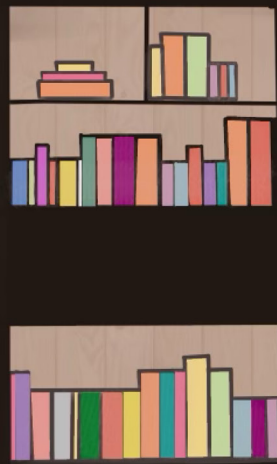


# BIBLIOMANN

VOLUME VI, ISSUE II



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CHARLOTTE BRONTE  
*Jane Eyre*



“There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.” The opening line of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* conjures a sense of dreariness and despair that holds true throughout the classic novel. Born in Victorian Era England, young orphan Jane Eyre lives with her late uncle’s family, the Reeds, at Gateshead Hall. Growing up at Gateshead Hall, Jane’s unfair aunt and cruel cousins despise her. She is often bullied by her cousin John and blamed for the family’s misfortune. Throughout this story, Brontë paints Jane as an unfortunate young girl with limited opportunities. Accused of being disobedient and a burden, young Jane is sent away by her aunt to Lowood School, a strict and abusive institution, where she will live for the next eight years in poor conditions, enduring constant bullying and unfair teachers. During her early time at Lowood, Jane finds comfort in her friend Helen Burns and together they help each other survive their prison-like surroundings. This friendship proves to be temporary as Helen eventually falls victim to a typhus epidemic that breaks out at Lowood. This loss is devastating not only to Jane, but also to the reader. When I read this, I was heartbroken for Jane.



Throughout the novel, I felt as though Jane was stuck at Lowood and that her life would be a continuous cycle of tragedy and sadness. It wasn't until Jane finally decided to leave Lowood and take up a position as governess for a young girl at Thornfield Manor, a mysterious mansion with an absent owner, that I finally felt hopeful for her. Even when she lives at Thornfield Manor, Jane remains a supporting figure helping out rather than being in the spotlight. During her time at Thornfield, she creates a connection with the absent owner, Edward Fairfax Rochester, and the other housekeepers. While Thornfield possesses ominous and eerie elements that make the reader's heart pound with fear, it also has a contrasting beauty to it that draws the reader in.

Throughout her time at Thornfield Manor, Jane often hears creaking noises and strange words within the walls, and she often sees a shadowy figure roaming the halls at night. One night, she wakes to the smell and sound of a growing fire that neither the housekeepers nor guests started; I was confused when I didn't understand what happened but then surprised and rattled when I discovered the cause. The book's beauty comes from Brontë's writing style and imagery of the scenery and characters; her descriptive writing feels authentic and real rather than imaginative and distant.

I loved this book so much. This pick was a bit out-of-the-ordinary for me since it isn't my usual genre, but its mysterious and gloomy ambiance kept me hooked and eager to uncover Thornfield Manor's secrets. There were moments where I was surprised, sad, or confused, but ultimately the ending was serene and happy and the book was tied together beautifully. The characters were well represented and had personality to them; I felt immersed in this classic surrounded by Jane, Mr. Rochester, Helen Burns, and many of the other intricate characters. I felt as though I was alongside Jane as she discovered herself and her lineage throughout the novel, creating a place for herself in an unfair world. Brontë brings us through a rollercoaster of events and emotions with her captivating writing. If you are a fan of mystery, a bit of thriller, drama, and romance, I would definitely recommend you read this book; it is the perfect combination of many intriguing genres.



# ★ Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*

—Olivia Coward

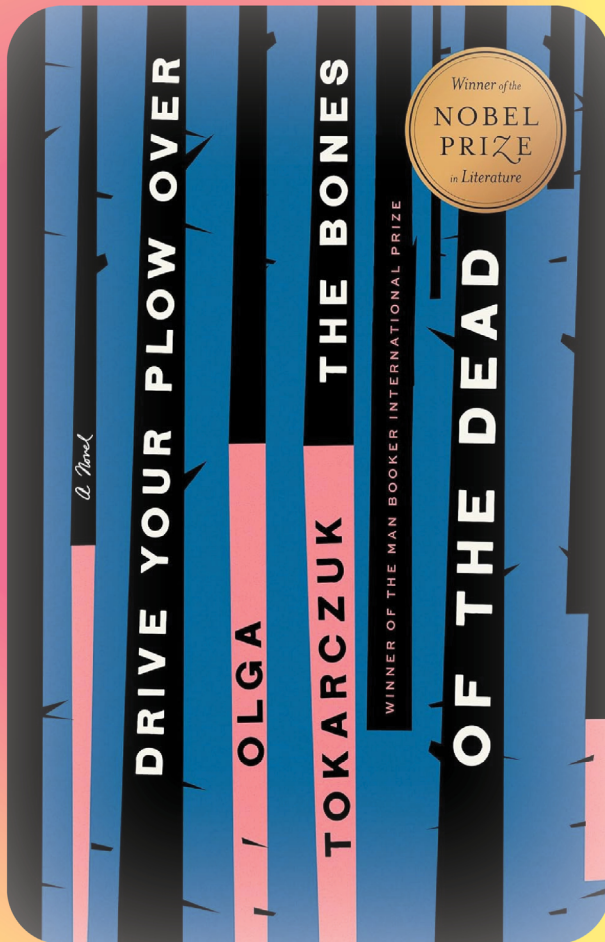
Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* is narrated by Janina, an aging woman labeled as the senile recluse of a small Polish town. Despite her age, Janina is an activist in her own right. She voices radical opinions on animal rights, astrology, and human nature to the other villagers with determination, which only isolates her further from her community. When mysterious murders begin occurring all over town, linked only by the presence of animals at the crime scene, it's no surprise that Janina gets involved. As she becomes entangled in a web of disturbing events, her mental and physical states grow increasingly unstable.

Tokarczuk makes clear the inspiration behind the novel with its title, which quotes William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell," a poem from his book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Indeed, it was my luck that I was studying William Blake's work in Dr. Casdin's British Romanticism senior elective at the same time that I was reading this book. Tokarczuk's work is so rich with Blake references that *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* was the first non-school book that I have annotated in order to keep track of parallel themes. The first reference I noted was on the cover, where the title of the book evokes Tokarczuk's and Blake's themes of death and nature. And in pulling from the "Proverbs of Hell," Tokarczuk also mimics Blake's rejection of oversimplified dichotomies within his poem - the devil and god, good and evil, right and wrong - themes that run throughout her novel.

The element in the novel that reminded me most of Blake is the narrator. Both Blake and Janina have vivid imaginations: Blake invented his own complex mythological system and Janina develops her own complex astrological understanding of the universe. Both worldviews are so idiosyncratic that many of Blake's contemporaries believed him to be a madman - just as many of the villagers deem Janina to be a senile old hermit. Initially, I agreed with the villagers: Janina is undoubtedly an unreliable narrator, often inventing half truths and spouting outlandish ideas.

Upon first being introduced to Blake, I thought he was unstable as well. His poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* seemed like children's





fables devoid of any deeper meaning. And then there was *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in which Blake recounts a vision of an angel guiding the narrator through a tour of hell before they “flew westerly thro’ the night, til we were elevated above the earth’s shadow; then I flung myself with him directly into the body of the sun.” At some point, the narrator watches a devil as he writes “Proverbs of Hell,” a seemingly nonsensical set of statements such as: “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion;” “Sooner strangle an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires;” and of course, the titular “Drive your plow over the bones of the dead.” While at first *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* seemed to me the uninterpretable fever dream of an eccentric, as our class dug deeper into the text, we uncovered shocking kernels of wisdom that played with the binaries of imagination and reality, childhood and adulthood, life and death.

Similarly, while I – and certainly the villagers in the novel – often dismissed Janina’s ramblings as incoherent delusions, as the book progressed, I found myself pausing more and more at striking moments of enlightened clarity. For example, when Janina advocates for animal rights, she argues that, “You’ll say it’s just one Boar, but what about the deluge of butchered meat that falls on our cities day by day like neverending apocalyptic rain? This rain leads to slaughter, disease, collective madness, the obfuscation and contamination of the mind. For no human heart is capable of bearing so much pain.”

Within the novel, Janina serves almost as an embodiment of Blake, carrying his imagination and radical views. Thus, by painting Janina’s beliefs as both wise and crazed, Tokarczuk simultaneously embraces and rejects Blake’s ideas. I love both works because the authors challenge readers’ minds, leaving it up to them to either dismiss seemingly preposterous notions or challenge their preconceptions to glean radical wisdom from unconventional sources.

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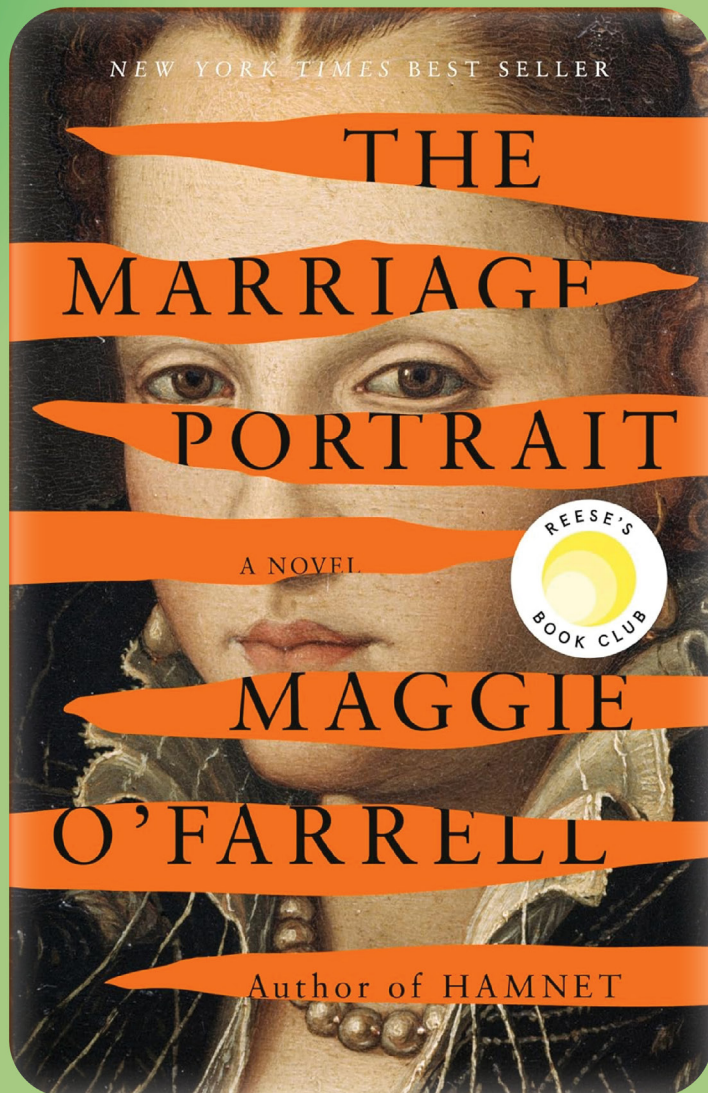
# ★ Maggie O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait*

—Leila Dossani

At age 15, Lucrezia de' Medici was forced to marry 24-year-old Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. Less than a year later, she died. The official cause of her death was stated to be “putrid fever,” but it was rumored that she had been murdered by her husband.

*The Marriage Portrait* by Maggie O'Farrell is a captivating historical fiction novel following the life of Lucrezia in 16th-century Italy. From the first chapter, Lucrezia makes it clear that she believes that her husband is going to murder her. The chapters alternate between Lucrezia's childhood and the days where she is anticipating her death, until finally, the two timelines join at the end of the book. After keeping you craving more with elegant prose and hints at Lucrezia's looming death, O'Farrell ends the book with a shocking twist.

I generally don't gravitate towards historical fiction, but I thought O'Farrell did an excellent job of keeping true to the historical facts while also taking her own creative liberties. I also loved how at the end of the book, O'Farrell provides a short author's note that describes what aspects of the story are real and which parts she fabricated. For example, she explains how she was inspired by the sudden and

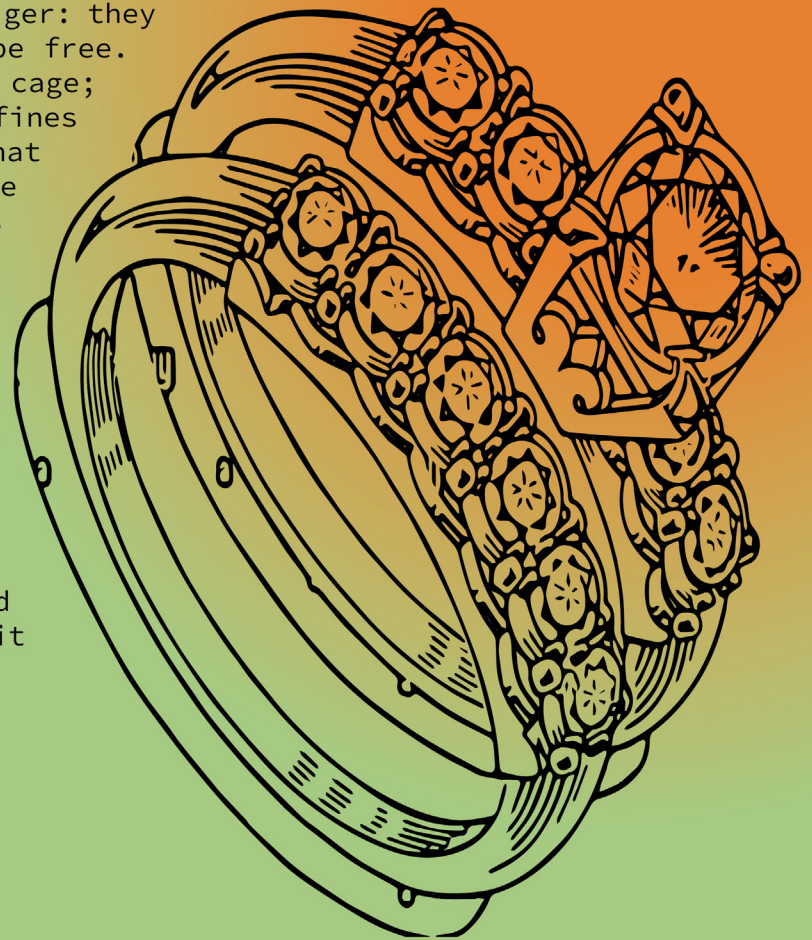




suspicious deaths of two of Lucrezia's sisters, Isabella and Dianora. There remains debate about their causes of death, with some speculating foul play. However, their husbands were never held accountable for their wives' unexplained deaths. O'Farrell's historical novel is her attempt at reclaiming and giving life to one of the many women whose deaths were tragically overlooked.

One of my favorite parts of the book is when Lucrezia describes the exotic animals that her father kept in the basement of their palace, Palazzo Vecchio. The Sala dei Leoni, the room of the lions, held lions, bears, gorillas, and boars. When her father hosted honored guests at his palace, he would pit the animals against each other for sport. Lucrezia describes how when she was a child, her father had a tiger shipped from a remote part of Bengal to Tuscany. Lucrezia felt a special connection to the tiger: they were both trapped and itching to be free. The tiger yearned to escape his cage; Lucrezia wished to escape the confines of the palace and expectations that she marry and bear children. In the author's note, O'Farrell explains that there was actually a collection of exotic animals in the basement of the Palazzo Vecchio, which I found fascinating.

*The Marriage Portrait* is a striking novel filled with descriptive imagery that details the ornate palace that Lucrezia grows up in and the dramatic scenery of northern Italy. This book kept me hooked throughout, leading me to finish it in under three days.



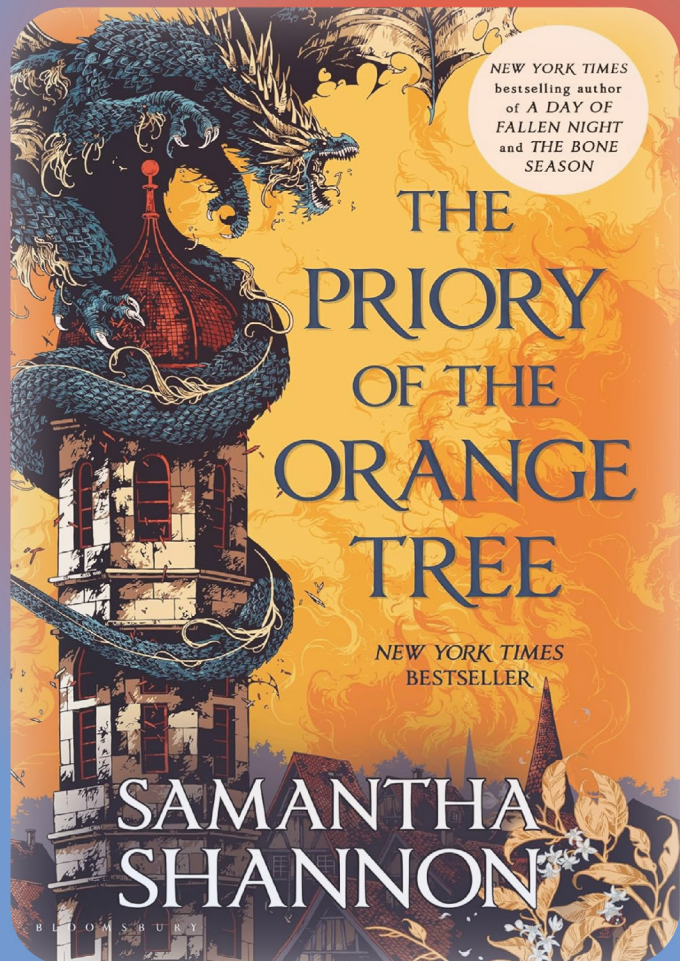


# ★ Samatha Shannon's *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

—Alessandra Agopian

If your world was divided and crumbling, how far would you go to save it? What if powerful kingdoms stood in your path? *The Priory of the Orange Tree* by Samantha Shannon follows the journey of five distinctive characters as they navigate a divided world full of magic. In the land of Inys, the heirless Queen Sabran the Ninth must save her people from destruction by having a daughter; Ead Duryan must covertly protect her Queen with forbidden magic; and Loth Beck must resolve political problems he never knew existed. In Orisima, Tané must hide her terrible secret at the risk of ending her dragon-riding career, and Niclays Roos must escape his captivity. As their lives crash together, an ancient enemy awakens that threatens all of their survival.

While the book is plot-heavy, the action often takes a backseat to the characters' motivations and personal journeys, which are wonderfully written. Be it Sabran's struggle between love and duty or Tané's single-minded quest for her goals, the motivations and actions of each character are wholehearted and hold true throughout the book. The book's narration switches among the points of view (POV) of five characters from all ends of the world, providing readers with an entire spectrum of political, religious, and social views. Consequently, we see tension between charac-





ters in a new light, as we can understand their motivations. Although characters are framed as “evil” or “wrong” within POV chapters, no single character is “evil” all of the time. Niclays’s actions often harm other characters, framing him as a villain in the other POVs. Yet, in his mind, he is simply a man doing what he has to, be it murder or sabotage, so that he can be free.

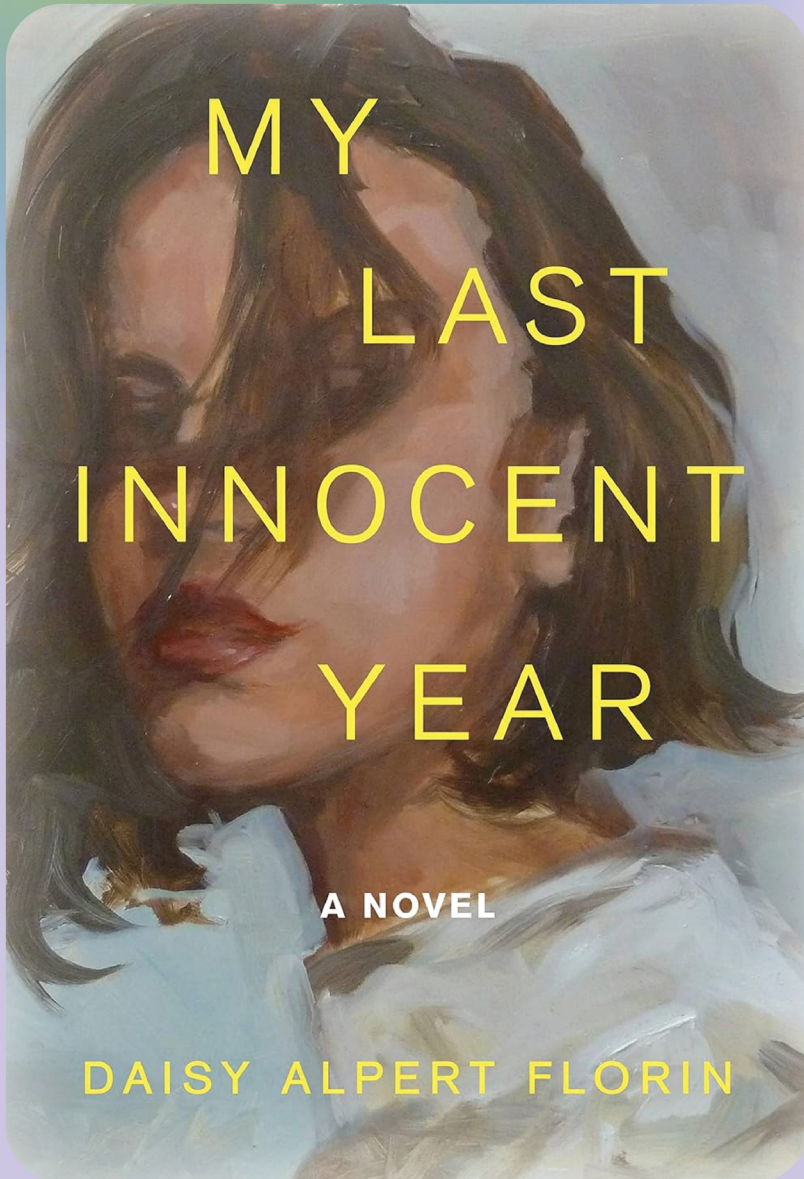
Shannon’s worldbuilding is masterful, setting up complex and overlapping political, religious, and economic systems. There are no heavy-handed dialogues where the entire history of a nation is explained or pages and pages of encyclopedic information about a character. Rather, the reader is forced to read into interactions between advisors in a counsel or watch a character’s habits to gain an understanding of their characteristics. We can ascertain much about Sabran’s character from the way she asserts her power over her council members – softly but still unyielding. Ead’s past is elucidated when we see her shift her accent to sound more Western. It was a fascinating puzzle to put together as I read. However, these small details and interactions can tend to mix into a jumble – some are necessary and others not. For instance, the minutiae of the religions and political systems of the Inysh and the Yscalin made me get slightly lost in the book.

I was drawn to the book because it had dragons and fascinating worldbuilding. I ended up truly adoring it. It had the perfect blend of fantasy and intrigue. The POV switches always came at the perfect time, though I was often frustrated when I was left on a cliffhanger. Every time the different characters’ plotlines overlapped, I almost threw the book in excitement. This is easily one of my favorite fantasies, and I highly recommend it!



# ★ Daisy Alpert Florin's *My Last Innocent Year*

—Alice Davis



*My Last Innocent Year*, Daisy Alpert Florin's debut novel, chronicles the experience of Isabel Rosen, aspiring author and lifelong resident of a "pre-hipster" Lower East Side, at the elite Wilder College. Since sophomore year at Wilder, Isabel's best friend Debra Moskowitz has been an active feminist on campus, founding a feminist journal and leading a rebel feminist group that once copied the ID of a student who had been sexually assaulting girls at parties and hung it up on every bathroom mirror on campus. Early in freshman year, Isabel also began a friendship with Zev Neman at Shabbat dinner at their school's Hillel House, as they were two of the college's "skeletal collection of Jews."

When Zev rapes Isabel in December of their last year of college, Debra springs into action, vandalizing Zev's dorm room door. Zev is outraged, believing that Isabel should have told him that she felt uncomfortable rather than allowing Debra to act after the fact. Isabel doesn't know how to feel, saying, "Something passed between us, a look that encapsulated all



the years of our friendship – because I guess that’s what it was – all of it, evaporated in a moment. I felt like I’d let him down.”

From that moment on, *My Last Innocent Year* deftly takes us through the rest of Isabel’s last semester of college, which includes an extramarital affair that tangles both Isabel and her professor in a potential kidnapping case. Isabel seeks to be recognized as a legitimate author and artist despite her focus on “girls with feelings.” She strives to challenge conventional narratives and elevate oppressed voices in her work. However, since most of her classmates and professors don’t share or appreciate this focus, Isabel feels isolated and inadequate.

*My Last Innocent Year* has a captivating story, with specificity in every scene to build atmosphere and set the stage for the reader. Florin’s prose is specific and vividly detailed without being overly wordy or confusing. Though Isabel’s journey, both artistic and romantic, is her own, Florin manages to create a coming-of-age story resonant with any girl.

I truly loved *My Last Innocent Year*. I came into it with a few fears: I was worried that Isabel would verge into “manic pixie dream girl” territory (I was thrown off by an early description of her “scuffed” Doc Martens), that the story would lack real nuance, or that Florin wouldn’t manage to juggle all of the complexities of sexual assault. Though #MeToo stories can sometimes feel too “inspirational” or lack real nuance, Florin manages to infuse Isabel’s story with all of her confusing feelings about her own assault, Zev’s moral character and intentions, and what it means to be a woman and a feminist. Isabel and Zev have known each other for four years, and she struggles to label him as a bad or amoral person after one night’s actions, no matter how quick Debra is to categorize him. She has her own guilt and regret to handle, along with anger at Zev, which has only come second to her years-long admiration of him as an intellectual equal.

Isabel was relatable and human. She sought to be recognized as a complete individual, with all of the many facets of her identity recognized and accepted, but she stumbled along the way. This lands her in a strange, almost Lolita-esque relationship with her professor, R.H. Connolly, who praises her for her exceptional writing talents. Isabel also tried to work out her relationship with her dad, Abe, who has worked hard all his life at a Lower East Side appetizing store. Through him,

Isabel reconciles her relationship with both love and money. As for love, she says, “My parents’ marriage had always been a mystery to me.” The fifteen-year age gap between her parents confused Isabel. She felt that her mother, an offbeat artist, was always searching for something beyond the Lower East Side until her death just before Isabel’s matriculation into Wilder. In contrast, her father was content staying right where he was. Isabel also has to come to terms with the economic disparity between herself and her classmates upon graduation, saying, “But now I saw that it had always been about money, and those who’d spent their time here with that in mind were the ones with all the answers, while the rest of us were left scrounging.”

*My Last Innocent Year* provides a fresh look at an old issue, full of delicious details and rich imagery. Florin knows how to handle all of the complexities of Isabel’s story, and what comes out is something that feels searingly human. Florin doesn’t seek to moralize her three-dimensional characters, including Connolly, Abe, and Zev, and the ambiguity she infuses into the story makes it all the more realistic. The ambiguous characters are more true to life; whether we like it or not, most people in our lives can’t be grouped into “good” and “evil” categories, and Isabel still holds love and affection for even the more “evil” of her characters. Whether you’re coming for her rich descriptions of the college town and strange campus rituals or the multi-faceted feminist message, Florin manages to deliver on all fronts.

Sources:

Florin, Daisy Alpert. *My Last Innocent Year*. Henry Holt and Company, 2023.



# ★ Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* —Zach Hornfeld

*The Historian*, Elizabeth Kostova's debut novel, is a thrilling historical fantasy that follows the journey of a history professor-turned-diplomat named Paul and his 16-year-old daughter as they search for Dracula's tomb.

The story's central thread is set in the 1970s and is narrated by Paul's unnamed daughter. She accidentally stumbles upon a mysterious old book that brought its readers before her nothing but trouble and misfortune. Eventually, Paul leaves his daughter to handle some unfinished business. The daughter grows increasingly curious about the book and her father's past, and she decides to follow him. Interspersed throughout the novel are a series of letters Paul writes to his daughter, as well as occasional letters from Professor Bartholomew Rossi, Paul's missing mentor.

The first 200 or so pages resemble a European travel guide more than an historical thriller. Paul and his daughter travel leisurely and entertain long conversations on philosophy and history over tea and biscuits. Despite the sluggishness, I found these pages as exciting as the other parts of the book. Kostova has a talent for description, weaving detail into her settings with ease, whether painting a sunny afternoon in the Piazza San Marco, the grandeur of the Hagia Sophia, or a picturesque monastery in Communist-era Bulgaria. Kostova also has a knack for describing food and beverages in her narrative. Each of the numerous places visited has at least one corresponding meal, whether crumpets in the University of Oxford or focaccia in the Piazza San Marco. No matter what terrible danger the characters may be in, they can always enjoy a pleasant cup of tea.

For all its strengths, the novel did fall short in its poor pacing and predictability. Even as the plot tightens gradually, there is not much action until the very end. Most dangerous encounters leading up to the end followed a general ominous theme – suspicious figures in dark alleyways, strange wolves approaching a campfire. While there are occasional bursts of activity, *The Historian's* plot is largely predictable: Paul and his wife, Helen, visit numerous countries, find an ancient sanctum of knowledge, and meet a character who either wholly supports or hopes to undermine their efforts (one of their nemeses is called the “evil librarian”). After a tedious struggle, the pair receives a clue, draws their plans, and then heads to their next destination. Except for the looming threat of the undead stalking them, little differentiates Paul and Helen's adventures from real historical research.

THE PHENOMENAL #1 BESTSELLER

# ELIZABETH KOSTOVA

## *The* HISTORIAN

FEATURING A PREVIEW OF  
ELIZABETH KOSTOVA'S  
NEW NOVEL  
THE SWAN  
THIEVES

"Quite extraordinary....Kostova is a natural storyteller....She has refashioned the vampire myth into a compelling contemporary novel, a late-night page-turner."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

GUIDE  
READERS' PICK  
INSIDE

For all the exciting tourist destinations and delicious-sounding meals, the rest of the book lacks much substance. Over the course of 642 pages, Kostova does little to establish the characters as complex individuals. They lack personality quirks and depth – the main character and principal narrator, Paul's daughter, notably lacks a name. Nor is there a fluid interaction between characters. While not too noticeable at first, it becomes more problematic as the story progresses. At the beginning, readers are told Paul sets out to find Rossi (his mentor) because he admires him, but the key word is told. As he finds himself in ever more dangerous situations, that "admiration" becomes an insufficient justification. The book ultimately tells readers how to feel, instead of convincing them through meaningful characterizations and emotions, that Paul really should be risking his life for Rossi. There are enormous spans of time in which

Paul doesn't even think about Rossi at all, though he remembers to describe every meal he eats in his letters.

While *The Historian's* premise is simple, the plot is slightly convoluted and requires some active thinking to read. Like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, this is an epistolary novel, with large chunks in the form of letters written by various characters. The temporal leaps between letters are not inherently difficult to follow, but the way the letters are structured results in some confusion. Rossi's letters are clearly marked, with italics and dates at the beginning of each one. On the other hand, Paul's letters, which make up a considerably larger portion of the book, are given

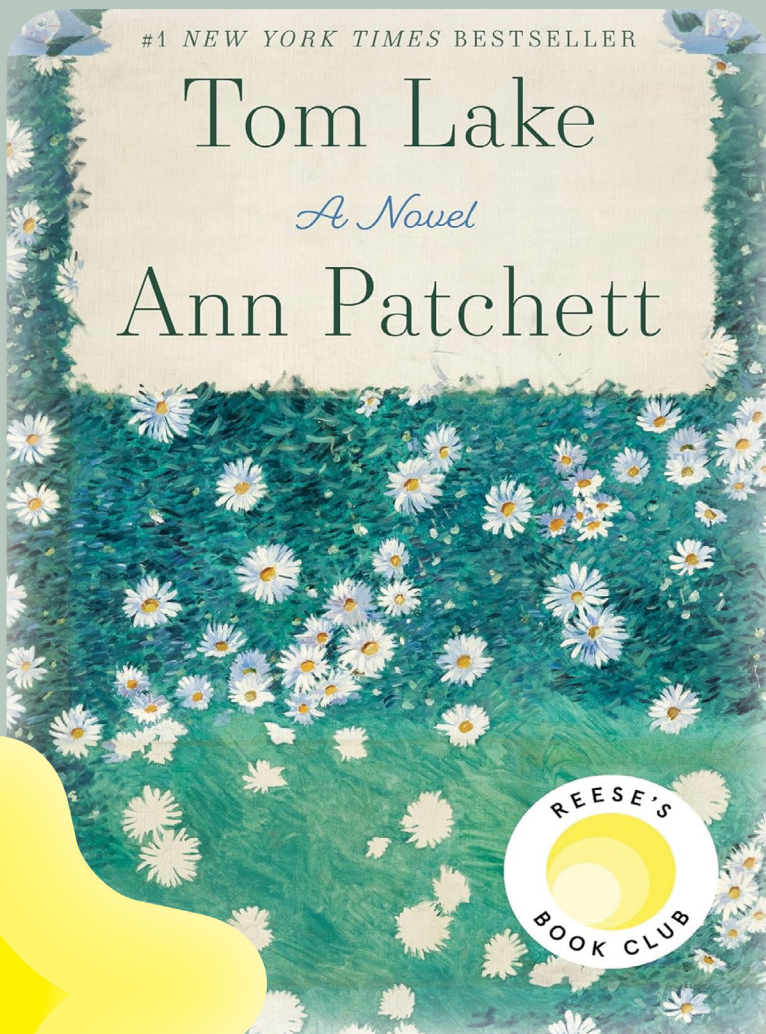


only quotation marks. You have to pay close attention to shifts between the daughter's story and Paul's story. Both are told in first person, with little use of proper nouns. Their only differentiating feature is quotation marks. This not only causes uncertainty when reading but also some annoyance. Especially late at night, I would find myself a page or two into a new chapter, reading as though it were from one perspective before realizing it belonged to a different narrator. It requires some effort to separate narration from dialogue. At one point, Paul's letters get more unconventional, so that there are letters within letters – quotation marks within quotation marks.

At times, you have to remind yourself that this is a book about vampires – not that Kostova herself won't remind you at some point along the way. There is so much enjoyable writing and fun detective work throughout that often the novel's supernatural element seems almost secondary to the lengthy history of a centuries-old monastery or tome.

*The Historian* is not bad by any means. By no means was it a chore to finish. Kostova creates a flawless, intricate story of the past that anyone can appreciate for its vivid detail, if not its accuracy. If you don't enjoy history or researching, though, I would skip it. If you are considering reading it just because it has to do with Dracula, I would pick a smaller, more action-oriented book.

# ★ Ann Patchett's *Tom Lake* —Molly Goldsmith



Ann Patchett's *Tom Lake* is the epitome of heartfelt and dynamic storytelling. In the spring of 2020, 57-year-old Lara's three daughters return to the family's cherry orchard in Northern Michigan. As the world shuts down around them due to the pandemic, Emily, Nell, and Maisie ask their mother to recount the nostalgic years in which she shared a stage, and romance, with famous actor Peter Duke at a theater company called Tom Lake. As Lara narrates her days as a young actress, her daughters are forced to reconsider their own lives and their connection to their mother. Patchett's insightful story about a story is one of my favorite comforting reads of spring.

One of my favorite aspects of the novel is Patchett's evocative descriptions of summer stock. I felt like I was on the stage with Lara as she rehearsed, and by her side as she walked along the glistening lake. Patchett perfectly captures the feeling of being away from home in a frightening, but lively environment. As a person passionate about the theater industry, *Tom Lake* made me more connected to *Our*



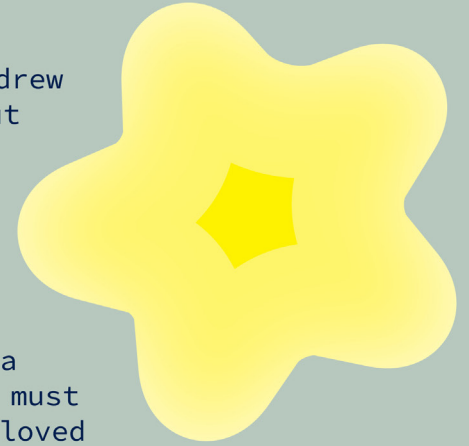
*Town*, the show central to the book's plot. I wasn't familiar with the show before reading the novel, and I thought that Patchett's choice to use a show that focuses on the changes in a town and its people perfectly mirrored the plot of *Tom Lake*. I especially enjoy that despite the specificities of *Our Town*, a knowledge of theater is not required to understand the novel.

The reason why Lara recalls her time at Tom Lake also drew me to the book. Her three daughters want to hear about how their mother was involved in the life of a famous movie star, a time filled with the pure joy of youthful love. As the story unfolded, I loved getting to know Lara, Emily, Nell, and Maisie. Patchett's world-building is intricate and her characters are layered. To that end, Emily loves Peter Duke, the famous actor Lara fell in love with, and so when Lara talks about her experience getting to know him, Emily must reconsider what she thought she knew about Duke. I loved watching Emily's complex thoughts about Duke change over the course of the novel.

The novel oscillates from past to present, a format I usually find confusing but loved in the case of *Tom Lake*. Patchett's choice of structure is effective as it allowed me to get to know the characters equally well during the days at Tom Lake and at the cherry orchard. Perhaps Patchett could have put an asterisk or a bar to separate the sections in the past and those in the present as they are only separated by a space, but overall I appreciated the format.

Nostalgia is one of the novel's central themes, and Patchett masterfully touches on what it feels like to be caught between the past and present. There are joyful surprises in the past, as the girls revel in their mother's life as an actress, and tender meditations on love and family dynamics. Patchett also implies, though, that we should enjoy the present moment and appreciate what we currently have. By having Lara reflect on the joys of having her daughters home with her, even if it's due to the pandemic, I took away the importance of living in the moment and appreciated that message.

If I could use one word to describe *Tom Lake*, it would be *real*. From the plot taking place during COVID-19 quarantine to Lara's anxiety from the pressure of the spotlight, the novel felt relatable at all times. Lara's understanding that her daughters will leave the orchard once the world opens up again - a pause in time allowing for some of the most precious family connections - makes her stories all the more special.



# ★ Author profile:

## Laura Wood

—Annika Bhandari

Laura Woods' novels transport readers to the early 20th century. In *A Snowfall Silver*, *Under a Dancing Star*, and *A Sky Painted Gold*—Wood captivates readers through her engaging characters and the unique settings.

*Under a Dancing Star* was the first novel I read by Laura Wood. *Under a Dancing Star* is loosely based on Shakespeare's novel *Much Ado About Nothing*. However, this book is set in the 1930s and follows the spirited Bea as she leaves her home in England and escapes to her uncle's house in Florence, where he allows several artists to reside. There Bea meets artists - Ursula, her brother Klaus, and an 18-year-old named Ben.

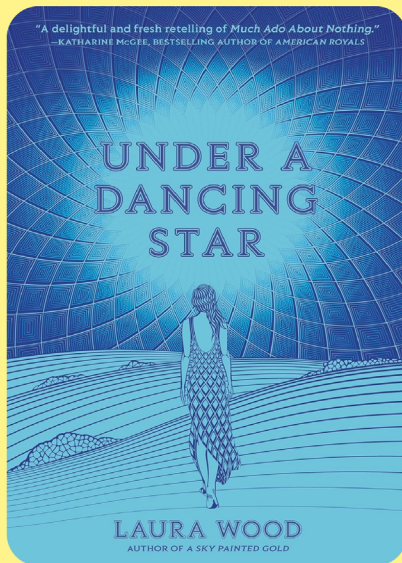
During their first encounter, Ursula describes Bea as “sheltered” and a “typical English young lady.” Ursula and Klaus help expose Bea to new experiences and encourage her to have a “romantic summer” with Ben before her parents marry her off. Bea also immerses herself in Italian culture. For instance, she wears a toga for a midsummer feast held in honor of the Roman god Jupiter, and Ben attempts to teach her classical painting.

The second novel I read by Laura Wood is titled *Snowfall Silver*, which takes place in the autumn of 1931. The book follows 18-year-old prideful, confident and ambitious Freya Trevelyan as she escapes her home in Cornwall and travels to London to join a theatrical company as an assistant seamstress. Freya immerses herself in the glamorous and bustling world of stage life as the company embarks on a national tour. However, Freya dreams of working in the cast as an actress, and when the lead actress and understudy are both unable to perform, Freya is given the opportunity to rise to the occasion.

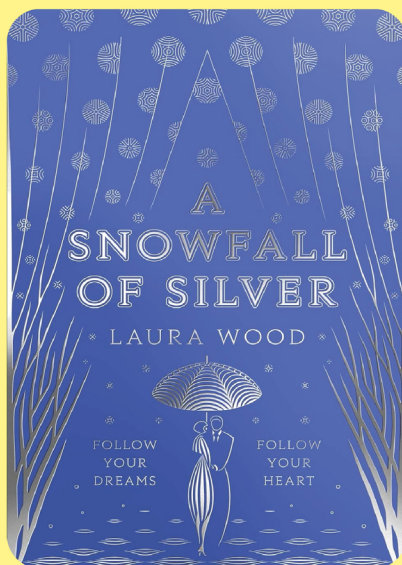
The last book I read by Laura Wood is titled *A Sky Painted Gold*. It is set in the summer of 1929 in England. Freya's sister Lou Trevelyan is an 18 year old aspiring writer who has been stuck in her dull Cornish Village.



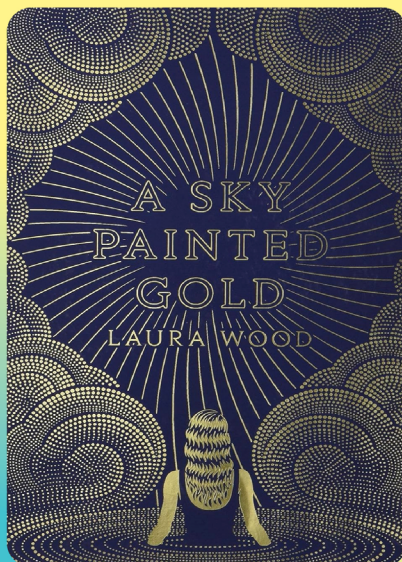




Lou lives in the shadow of her older sister Alice who is marrying her childhood sweetheart. While Lou is happy for her sister, she wants a different ending to her story. Lou begins to sneak into the mysterious Cardew House nearby, where she reads the books in the library and eats the apples from the trees. When the owners arrive for the summer, Lou meets the exuberant siblings, Catlin and Robert, who treat her to a summer filled with glamor, secrets, and cocktail parties. Lou is relatively sheltered and it takes time for her to become accustomed to and adapt to this new world.



My favorite part of Wood's writing is how her novels are set in the 1920-1930s. Through Wood's atmospheric writing style and use of abundant specific and vivid details, I feel immersed in the settings of the novels.



Moreover, although there are elements of romance and historical fiction in all three books, I would argue the books would be best characterized as coming of age novels. Bea, Lou and Freya all grew up sheltered and were expected to embrace a traditional role of a housewife. However, each girl immerses herself in a new culture, meets new people, and obtains control over their own futures. All three girls undergo immense character development in their novels. Bea decides to live a life of passion; Lou finds self-confidence; and Freya demonstrates patience in her quest to achieve her dream. I would recommend Laura Wood's books to readers who enjoy romance, historical fiction, and realistic fiction novels. Although there are historical elements to the novels, it is not a central focus. Readers like me, who often do not enjoy historical fiction, might still enjoy Wood's novels.

Through *A Snowfall Silver*, *Under a Dancing Star*, and *A Sky Painted Gold*, Wood captivates audiences with engaging characters and vibrant settings. Wood brings the 1930s to life and immerses her readers in a world filled with and uplifting narratives of courage, passion, and self-discovery.

# ★ Author Profile: Agatha Christie,

—Freya Riebling

Known as the Queen of Crime, Agatha Christie is one of the best-selling authors of all time. She has sold over two billion books, placing her works only behind Shakespeare's and the Bible! Her writing has been translated more than that of any writer in history, she wrote the longest-running play in history (*The Mousetrap*), and she was named Mystery Writer of the Century in 2000. Outside of her success in the publishing industry, Christie traveled, adventured, and led a fascinating life as an expert on poisons and the first European woman to stand on a surfboard, among much else.

Christie is also famous for being a *very* prolific author. As a result, picking from her over 50 detective novels can seem daunting when first getting into her work. But there is no “correct” order to read her books in. You can truly start anywhere.

One tip for finding a starting place is to consider the setting that you would like to read about. Each book in a Christie series concerns a unique crime, so it can be set virtually anywhere in the world: in the city, country, or mountains; on a train or a boat; in a hotel, apartment, or mansion. There is almost certainly an Agatha Christie book to match every reading mood.

Another tip for starting to read Christie's work is to use one of her many short stories or plays as an introduction to her two most famous





detective characters (Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple), writing style and language, and elaborate crime plots. Short stories, of course, can be read in one sitting, and are much less of a commitment to start reading than a 300 page book. Although many people don't think of reading plays, I would also recommend starting with them. Plays are quick reads because they are all dialogue and much faster paced than a novel (and simply less pages altogether), with just as much suspense.

Christie's novels are typically short (300 pages or less) and driven by the plot, rather than the characters. They have unique and immersive settings plus a reasonably sized cast of unique and developed characters. She is an absolute master at creating highly developed character backstories which interact with one another and the crime (the plot of *Murder on the Orient Express* is a great example of this).

Another thing that makes Agatha Christie a special author is the fact that she was not afraid to play with the truth in her stories. Her characters are flawed and can be dishonest, just like real people are. This gives her writing a layer of realism which is difficult for many writers to achieve, because her characters' decisions and actions make sense as the result of established goals and relationships, rather than just "what had to happen" for the plot that the author wanted to write, which makes her stories feel more natural and believable, like something that happened in our real world.

I think that Christie's work is also outstanding and special because somehow, in 2024, her characters are still relatable. Most of them are British adults, who are about 100 years older than me, but I still feel like I understand them, and know people in my life who are just like her characters. And their humor still makes me laugh! That's why her books are, in my opinion, classics.

She was incredibly smart and her crime plots are very intricate, yet once everything is explained in that classic epic reveal scene, it all makes perfect logical sense. Her writing is very simple and clear (like this sentence!). She uses scarce but punchy details, and her writing is never too flowery.

However, Christie's work is not for everyone. For example, I find that I am not very emotionally invested in the characters, who do not grow or learn much about themselves during the murder investigations, as *solving the murder* is the simple focus of the story. Also, Christie's plots (with a few exceptions) don't have the scariness of a modern thriller, and her main characters are adults, not high schoolers like in many YA mysteries. Finally, many of her books are narrated with a limited perspective, by a colleague of the starring detective, rather than third person omniscient or the first person perspective of the detective. Although her detectives delineate their thought processes throughout each book, the reader does not often get a true peak into the brains of the geniuses. Personally,

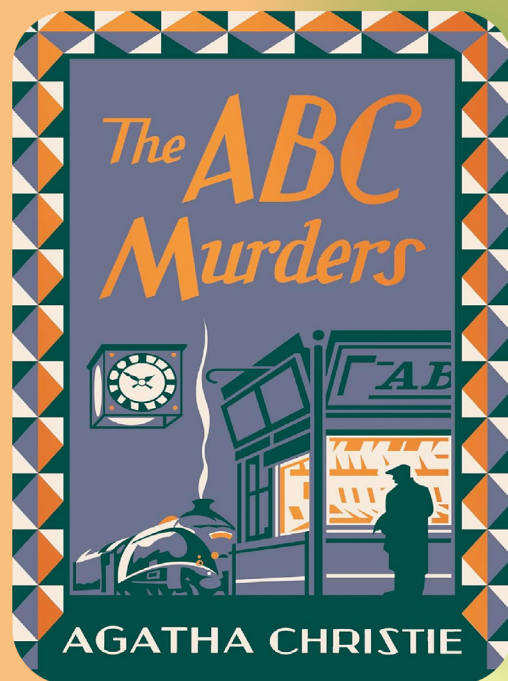
I don't mind any of that, but readers who have other preferences should consider those things before picking up a Christie mystery.

## ***The A. B. C. Murders***

The premise of *The A. B. C. Murders* is immediately intriguing. First, Alice Ascher is murdered in Andover, then Betty Barnard in Bexhill... the victims are killed in alphabetical order.

When each body is discovered, there is a copy of the *ABC Rail Guide* purposefully placed nearby. This killer is also not afraid to tease the great detective Hercule Poirot, and sends him a letter preceding each crime.

*The A. B. C. Murders* is unique among Poirot stories because the crime is in the public eye, and Poirot works alongside the police force to catch the killer, while traveling to different towns where murders took place. Rather than a couple of suspects in a "locked room," the killer could be anyone in England. The stakes in this book are especially high since the serial killer shows no sign of stopping and time is of the essence for Poirot. This book was a page turner because I was eager to find out how and why the victims were being killed, as well as how Poirot would catch a killer who seemed so elusive, before he reached the end of the alphabet and killed 26 people.



I would recommend this book to readers who are looking for a more modern-feeling, plot-driven mystery and are less interested in the classic "cozy" mystery genre that Christie is often known for. One should note, however, that *The A. B. C. Murders* does not focus on character development, and in this way does not feel like a modern mystery which attempts to address a main character's internal conflict through the investigation.

## ***Witness for the Prosecution***

In this courtroom drama play, a man by the name of Leonard Vole is accused of murdering a rich old lady for the money she promised him in her will. As the trial unfolds, Leonard's wife testifies as a witness for the prosecution. However, the story of the crime keeps changing, and as the play goes on, the truth becomes less and less clear. I have read three of Christie's plays, and this is the absolute best of the three. It is worth reading if only for the final mind boggling plot twist (which is really a series of twists, all occurring on one page). I am genuinely still re-

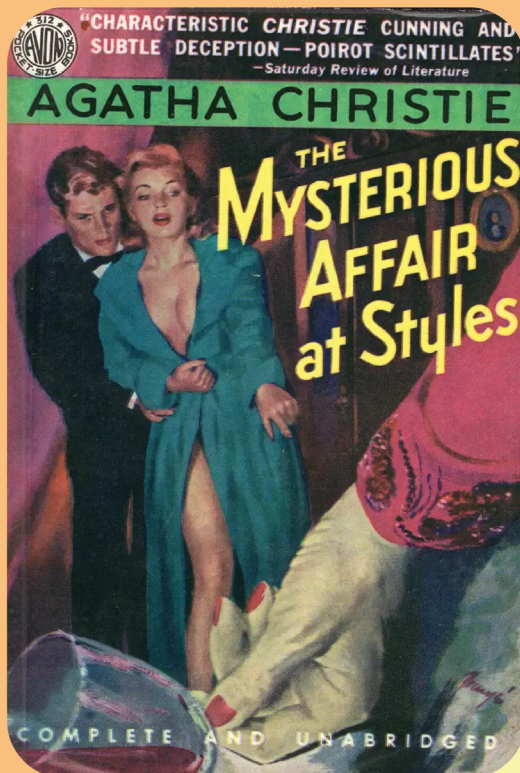


covering from the shock of finishing this play in September. But the lead up to the trial scene is what makes that final moment so baffling, because the scenes set up a certain world of the characters and their relationships, which I slowly started to understand, until I thought I had a sense of what had happened and what was real. That all changes at the very end of the play, when the reader's whole understanding flips around, and they are left dumbfounded.

## *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*

Agatha Christie wrote her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, at age 18, on a dare from her sister. Although this is not her most finessed work, it is surely a classic, and as the very first, it is a great place to start with the Poirot mysteries and Christie's novels as a whole.

Poirot is called to investigate a fatal poisoning at a countryside mansion, where a handful of the victim's friends and family are the only suspects. Multiple red herrings and twists that are sure to keep the reader guessing. Even though it is Christie's first novel and one might expect it to stay within the norm of the detective genre as a result, the ending is still brilliant and unconventional. I never could have guessed it. I would recommend *Styles* to someone who enjoyed the movie *Knives Out*, as it is a similar sort of mystery, just 100 years older.



## *And Then There Were None*

This is my personal favorite of Christie's novels, and it is also (for good reason) "the best selling crime novel of all time." In the book, ten people meet on a remote island in the most extreme kind of locked room mystery. Their host is nowhere to be found. A nursery rhyme hangs in the island house, counting down the gruesome deaths of "Ten Little Soldier Boys." It is revealed that each guest has somehow committed murder in their past . . . and then they begin to die off, one by one, in the same order and fashion as the ten little soldier boys. With each death, the pool of suspects shrinks, the plot quickens its pace, and the island begins to feel more and more dangerous. You wonder who can even be trusted, because *someone* must be the killer, yet each one could also be the next

victim. This mystery is absolutely *baffling*. The crime seems impossible. How can the characters catch a murderer if everyone dies and there is no way off the island? Yet the story is riveting, and I could not stop reading as the murders kept unfolding.

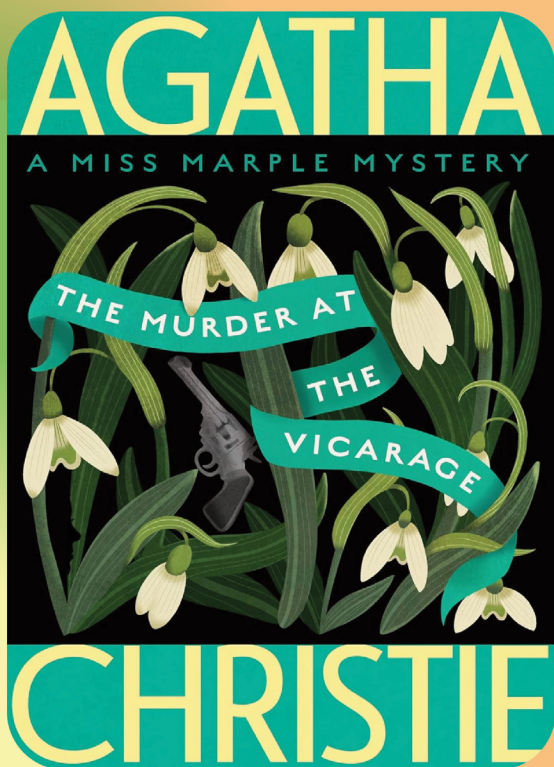
The reader can't figure out how the murders are happening, or really even *what* is happening. There is just a feeling of disbelief, and one wonders how there will even be a final reveal or explanation for a crime that is so impossible. This is not to say that there are no clues, or that you are "in the dark" the whole time. On the contrary, this book is all the more effective because there are so many little things that stand out as clues or seem suspicious throughout the novel. You are actively trying to form a theory while reading, yet cannot put together the full picture based on just nagging feelings. The mystery is so hard to figure out, and I felt absolutely lost while reading it, but in the best possible way. I wish I could read this book for the first time and reexperience that what-the-heck-is-happening feeling. The end of this book was very satisfying, as every detail did finally fall into place with a rational explanation. *And Then There Were None* is slightly claustrophobic and depressing, so readers who prefer having a light at the end of the tunnel may not enjoy this book as much as I did. However, I was fascinated by the dark plot and the way it mirrored such a twisted children's rhyme.

## *The Murder at the Vicarage*

This is the first novel in the Miss Marple series, which at 12 books, is significantly shorter than Christie's Poirot series. This is the only Miss Marple book I have read, but her series does not necessitate any particular reading order. *The Murder at the Vicarage* was a very enjoyable introduction to the iconic character of Miss Marple, as well as her village and surroundings, and the general structure of a Miss Marple mystery.

Essentially, the village magistrate, who is universally hated, is murdered in the local vicarage while the vicar is away. There is no shortage of motive in the village, and the vicar narrates as police investigate contradictory clues and witness accounts.

Although this is a small town mystery, it is not all sweet and cozy. As the story progresses, the reader learns more about the dark sides of the town





and the wrongdoings of various characters. I liked how the town felt very real and how reading the book felt like peeking into a place that continuously existed, rather than a place that was constructed on page one and disappeared after the end of the book. I also really liked the solution to the mystery and how the complex web of red herrings, motives, and secrets kept me guessing about the murderer until the final reveal.

Miss Marple stories are unique because she is not a professional detective, and although she has a reputation for figuring things out correctly, she is not involved with the formal investigation of the murder, unlike Poirot usually is. She is absent for large portions of the book, but shows up at the end to present and explain her solution to the mystery, after figuring it out independently.

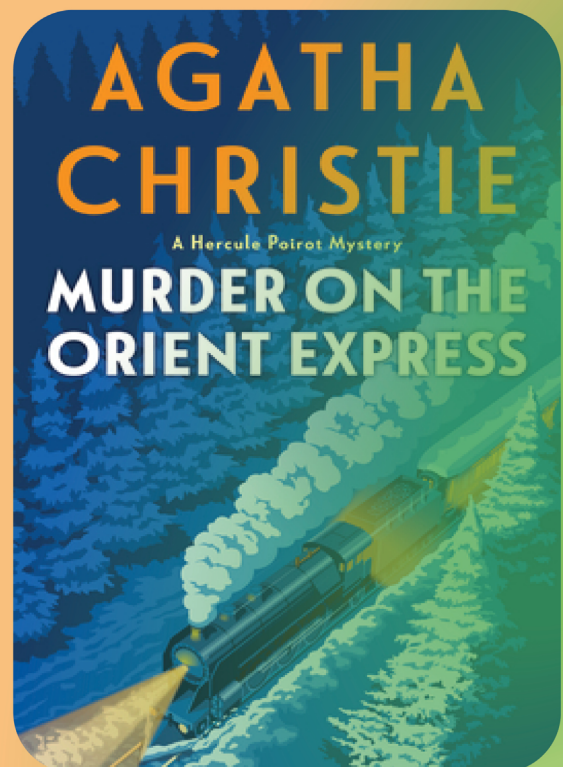
### ***Murder on the Orient Express***

This was my first ever Agatha Christie story! I loved it even more than I thought it would. It's a classic, and an absolutely fascinating one at that. This is some of her best work, and by far her best train-centered mystery. The Orient Express gets stuck in the snow (with Poirot on board, of course) and someone is stabbed to death. Now, all of the passengers are stuck with a murder in their midst, until Poirot can figure out who did it. He interviews lots of interesting characters on the train and uncovers dark parts of their pasts as well as some strange connections to other passengers.

This book got me absolutely hooked onto the Queen of Crime's work, and I think that it has the power to also hook anyone who likes the mystery genre in any way, shape, or form. When I get around to rereading some of these books, *Murder on the Orient Express* is definitely going to be the first. It is a great page turner in a high-stakes, tense environment, and an example of the stunning sorts of character backstories which Christie creates as well as the brilliant way that Poirot makes sense of a complicated crime then easily explains it to the reader.

### ***The Murder of Roger Ackroyd***

In this acclaimed Poirot novel, after local widow Mrs. Ferrars commits suicide, Roger Ackroyd invites over our narrator (Dr. Sheppard) and reveals to him that they had been engaged, that she had admitted to killing



her first husband, and that she was being blackmailed, but died before she could expose her blackmailer to him. Later that night, Dr. Sheppard is called back to Fernly Park (Ackroyd's home) where Roger Ackroyd has been stabbed to death. Poirot interviews people who live and work in the house and reconstructs the order of events of the crime in classic Christie fashion. Slowly, various secrets are revealed, including secret romances. The setting is not glamorous, but that serves the story well.

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is most renowned for its groundbreaking twist ending. I had heard a lot about this book before I read it, so I kind of already knew the twist (but I wasn't positive it was in this book) and although it was still shocking and effective, I do think that having somewhat of an idea going into things weakened the experience. I hope that you can pick up this book with very limited prior knowledge (perhaps just my spiel and the book's blurb) and just trust that it will pay off and you will get the full, shocking experience. Don't look into it any more. Just start reading. I personally really enjoyed the subplots and characters in this story, so please don't think that it only gets interesting at the end. Rather, the book only gets more complicated as the clues are investigated, and the reader is pulled into the world of Fernly Park.

I am by no means an expert on Christie's work. To date, I have read nine novels, nine short stories, and three plays written by her, which is only a fraction of her work. I enjoyed all of those, but these recommendations represent the very best, and the ones that I think could be an excellent start for someone hoping to get into Agatha Christie.

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# Editors' Picks

**Lucy Peck**

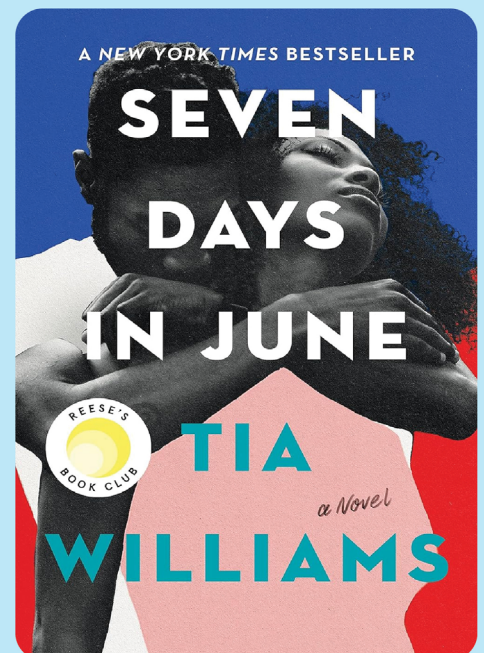
***The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder* by David Grann**

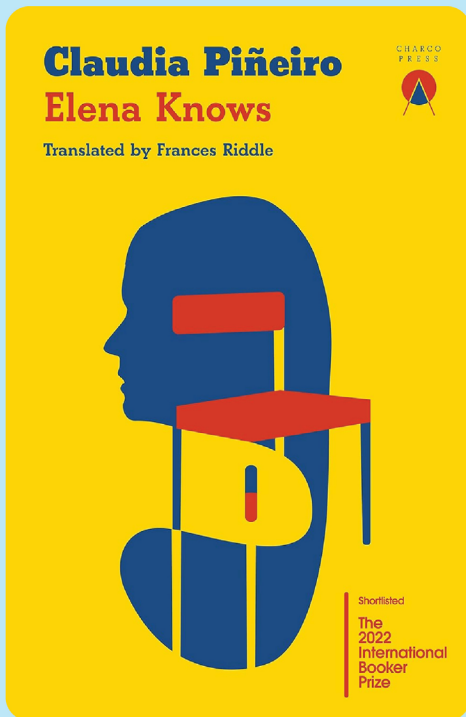
In the early 1700s, a British ship named the *Wager* set off on her maiden voyage in a fleet of His Majesty's finest men-of-war. After months battling mysterious diseases and treacherous waves, the ship's emaciated and land-hungry crew were marooned on an inhospitable island off the coast of Patagonia. The crew's devotion to their captain and commitment to the Navy's code of conduct quickly unraveled as each man became more desperate for food and power. The tale is a real-life example of the savagery and greed with which we are all accustomed from our time in middle school with *Lord of the Flies*. Grann is also the author of the acclaimed *Killers of the Flower Moon*, which was recently adapted into a movie.

**Molly Goldsmith**

***Seven Days in June* by Tia Williams**

Single mother Eva Mercy is a bestselling romance writer. Shane Hall is a reclusive award-winning author. When Shane and Eva surprisingly meet at a literary event, they feel their spark return. No one knows that 20 years earlier, teenage Eva and Shane spent one week together, madly in love. Although they both may be pretending that this week didn't matter, they cannot ignore their chemistry, or the fact that they have been secretly writing to each other in their books ever since. Over the next seven days, Eva and Shane reconnect during a hot Brooklyn summer, and the two cannot deny that they have questions they need answered. *Seven Days in June* is one of my favorite romance novels - the story is enticing and the characters are beautifully layered, vulnerable, and human. If you're looking for a novel that will trap you in a whirlwind of emotions, add *Seven Days in June* to your summer reading list.





## Olivia Coward *Elana Knows* by Claudia Piñeiro

The vast majority of murder mystery novels I have read are set during the heat of the murder; they are fast paced thrillers and follow young, interesting characters. *Elana Knows* is the opposite in almost every way – and I loved it for that. This novel is set in the wake of a murder, and it follows Elana, the sick, aging mother of the murder victim. Her daughter's case is dismissed by the authorities, leaving Elana to uncover the truth and avenge her daughter's death on her own. The book is slow, and not very action-packed, but I loved it because it offers a far more realistic depiction of murder and how it affects the loved ones of the victims.

## Leila Dossani *Oil and Marble* by Stephanie Storey

*Oil and Marble* is an historical fiction novel that follows the rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. The novel alternates between the two artists' lives as Michelangelo begins his career and da Vinci's fame peaks. Both artists are creating works that will become immortalized: the David and the Mona Lisa. As someone who doesn't know much about art, I found Storey's description of Michelangelo's dedication when sculpting the David was awe-inspiring. The artist locked himself in a shed for almost three years, barely showering and eating, all for the masterpiece that is the David. This book is the perfect mix of interesting historical facts and compelling prose. I highly recommend it if you are interested in art or are just looking for an absorbing next book.

## Rani Ogden *The Lying Life of Adults* by Elena Ferrante

*The Lying Life of Adults* is a coming of age story about a teenage girl in Naples, Italy. When Giovanna overhears her father say that she is beginning to look like her aunt – a woman whom her mother and father describe as ugly – she resolves to finally meet her Aunt Vitoria whose likeness she's seemingly acquired. As she and her aunt form a bond, Giovanna begins to develop another life on the other side of Naples. She struggles between these two different identities throughout her formative teenage years. I thought this book was a very authentic depiction of a girl's transition from child to young woman. Giovanna's experiences with her looks, identity, family, and romantic life were very relatable and offered me a new outlook on growing up.



## Suzette Sheft

### ***When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi**

*When Breath Becomes Air* is a memoir by neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi detailing his path to becoming a doctor and his life after receiving a terminal lung cancer diagnosis during his neurosurgery residency. Through eloquent prose, Kalanithi explores what it means to have a purpose in life and how to find it, offering poignant personal reflections. This incredibly moving book serves as a reminder of the fragility of life, and I would recommend it to everyone.

## Sophia Paley

### ***World of Wonders* by Aimee Nezhukumatathil**

*World of Wonders* is a collection of nature essays written by award-winning author Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Filled with stories ranging from her childhood to adulthood, Nezhukumatathil's work explores humans' connection with living things and how our experiences relate to those of other creatures. I enjoyed Nezhukumatathil's powerful mirroring between herself and other organisms, as well as the interesting facts she included in each story, ranging from the habits of Potoos to the repellent smell of Corpse Flowers. Although each story is centered around a certain plant or animal, they still varied much in content, which I appreciated as to not make each chapter repetitive. Just as captivating are the colorful illustrations by Fumi Mini Nakamuri that bring Nezhukumatathil's memoir to life.

## Neeva Patel

### ***Death in Her Hands* by Ottessa Moshfegh**

Ottessa Moshfegh once again produces simple, great writing in *Death in Her Hands*. The novel follows an elderly woman named Vesta who lives in a secluded cabin with her dog Charlie. One morning, Vesta discovers a note: "Her name was Magda. Nobody will ever know who killed her. It wasn't me. Here is her dead body." I loved the beginning and middle of this book because I enjoyed how we saw only Charlie and Vesta living in their cabin by the woods. Once the book progressed, Vesta begins leaving her house more and we were introduced to many more characters. This made me believe that we would be figuring out the mystery soon and Magda's killer would be revealed . . . but then something crazy scary happened and then the book ended. This book isn't a mystery; it's more like a horror novel about a woman losing her mind. At the end I found myself searching for answers.

