

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian
On my radar: Karl Ove Knausgaard's cultural highlights
Killian Fox
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Spy novels, Swedish art and the Russian obsession with immortality feature on the Norwegian literary heavyweight's cultural hitlist



Image: Karl Ove Knausgaard: 'I'm a sucker for spy novels.' Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

Karl Ove Knausgaard is a Norwegian author, born in 1968, who lives in London and Sweden. He gained worldwide fame, and notoriety, with his six-volume series of autobiographical novels entitled *My Struggle* (or *Min Kamp* in Norwegian), which dissected his life and relationships in often merciless detail. The *Wall Street Journal* described him as "one of the 21st-century's greatest literary sensations". He is also the author of the *Seasons Quartet* and, most recently, the essay collection (translated by Martin Aitken) *In the Land of the Cyclops* (Harvill Secker).

1. Novel

Shuggie Bain by Douglas Stuart

I started reading *Shuggie Bain* last weekend and I'm really, really stunned by it. It's so good. I think it's the best first book I've read in many years. The characters have so much space around them – normally plot narrows character but that's not the case here. It's set in working-class Glasgow in the 1980s, focusing on the relationship between a son and his mother, who is turning into an alcoholic. It's a heartbreaking story, and quite hard to read at times, but it's almost like it's uplifting on behalf of literature. And it's written with great warmth and compassion for the characters.

2. Album



Philip Glass: Piano Works by Vikingur Ólafsson

Image: Vikingur Olafsson: 'simplicity that is almost majestic'. Photograph: Antonio Olmos

We got this as a Christmas present from my father-in-law, who's a pianist and musicologist, and I think it's one of his favourite records. Ólafsson is an Icelandic pianist and here he's playing works by Philip Glass, for whom repetition is a big thing. The album has a simplicity that for me becomes almost majestic in the end. It's so precise and so clear – it feels almost mathematical but also very soulful. You listen to it for a little while and new details keep emerging. I've been playing it all the time since we got it.

3. TV



The Bureau (Canal+/Amazon Prime)

'Incredibly well done': The Bureau. Photograph: Amazon

I'm a sucker for spy novels, but when it comes to movies and TV shows, there aren't many spy stories that I really like. My favourite has always been the BBC adaptation of Smiley's *People* from the 1980s. But then I got switched

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on to The Bureau and we've been binge-watching it – we're now on the last season of five. It's about the French intelligence services as they're investigating al-Qaida, or Russia, and it's very much focused on the bureaucracy of it. I really admire the writing and the acting is absolutely superb. It's incredibly well done, one of the best TV series I've seen, not that I've watched much TV.

4. Art

Mamma Andersson



Image: Dead End, 2010, by Mamma Andersson. Photograph: © Mamma Andersson / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Bildupphovsrätt, Sweden Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

This is a Swedish artist I really love. She's a really brilliant figurative painter. Her paintings are mysterious, enigmatic, but still kind of everyday life-ish. They show people in empty rooms; she also paints forests and landscapes where there's always something slightly threatening, but you don't quite know what it is. There's an apocalyptic feeling in some of them, but they're very beautiful too. It's tough to describe but they're very striking when you see them. She had an exhibition in New York recently, which I've just been looking at online, and she's changing, but you can still see that it's her.

5. Nonfiction

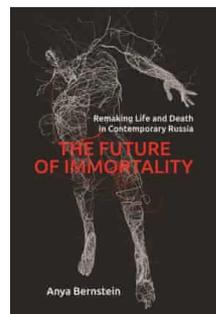


Image: Princeton University Press

Anya Bernstein: The Future of Immortality

I've been reading a lot about Russia and came across this great book about the idea of immortality in Russian culture. Bernstein, a professor of anthropology at Harvard, investigates the idea from different angles. It could be dead bodies being cryogenically frozen until a time when science is able to resurrect them, or ideas of downloading the mind into machines, but she also looks at the 19th-century philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, who felt that the common task of humanity should be the resurrection through science of all people who have lived. So the idea has deep roots in Russia. It's a really fascinating book.

6. Documentary



American Utopia (2020)

Image: David Byrne in American Utopia, directed by Spike Lee. Photograph: 1996-98 AccuSoft Inc., All rights reserved/AP

My wife and I went to a David Byrne show in London in 2018 and we were completely blown away by it. Byrne had an amazing band and they were all walking around and dancing while they played, even the drummers. I'd never seen anything like it. So it was very nice to see the film version of the show over Christmas, directed by Spike Lee. The set list was slightly different, and it was filmed in New York so it was a bit more about US politics, but the spirit of it was the same. The rhythms are so mesmerising. You want the songs to go on and on for ever.