

BOOKS

Roland White picks the books that rose to the occasion in a stormy political year

POLITICS

Does this sound familiar? A Republican presidential candidate is accused of being unstable and a bit dim. He is a man, says his Democratic opponent, who will divide "black from white, Jew from Christian". That was in 1980, and President Carter was describing Ronald Reagan, who turned out to be one of the most successful postwar presidents. No pressure then, Donald.

In **Reagan: American Icon** (IB Tauris £20) Iwan Morgan traces the former Hollywood star's rise from small-town Illinois and finds a more complicated man than his reputation suggests: a pragmatist rather than a right-wing ideologue, and, according to Morgan, "one of a small band of leaders across the ages who change the course of history through their remarkable qualities of vision, will and character".

It has been an exceptional year in politics, and this year's collection of political books has risen to the occasion. If Reagan has lessons for the next president, then Jeremy Corbyn might be encouraged by **Citizen Clem** (Riverrun £30), John Bew's biography of Clement Attlee, a man who became Labour leader by default, was never expected to last long in the job, but won an unexpected landslide. Attlee was a distant and austere figure by reputation, but the book sweeps that away from the start, recalling Clem the street agitator and war hero, wounded by "friendly" shellfire as an infantry captain in Mesopotamia.

Older readers might remember that Ed Balls, the star of this year's *Strictly Come Dancing*, used to dabble in politics. His memoir, **Speaking Out: Lessons in Life and Politics** (Hutchinson £20), is self-deprecating (very unusual in the genre), often poignant and occasionally revealing: during the 2015 election campaign, shadow chancellor Balls spoke to the Labour leader Ed



On the up Ronald Reagan, with his wife Nancy, 1975; below, Ed Balls struts his *Strictly* stuff

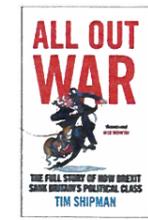
Leaders of the pack

Miliband just twice. After reading his book, you feel you would enjoy Balls's company. Ken Clarke's memoir, **Kind of Blue** (Macmillan £25), pulls off the same trick. There are no startling revelations (although the former chancellor's relatively modest background in a Nottinghamshire pit village was a surprise to me), but instead we take a pleasant journey through his career. It is difficult to dislike a man who admits frankly, after losing the party leadership to Iain Duncan Smith: "My considered reaction...was that the Conservative party had gone mad."

After the Brexit campaign, you might not have the stamina for more than 400 pages on the future of the euro, but Joseph Stiglitz makes the ordeal relatively painless. In **The Euro** (Allen Lane £20), the Nobel-winning economist is damning about the state of the European currency. "It is clear that Europe is facing a lost decade," he writes. "There is a risk that in a few years' time we will be speaking of Europe's lost quarter of a century." A surprisingly accessible read, but a rather depressing one. Leaving the euro to Stiglitz,

Politics book of the year

ALL OUT WAR by TIM SHIPMAN
Wm Collins £25



The EU referendum was the most significant political event of modern times. This book, by the political editor of *The Sunday Times*, is the definitive account. (Please note: although Tim is obviously a colleague, we have never actually met.) The book is big on detail — we learn, among other things, that the Goves ate beef on referendum night — but on reading it you might think how remote it all seems from everyday life: exactly the feeling that handed victory to the Brexiters.

Mervyn King traces the origins of the 2008 banking crisis in **The End of Alchemy** (Little, Brown £25). The former Bank of England governor was inspired to write his book by a remark from a Chinese central banker about the western economies: "I don't think you've quite got the hang of money and banking yet." King makes the argument, remarkable coming from a central banker, that

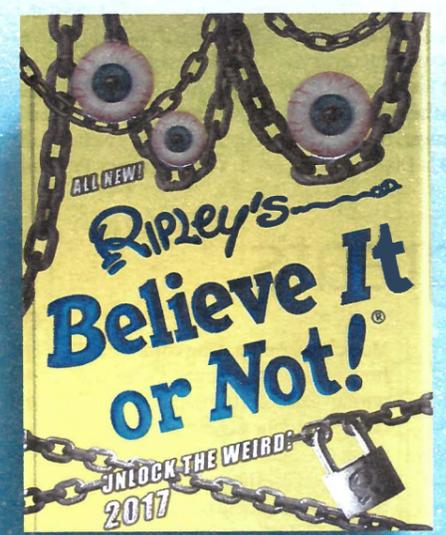
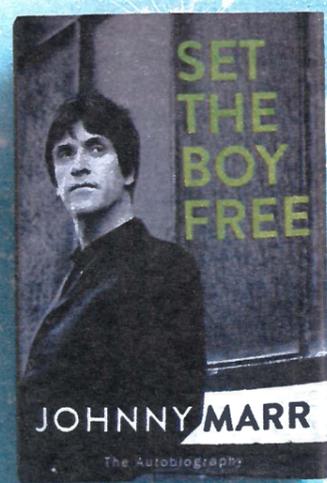
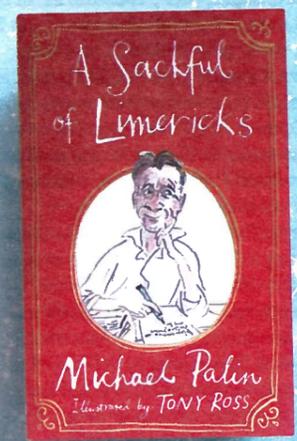
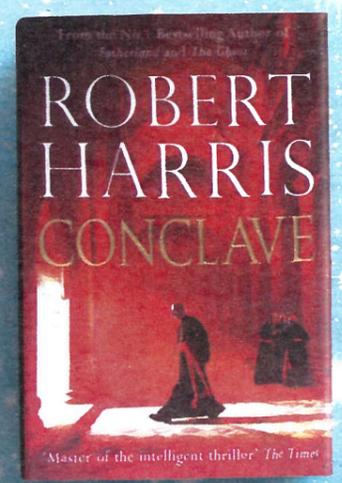
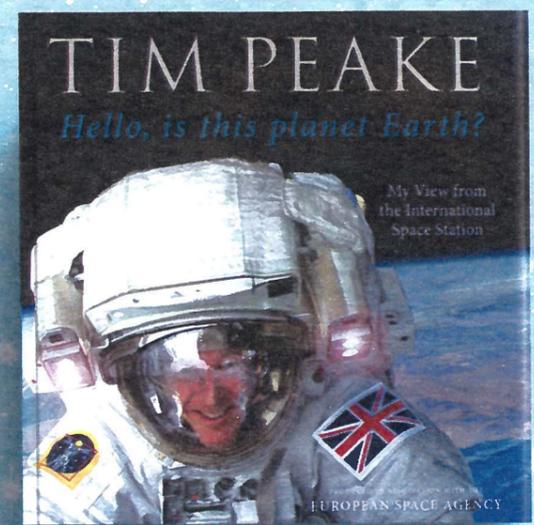
money and banking are the "Achilles heel" of the market economy. Considering the subject matter, this is an easy read with flashes of unexpected wit. "If the economy had grown after the crisis at the same rate as the number of books about it," he writes, "we would have been back at full employment a long time ago."

Have you forgotten who is fighting whom in the Syrian war, who is on which side, and why? In **Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe** (Verso £8.99) the foreign correspondent Charles Glass explains all, beginning with a chronology that takes us back to 2011 when President Bashar al-Assad brutally suppressed demonstrations in the city of Dera.

Broken Vows by Tom Bower (Faber £20), meanwhile, is a warts-and-all account of Tony Blair's time in office and his subsequent career as a cash magnet. Mostly warts, as you will see from some of the chapter headings: *Hither and Dither, A Government Adrift, Everything Is PR*. The book is lively and full of interest, but it has a central flaw: is there anybody, even in the Labour Party, who wants to read another word about the Blair years? ☑

NEXT WEEK

Our choice of the best children's books, plus biographies and memoirs, humour, stage and screen, pop music, literature, nature and thought.



There is a great read for everyone this Christmas

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