Sixty-five writers make their selections from around the world.

**Bill Drummond's $20,000 (Beautiful Books) is a digressive, entertaining disquisition on the value of art, the starting point of which is "The Smell of Sighs in the Wind" by the Turner Prize–winner Richard Long. Some years after purchasing the work for the eponymous sum, Drummond decides that he is no longer able to derive any enjoyment from his acquisition. What follows is a quintessentially engaging journey of discovery as Drummond traverses the country with his photograph, following a whim which he hopes will end in the creation of a suitably meaningful replacement for his Long. Along the way, he confronts essential questions about the creation, appreciation and worth of art; ultimately, his thoughts coalesce in an act that is as logically sounded as it is artistically disconcerting. "If whims were not emburdened upon, very little of substance in the affairs of man . . . will ever be done", Drummond argues. He may just be right.

**Julian Barnes**

Barry Hannah's death at the start of the year passed with little notice in this country, where his work has long been unavailable. The short story was his best form, and Airships (Grove), an ear-perfect array of voices from the American South, was his best book, worth searching the internet for. Harry Mollish died recently so slightly more notice: defence of the mind, that with whom a person thinks, feels, creates, reflects on his or her self, submits to God. The book is therefore an attack, deeply delivered, on those who regard the mind, the self, as no more than burned-out words, bits of superfluous terminology which we should have long outgrown. There is a lot to be done here for those who cannot abandon the instinct for the transcendent now generally regarded as an intellectual embarrassment.

**Lucy Beckett**

Marylebone Robinson's Absence of Mind (Vog) is a short, intricately argued piece on the collapse of the concept of the mind, that with which a person thinks, feels, creates, reflects on his or her self, submits to God. The book is therefore an attack, deeply delivered, on those who regard the mind, the self, as no more than burned-out words, bits of superfluous terminology which we should have long outgrown. There is a lot to be done here for those who cannot abandon the instinct for the transcendent now generally regarded as an intellectual embarrassment.

**Jonathan Bate**

The two books I most enjoyed this summer took me to that fascinating and troubling place, Vienna in the early years of the last century. Edmund de Waal's The Hare with Amber Eyes (Chatto) is a beautiful piece of writing, mixing family memoir, cultural history, travel narrative and nuanced observation of miniature curiosities (his inherited collection of vases) in a style suggestive of Sebald without the gloom. On a similar note, small but beautiful objects: for several years I have been a fan of the Punkin Press's little editions of European classics, Fear, Anansi Boat's version of Stefan Zweig's As an Angel, is perfect translation of a near-perfect novella of bourgeois adultery and guilt. The best literary biography of the year was Wendy Moffat's E. M. Forster: A New Life (Bloomsbury). I am congenitally resistant to biographies that regard the sexuality of writers as the key to their literary careers, but the case of Forster is genuinely one of the exceptions that prove the rule.

**Mary Beard**

Exhibition catalogues can be a wonderful Vestibule of good writing, clever ideas and stunning images. Yet we often overlook them, as if they were as ephemeral as the shows they commemorate. This year the catalogue produced to accompany the first of a series of five exhibitions planned for the Capitoline Museum in Rome, I giorni di Roma (The heyday of Rome), stands out. Entitled L'estasi della conquista (The age of conquest; Skirt) it includes excellent essays on Roman culture in the last two centuries BC, and marvellous photographs of the art of the period, familiar and unfamiliar (including some extraordinary terracotta sculpture, discovered in the 1950s in a villa in the Abruzzo, quite unknown to me).

Equally impressive is Chaos and Classicism, the catalogue of an exhibition at the Guggenheim, New York, focusing on ancient themes in the art of the 1920s and 30s. It brilliantly disposes of the common misconception that Modernism turned its back on Greece and Rome.

**Paul Binding**

I am dazzled by Simon Armitage's collection, Seeing Stars (Faber), a splendid piece of writing, mixing family memoir, cultural history, travel narrative and nuanced observation of miniature curiosities (his inherited collection of vases) in a style suggestive of Sebald without the gloom. On a similar note, small but beautiful objects: for several years I have been a fan of the Punkin Press's little editions of European classics, Fear, Anansi Boat's version of Stefan Zweig's As an Angel, is perfect translation of a near-perfect novella of bourgeois adultery and guilt. The best literary biography of the year was Wendy Moffat's E. M. Forster: A New Life (Bloomsbury). I am congenitally resistant to biographies that regard the sexuality of writers as the key to their literary careers, but the case of Forster is genuinely one of the exceptions that prove the rule.