



Tom McCarthy

The author, whose most recent novel is 'The Making of Incarnation,' was disappointed by 'Slaughterhouse-Five': 'Endlessly repeating the phrase *so it goes* does not a *Weltanschauung* make.'

What books are on your night stand?

"Critique of Fantasy," by Laurence Rickels; "The Superrationals," by Stephanie LaCava; "The Encyclopedia of Surfing," by Matt Warshaw.

Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?

I was recently invited to write an introduction to NYRB's new edition of Gaddis's "The Recognitions." I'd read his slim "Agape Agape," but never his doorstopper first one, despite one of my own novels being described (in this very newspaper) as a tribute to it. So I took the offer as an excuse to catch up with my supposed influence — and found that Gaddis had indeed grappled with all the same questions (art forgery, cultural underworlds, the age-old Western fetish of "authenticity," etc.) 50 years earlier, and in an encyclopedic way. It's a magnificent book.

What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?

"Three," by Ann Quin. It follows a couple and their mysterious lodger as they run through a series of ritualized performances around an empty swimming pool and orchid-incubating hothouse, while a hostile public throw mud over the garden wall at them. It's an allegory for British postwar culture — but also a philosophical study of spectacle and death, and a detective story. Quin died, aged 37, in obscurity, and remained there for decades (although recently new editions have been appearing). Her work, despite its brilliance, keeps feeling its way toward the marginal and the invisible. One of her characters envies Navajo artists' ability to create in the sand each day a work of art that will be "rubbed out by sundown."

Which writers — novelists, playwrights,

critics, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most?

The poet and translator Anne Carson: Her "Oresteia" is a miracle, in that it both gets the essence of the Greek and seems totally contemporary. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben: He elevates the pause, the interval, the in-between and the unresolved to ontological conditions. The artist and thinker Hito Steyerl: She charts with devastating precision the direction in which our off-shored, derivatized and crypto-militarized society is drifting, and how culture facilitates this drift. And the poet and theorist Fred Moten, for his hymning of knowledge's "undercommons," its deviant intellectual cross-currents and flight-paths, "fugitive enlightenment."

How do you organize your books?

I have these giant acacia bookshelves built by a Finnish carpenter called Tina Lotila, who in her Berlin workshop has a parrot that can simulate to perfection the noise each one of her tools makes. She built them two years ago, and at first I tried to start at top-row-left with poetry, then morph somewhere mid-second-row into philosophy, then third or fourth-right to fiction. But I had to give that plan up. Where does Bataille go, or Ponge, or Derrida? If "Clarissa" is an epistolary novel, then so, really, is "The Post Card" — and then half of "Tristram Shandy" is speculative philosophy. And what about "I Love Dick"? Etc. So I just went alphabetical. Art monographs get their own section, but that's just because they're taller and so only fit in the bottom-row shelves.

What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?

"The Knowhow Book of Spycraft," by Falcon Travis and Judy Hindley.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn't?

I was really disappointed when I read "Slaughterhouse-Five," because I always thought of Vonnegut as a really cool writer whom I'd love when I got round to reading; and the book just seemed auto-journalistic — kind of like a heavy version of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," minus the drugs and nymphomaniac polar bears. And endlessly repeating the phrase *so it goes* does not a *Weltanschauung* make. But then I read his "Mother Night," and thought it was brilliant: dark and morally vertiginous and (as its title suggests) deeply Faustian. □

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.