so seriously injured she must have her arm amputated: A part of her could not be wrenched back into her time. Such is the merciless vision of this novel: The past is ever present.

The Final Opus of Leon Solomon
By Jerome Badanes (1989)

5 "The Final Opus of Leon Solomon" is a catalog of rants, confessions, heart-breaking vignettes and searing memories. The novel is the narrator's unhinged suicide note, his goodbye. Leon, a Holocaust survivor, is also a disgraced historian. He has lost everything—his career, his reputation, his family. He is now writing his farewell to the world in a seedy hotel. He revisits memories of his childhood in the city of Vilna and his close relationship with his sister, Malkele, who was murdered by Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto. The novel teeters between rueful recollections of his unfaithful wife and the son who has rejected him, to his horrific experiences before and during the war. In Auschwitz, he memorized the faces of his fellow prisoners to keep himself alive. "They were like a map through time." His life has broken him, and his scars are unbearable: that is the limit of his reckoning. "I have devoted my life to recovery—a task with grave limitations."

Resetting The Cellular Aging Clock

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spark a social revolution that we are wholly unprepared for.

Originally inspired by the so-called progeria diseases that cause premature aging in humans, such as Werner syndrome and Hutchinson-Gilford syndrome, and having spent a lifetime mutating yeast and other simple organisms to show that lifespans are highly malleable, Mr. Sinclair has arrived at a simple, compelling and experimentally verifiable explanation for why we age. In so doing, he may have identified the basis of an effective way to manipulate and even one day reverse the aging process. Invoking Claude Shannon, the father of information theory, he calls this the "Information Theory of Aging."

Even if our genomes are tweaked to enable longer lifespans, a poor dietary choice or the wrong spouse might still be our undoing.

Most of us are familiar with the biological information stored in the sequences of genes, rather like digital information encoded in a CD. But this is supplemented by a second layer of "epigenetic" information superimposed onto it and encoded by chemically marking select regions of DNA. Unlike genetic information, this epigenetic information is analog—reminiscent of the grooves on a vinyl record. By manipulating the accessibility of DNA and how tightly it is "spooled" onto proteins called histones, this auxiliary tier of information allows otherwise identical genes to be "read" in different ways. This generates distinct patterns of active and silenced genes.

As a result, genomes can be epigenetically programmed to become any cell type in the body. While "a caterpillar can't become a human," it deploys the same epigenetic tricks to reprogram its genomes to metamorphose into a butterfly. According to Mr. Sinclair, aging occurs when this analog information is degraded. But though this happens inevitably over time, some stimuli—such as exercise, extreme cold or calorific restriction—can lock cells into an ancient "survival circuit" that protects analog information by attracting proteins called sirtuins. Like museum curators, these guardians watch over epigenetic markings and secure their integrity. Certain drugs may be able to do this too. More enticing is the possibility of reprogramming cells to restore their epigenetic markings, a type of reset that has already been shown to increase the lifespan of prematurely aging mice.

Accompanying Mr. Sinclair's irrepressible and infectious optimism for our potentially ageless future is his assertion that aging should be regarded as a treatable disease rather than as an inevitable part of human nature. Instead of trying to address our mortality and physical decline in piecemeal, Whac-A-Mole manner, by treating the aging process itself we should be able to address human diseases in a more economical and rational manner. Mr. Sinclair's manifesto is simple—we need to end "our long war on individual diseases" and redirect our focus to their upstream cause: Aging may actually turn out to be easier to treat than cancer.

In his inspiring, energetic and equally optimistic **"Keep Sharp" (Simon & Schuster, 336 pages, $28),** the neurosurgeon and CNN journalist Sanjay Gupta adopts a more practical approach to preserving the human healthspan and lifespan. He invites readers to reinvent the way they live. Tapping into the global epidemic of Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline, he espouses a new brain-focused philosophy of prolonged well-being. In his view, health and longevity are determined not just by our biology, but by aspects of the way we live. For example, citing a study published in the journal Genetics, Dr. Gupta suggests that one's choice of spouse may have a greater impact on lifespan than genetics.

ALAMY

OLD TIMER The Galápagos tortoise remains spry through its long life.

Some environmental factors affect whole populations: the Chamorro people of Guam have a risk of neurodegenerative diseases that is radically greater than the rest of the world's. It turns out that their local gastronomic delicacy, fox bat, contains high amounts of a neurotoxin causing the same pathological changes as those found in Alzheimer's disease. The lesson, Dr. Gupta teaches us, is that even if our genomes are one day reprogrammed to enable longer lifespans, a random dietary choice might still be our undoing.

Some will be alarmed to learn that regardless of body weight, being inactive is twice as deadly as being obese. The good news, Dr. Gupta reassuringly tells us, is that a mere 120 seconds of activity each hour is sufficient to offset the effects of prolonged sitting. He goes on to identify five key modifiable lifestyle factors: exercise, sense of purpose, sleep and relaxation, nutrition, and social connections, which he identifies as the "pillars" that can help us maintain a "sharp brain."

Daniel J. Levitin's uplifting and sensitive work **"Successful Aging" (Dutton, 528 pages, $17.99)** addresses some of the more positive and beneficial aspects of growing older. He leaves us wondering whether we undervalue the benefits of advanced age and the contributions the elderly can make to society. Short of a medical breakthrough from the likes of Mr. Sinclair, there will, by 2030, Mr. Levitin tells us, be more individuals in the United States over 65 than under 15 years of age. He argues that we should transform our relationship with aging, viewing the elderly as a resource and old age as a "culmination rather than denouement." We need to construct a culture that organically embraces older people and their accrued wisdom.

Like Dr. Gupta, Mr. Levitin advocates an ongoing and active engagement with life, and warns against the perils of retirement. Just as one's spouse impacts longevity more than genes, the quality of an individual's social relationships at age 80 is a better predictor of health than blood cholesterol. Mr. Levitin also emphasizes the importance of the non-computable alchemy that we call happiness. The 2019 edition of the United Nations' World Happiness Report showed that the U.S. had dropped to number 19, its lowest ranking since the first report in 2012.

As of today, just one individual, the supercentenarian Jeanne Calment of France, has been validated as living past the age of 120. If Messrs. Sinclair and Steele are right, we may all need to start planning for a fundamentally different future. Indeed, according to Mr. Sinclair, we are close to an inflection point, where what "hitherto seemed magical will become real."

Mr. Woolfson is the author of "Life Without Genes."