

View

Must-Reads of 2017: From Space to Chinese Noir

A biography of Gorbachev. A history of Qatar. An attack on bad parenting. And management lessons from the Beatles.

By [Tyler Cowen](#)

November 29, 2017, 8:00 AM EST



Remember the Age of Aquarius? *Photo: Barcroft Media/Getty Images*

Tyler Cowen is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. He is a professor of economics at George Mason University and writes for the blog Marginal Revolution. His books include “The Complacent Class: The Self-Defeating Quest for the American Dream.”

[Read more opinion](#)
[Follow @tylercowen on Twitter](#)

COMMENTS

6

LISTEN TO ARTICLE



SHARE THIS ARTICLE

[Share](#)

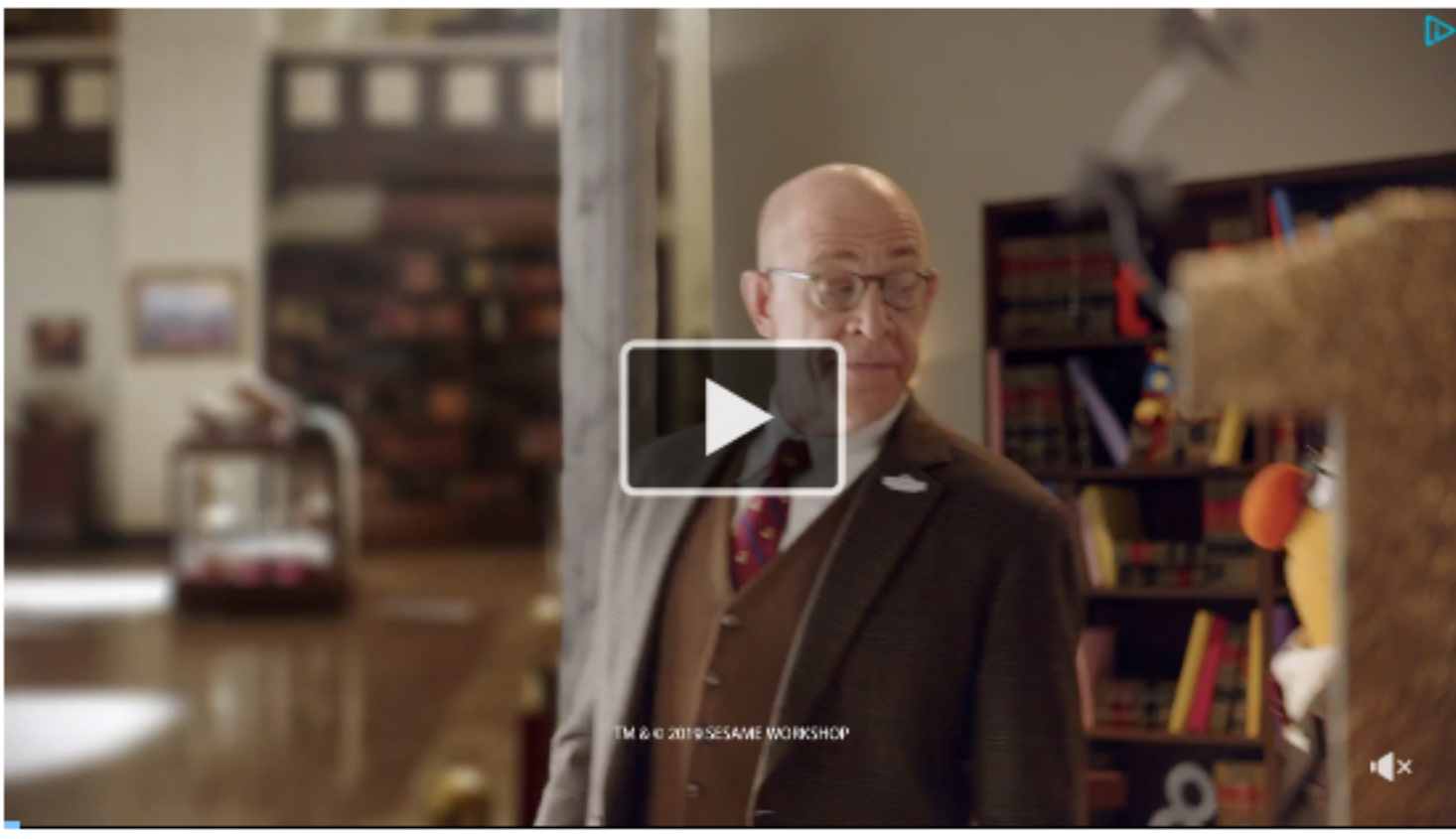
[Tweet](#)

[Post](#)

[Email](#)

Each year, I keep a running list of the favorite books I have read. [1](#) Here is a shortened version of my 2017 list, with brief commentaries. If it seems like a hodgepodge, that to me is the sign of a fruitful reading year (I hope you had one, too).

Other than putting fiction at the end, the books are listed in the order I read them, not by priority. When there is a link to the book’s title, it takes you to longer remarks I have written elsewhere. Here goes:



Neil M. Maher, “[Apollo in the Age of Aquarius](#).” Have you wondered how the space program interacted with the environmental, peace and “Whole Earth” movements of the 1960s?

Daniel W. Drezner, “[The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans and Plutocrats Are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas](#).” How are think tanks evolving, what biases do they embody, and is it all getting worse?

Rob Sheffield, “[Dreaming the Beatles: The Love Story of One Band and the Whole World](#).” This book teaches you to think of John and Paul as a management team, and was the most enjoyable read I had all year. The book is more analytical than you might think.

David Garrow, “[Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama](#).” I am surprised how rapidly this book faded from public attention. It’s one of the most impressive presidential biographies, even if it sometimes serves up more than you want to know. It is also a look at the social construction of race.

James C. Scott, “[Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States](#).” This look at prehistory suggests that government as we know it has a lot to do with the incentives and capabilities created by agricultural production and storage.

David Der-wei Wang, editor. “[A New Literary History of Modern China](#).” A useful introduction to modern Chinese intellectual history, this collection can be consumed in bite-size pieces. A best-books-of-the-year list with no books about China is...wrong.

David B. Roberts, “[Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City-State](#).” A short history of a country that is not about to fade from the news.

Ken Gormley, editor, “[The Presidents and the Constitution](#).” This volume shows how each American president faced constitutional issues during his term, and how those were resolved. That may sound dull, but I found this book to be one of the most gripping reads of the year, most of all for the coverage of the mid- to late 19th century. We’ve had a lot of lemon presidents, and I ended up feeling better about the American republic today.

Brian Merchant, “[The One Device: The Secret History of the iPhone](#).” This is the best account of the contemporary world’s single greatest technological miracle.

Jean M. Twenge, “[iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy -- and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood](#).” The author describes how the contemporary world’s single greatest technological miracle may be making some of our children more passive and depressed.

Tim Harford, “[Fifty Inventions That Changed the Modern Economy](#).” The story of the economic history and import of technology, told through short, compelling examples.

Dennis C. Rasmussen, “[The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought](#).” A wonderfully written book about a beautiful friendship.

Richard White, “[The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896](#).” Here is a [good Kyle Sammin review](#).

William Taubman, “[Gorbachev: His Life and Times](#).” I thought I already knew this history, but I learned something new and interesting on almost every page. This is my pick for best history book of the year.

Sujatha Gidla, “[Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India](#).” A painful look at the history of caste in India, as told through the story of one family in Andhra Pradesh and a woman who broke free of it all.

Victor Davis Hanson, “[The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won](#).” The war as seen from the point of view of logistics and underlying resources.

Mike Wallace, “[Greater Gotham: A History of New York City From 1898 to 1919](#).” I am about halfway through its 1,052 pages of text. This is my No. 2 contender for best history book of 2017.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, “[The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy](#).” A leading Syrian intellectual gives a subjective but insightful account of how totalitarianism has destroyed civil society and wrecked Syria.

Bryan Caplan, “[The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money](#).” It would be better for society if we all spent less time educating ourselves to show we are better or smarter than others (“signaling”). Did you really learn that much from your MBA? Professor Caplan is my colleague at George Mason University and is a one-time co-author.

Leslie Berlin, “[Troublemakers: Silicon Valley’s Coming of Age](#).” An excellent history of the early days of the internet and tech.

My two favorite novels this year were both pretty short:

Domenico Starnone, “[Ties](#).” For fans of Elena Ferrante, this novel intersects with some of her work but tells the stories from a male point of view.

Ge Fei, “[The Invisibility Cloak](#).” This short Chinese noir novel is set in Beijing, where strange events start happening to a protagonist who sells audio equipment. I finished it in one sitting.

1 I sample an average of about five books a day. (I don't finish them all.)

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

To contact the author of this story:
 Tyler Cowen at tcowen2@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story:
 Katy Roberts at kroberts29@bloomberg.net

COMMENTS (6)

UP NEXT

Democrats Fear More Trump Voters in Wisconsin

LIVE ON BLOOMBERG
 Watch Live TV >
 Listen to Live Radio >



Have a confidential tip for our reporters?

[GET IN TOUCH](#)

Before it's here, it's on the Bloomberg Terminal.

[LEARN MORE](#)

01/11/2018