

# 10 Exceptional Books

from University Presses

by Peter  
Skinner

First, sincere thanks are gratefully offered to all university press personnel; their enthusiasm and professionalism underpin the success of a great creative industry. They deserve the warmest praise.

Year 2005 has been impossibly rich in every sort of book, and Big Ten choices must seem ever more arbitrary. Intent remains unchanged: to note ten books of unusual interest and reward. High design standards help, as does—if needed—good illustration. Expected front- and back-matter are taken for granted. The hope is that books from smaller presses will appear; this year, as in the past, they have honorably earned their place. The acid tests are two: will a selected book ease two days' isolation in a lonely, snow-bound cabin? And would a book's owner (at the risk of a ruptured friendship) say, "You'd love this—but I'm not about to lend it and lose it"?

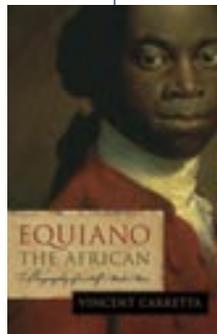
Poetry is the most challenging category, as strictly personal preferences often overwhelm hoped-for skilled and fair assessment. This year, a book of poetry in translation—one language but many poets of differing sensibilities, metaphors, and imagery—lets readers judge among many voices. A distinctive volume of English-language poetry is noted in the endpiece.

The best books invariably open the mind to ideas and experiences beyond the expected: they expand the reader's universe. Thanks to the imaginative publishing that the nation's university presses undertake, no one needs lack for enrichment and reward.

# 1

## SELF-MADE CITIZENS

*Equiano the African*, Vincent Carretta, The University of Georgia Press, 436 pages, 20 b/w illustrations, 8 maps, hardcover, \$29.95, 0-8203-2571-6



Olaudah Equiano lived a short life (1745?–97) and wrote a memorable biography, *The Interesting Narrative . . .* (1789). But few short lives have been so dramatic and incident-packed or have finally harvested more just reward, and few autobiographies so leave the reader wanting to

know more. Vincent Carretta (biographer of Phyllis Wheatley and other significant early African Americans) tells the reader very much more in reconsidering Equiano's life, his role in promoting the abolition of slavery, and his disputed origins. Carretta presents a wealth of engrossing and often new detail in a fully realized context of time and place.

The author illuminates Equiano's dangerous and exciting years with Lt. Michael Pascal, his first owner, on British men-of-war in the Mediterranean and Canada, and then his horrific time as a clerk on Montserrat, owned by one Mr. King, a Quaker with a flexible conscience.

What fascinates is Equiano's quest for experience—his Mediterranean cruises, his Arctic voyage on the *Carcass* (Horatio Nelson aboard)—and his years in the failing Sierra Leone resettlement project. Carretta deals fully with Equiano's growing self-awareness and ambitions and his aggressively self-promoted autobiography, which in condemning the inhumanity of slavery also confirmed the civilizedness of Equiano—an exemplar of his race and its potential.

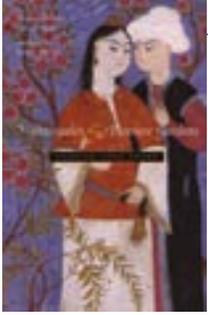
Carretta brilliantly brings alive the vibrant, highly competitive expansionist world of the late eighteenth century: his readers experience the many locales and live the many challenging moments.

**Also recommended:** *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, Oxford University Press, 662 pages, hardcover, \$35.00, 0-19-507238-3.

## 9

**A MULTITUDE OF VOICES**

*Nightingales and Pleasure Gardens: Turkish Love Poems*, Talat S. Halman, editor and translator, Jayne L. Warner, assistant editor, Syracuse University Press, 160 pages, softcover, \$16.95, 0-8156-0835-7



This volume deserves a warm welcome. Presenting poetry in translation calls for courage: technical difficulties can overwhelm. Because few readers (and certainly not this reviewer) can compare originals and translations, the latter simply have to “work,”

and a surprising number of Halman’s do. Some sixty poets, from Aprin Çor Tigin (sixth century A.D.) to contemporaries, appear here; for each, the translator provides an identifying note. Though Rumi and Yunus Emre are well represented, twentieth-century poets dominate.

Contrasting styles abound. Suleyman the Magnificent fixes upon exotic imagery: “*My sheer delight, my revelry, my feast, / My torch, my sunshine, my sun in heaven; / My orange, my pomegranate, / The flaming candle that lights up my pavilion*”; while a folk poet combines concision with force: “*Without fruit, the branch is dry— / Can the stars abandon the sky? / They tell me to leave my love. / Can’t give up love—how can I?*”

Nazim Hikmet, whom persecution failed to wean from communism, gets generous treatment here. His “prison poems” confirm the power of personal beliefs; one is particularly poignant: “*How lovely to remember you, / in the midst of the news of death and victory, / in prison, / when I am past forty.*”

This book offers not only the delights of Islamic poetry, but also a cultural education.

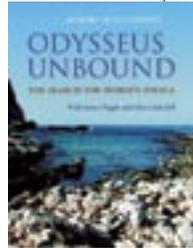
**Also recommended:** *In a Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare*, David Starkey and Paul J. Willis, editors, University of Iowa Press, 206 pages, hardcover, \$34.95, 0-87745-939-8, softcover, \$16.95, 0-87745-940-1. In this exuberant cornucopia of talent, wit, insight, and reverence, some ninety poets known and less-known respond to the sonnets, comedies, histories, and tragedies that Shakespeare’s genius gave the world.

## 10

**THE LIVING PAST**

*Cleopatra and Rome*, Diana E. K. Kleiner, Harvard University Press, 340 pages, 42 color and 29 halftone illustrations, hardcover, \$29.95, 0-674-01905-9

*Odysseus Unbound*, Robert Bittlestone, Cambridge University Press, 618 pages, 300 color and 38 b/w illustrations, hardcover, \$40.00, 0-521-85357-5



These two books, both written by scholars who combine verve with clarity, also reflect outstanding design and production qualities. They deserve special recognition.

*Odysseus Unbound* brings new analyses to an old problem: the seeming impossibility of pinpointing on Ithaca Homer’s many references to the much-changed island. Using the most advanced investigative techniques available to geologists and archaeologists, together with aerial photography and comprehensive literary research, the expert authorial trio posits, disproves, or proves hypotheses in order to “reconstruct” ancient Ithaca, allowing for convincing identification of Homer’s locations and sites, including that of Odysseus’s palace. The appositely quoted *Odyssey* forms the spine of the book, scientific findings its ribs, and vivid prose its sinews. The reader’s reward is truly thrilling detection supported by breathtaking illustration, yielding a revitalized epic whose prime location of Ithaca is made newly recognizable and powerfully evocative.



The matchless Cleopatra, who bore a son by Julius Caesar and two by Mark Antony, and saw Egypt and the East fall to Octavian, embraced immortality by means of a dramatic suicide. In her generously illustrated *Cleopatra and Rome*, Diana Kleiner moves beyond the emotive legend to the tangible legacy: though Greek and Roman authors had little good to say of Cleopatra, her image, accouterments, and taste fueled contemporary Egyptomania; her projection of power and personality shaped the Principate’s propaganda, delivered through sculpture, painting, wall panels, and coin images. She was a one-woman cultural revolution, as Kleiner brilliantly depicts in her enchanting book.

**Also recommended:** *Cities of the World; A History in Maps*, Peter Whitfield, University of California Press, 208 pages, 120 color and 26 b/w illustrations, hardcover, \$39.95, 0-520-24725-6. Exceptional illustrations provide a tour through time.

