

# 50 notable works of fiction

The year's best novels, short-story collections and works of fiction in translation

By Washington Post Editors and Reviewers

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## **‘All the Lovers in the Night,’ by Mieko Kawakami, translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd**

The best-selling author of “[Breasts and Eggs](#)” tells the story of a Tokyo-based copy editor who buries a traumatic episode under a solitary, regimented existence. But when she discovers the liberating properties of alcohol, the past comes flooding back.

## **‘The Books of Jacob,’ by Olga Tokarczuk, translated by Jennifer Croft**

When Polish author Tokarczuk won the 2018 Nobel Prize for literature, the judges praised this hefty book. Finally, English speakers can see what all the fuss is about: a sprawling but consistently entertaining [account of Jacob Frank](#), a real-life 18th-century mystic whose disciples believed he was the messiah.

## **‘City on Fire,’ by Don Winslow**

Winslow, a crime fiction virtuoso, has designs on retiring after he completes the trilogy that [this novel](#) launched — a kind of Greek tragedy about organized crime in Providence, R.I. It all starts with Irish mobster Danny Ryan, who has to deal with the escalating fallout after his brother-in-law gets handsy with an Italian gangster’s girlfriend.

## **‘The Consequences: Stories,’ by Manuel Muñoz**

California’s Central Valley in the 1980s and ’90s is the setting for most of the poignant stories in this collection. Muñoz, a three-time O. Henry Award winner, reveals the vastness of Mexican and Mexican American identity with tales of deportation, teen pregnancy, AIDS and the quotidian drudgery of farm work.

## **‘Cult Classic,’ by Sloane Crosley**

Crosley, already known for piercing observations in such essay collections as “[I Was Told There’d Be Cake](#),” takes aim at [social media and start-up culture](#). The novel’s protagonist, Lola, is thinking about settling down — if only she could get over the parade of exes whose accomplishments haunt her news feed.

## ‘Dr. No,’ by Percival Everett

Shortly after his novel “The Trees” was shortlisted for the 2022 Booker Prize, Everett released this very different book about a mathematician who specializes in the study of nothingness. As it turns out, that knowledge could be useful to an aspiring supervillain who will shell out millions in exchange for help in weaponizing naught.

## ‘Either/Or,’ by Elif Batuman

In this sequel to “The Idiot,” Batuman picks up the story of Selin Karadag as she begins her sophomore year at Harvard. After a summer spent pining over an unrequited love, the fledgling writer embarks on a series of sexual encounters in the hopes of uncovering some revelation — or at least inspiration.

## ‘Fencing With the King,’ by Diana Abu-Jaber

A Palestinian American woman, curious about her extended family, accompanies her father to a month-long birthday celebration for the king of Jordan. But when she begins piecing together puzzles of the past, she ends up at odds with her scheming uncle.

## ‘Forbidden City,’ by Vanessa Hua

In 1960s China, teenager Mei Xiang departs her small village to join Chairman Mao’s dance troupe, ultimately becoming his confidante and lover. Hua’s bestseller uses Mei’s decades-spanning story to consider the women who were used, then erased from the history of China’s Cultural Revolution.

## ‘The Foundling,’ by Ann Leary

A dark piece of history — the practice of incarcerating “feble-minded” women — inspires a twisting nail-biter with a caper of a climax. Protagonist Mary, an orphan, falls under the spell of the elegant doctor in charge of a home for women that turns out to be less altruistic than it appears.

## ‘Free Love,’ by Tessa Hadley

The year is 1967, and Phyllis Fischer embodies the suburban ideal: nice house, loving husband, two kids. But when a younger man she barely knows kisses her, Phyllis begins to question everything she thought she knew — and loved — about her life.

## ‘The Furrows,’ by Namwali Serpell

Serpell’s second novel is as stunning as her critically acclaimed first, “The Old Drift.” Through this story of a woman whose brother disappeared when they were children, Serpell explores the disorienting, sometimes surreal effects of grief.

## ‘Glory,’ by NoViolet Bulawayo

Bulawayo’s second novel, and her second to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize, was inspired by the autocrats who have ruled the author’s native Zimbabwe. But in this brilliant allegorical satire, the characters based on

Robert Mugabe, Emmerson Mnangagwa and others are stallions, goats and dogs.

## ‘Groundskeeping,’ by Lee Cole

You can choose your friends, but not your family. That’s one reminder in Cole’s emotionally rich debut about an aspiring writer who moves home to Kentucky, where his Trump-supporting uncle and grandfather complicate his budding relationship with the liberal daughter of Bosnian immigrants.

## ‘The Hero of This Book,’ by Elizabeth McCracken

When is a memoir not a memoir? McCracken straddles the line between real life and fiction in this story of a narrator whose trip to London prompts a deluge of memories about her late mother.

## ‘Horse,’ by Geraldine Brooks

The Pulitzer Prize winner offers a lesson in weaving together disparate narratives with this novel inspired by a real-life 19th-century racehorse. In the 1850s, the horse is trained by an enslaved boy; generations later, a man becomes obsessed with a discarded portrait of the horse just as a zoologist finds the animal’s bones in an attic. Inevitably, but never predictably, their stories intersect.

## ‘How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water,’ by Angie Cruz

The fourth novel by Women’s Prize finalist Cruz finds Cara Romero, a New Yorker from the Dominican Republic, unburdening herself to a woman meant to provide employment assistance. Instead, the woman ends up with 12 enlightening, sometimes hilarious sessions with Cara, who reveals the highs and lows of an eventful life.

## ‘Invisible Things,’ by Mat Johnson

What at first seems like a work of science fiction involving a group of astronauts who land on Jupiter’s moon grows into something broader and more trenchant — an accomplished work of cultural and political satire that calls to mind Kurt Vonnegut’s “The Sirens of Titan” and “Cat’s Cradle” and Robert A. Heinlein’s “Stranger in a Strange Land.”

## ‘Jackie and Me,’ by Louis Bayard

A charming story that captures our ongoing fascination with the Kennedy marriage, “Jackie & Me” focuses on the years when Jack and Jackie were still two distinct individuals, a young man and a younger woman navigating their ways through Washington.

## ‘The Latecomer,’ by Jean Hanff Korelitz

There’s a jigsaw-puzzle thrill to Korelitz’s tale of a wealthy New York City family. Part farce, part revenge fantasy, the book reads like a latter-day Edith Wharton novel, as Korelitz (“The Plot”) simultaneously mocks and embraces these upper-class combatants.

## ‘Less Is Lost,’ by Andrew Sean Greer

Arthur Less, the hero of Greer’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “Less” (2017), is back. He’s living happily in San

Francisco when he learns he owes 10 years of back rent and has only a month to come up with it. Hilarity ensues as our lovable, hapless protagonist is befallen by a series of accidents and misunderstandings.

## ‘Lessons,’ by Ian McEwan

McEwan, winner of the 1998 Booker for “Amsterdam,” tells the story of an ordinary man whose personal experience is woven into the social and political developments that have shaped all our lives, including the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the coronavirus pandemic. Through the tale of this imaginary life, McEwan deftly explores the interplay of will and chance, time and memory.

## ‘The Lioness,’ by Chris Bohjalian

From the author of “The Flight Attendant” and “Hour of the Witch,” this propulsive tale perfectly marries glamour and horror, as a group of Hollywood notables sets off on a safari in the Serengeti in the mid-1960s.

## ‘Lucky Breaks,’ by Yevgenia Belorusetz, translated by Eugene Ostashevsky

This story collection is the first new full-length work of fiction out of Ukraine since Russia’s war with the country began. Slim but meaty, these tales — whose main players are women displaced by war — are both unsettling and illuminating.

## ‘Lucy by the Sea,’ by Elizabeth Strout

Lucy Barton returns, this time riding out the pandemic’s early wave with her ex-husband in Maine. Strout fans will delight in the appearance of beloved characters from previous novels, including Olive Kitteridge and Isabelle (“Amy and Isabelle”) as they struggle and hope — together but in isolation.

## ‘The Marriage Portrait,’ by Maggie O’Farrell

O’Farrell (“Hamnet”) drops us into the panicked mind of a teenage girl who knows that her husband is plotting to kill her. This is Florence in the 1550s — and the teen is Lucrezia de’Medici. In this masterful work, O’Farrell pulls out little threads of historical detail to weave the story of a precocious girl sensitive to the contradictions of her station.

## ‘Mercy Street,’ by Jennifer Haigh

Haigh’s restrained novel explores the precarious status of safe, legal abortion through the eyes of an experienced counselor at a reproductive-health clinic in downtown Boston, revealing the surprising ways lives intersect amid this divisive issue.

## ‘My Phantoms,’ by Gwendoline Riley

Bridget, the 40-something narrator of this quietly powerful novel, has, to put it mildly, a difficult relationship with her parents, particularly her mother. In deceptively simple prose, Riley delivers a compelling character study and an unflinching look at the complexity of family bonds.

## ‘Nightcrawling,’ by Leila Mottley

Inspired by a sexual exploitation scandal involving several police departments in the Bay Area, Mottley’s debut novel imagines the life of a 17-year-old African American high school dropout who is vulnerable to abuse.

Mottley, who is 19, captures her narrator’s experience with painful, poetic beauty.

## ‘Olga Dies Dreaming,’ by Xochitl Gonzalez

Olga Isabel Acevedo is a 40-year-old dynamo from South Brooklyn who becomes an in-demand wedding planner — but she can’t seem to find romance herself. If you know anything about how romantic comedy works, you have some idea of how this story ends, but you’ll be completely surprised by how it gets there.

## ‘Our Missing Hearts,’ by Celeste Ng

As in her previous books, Ng (“Little Fires Everywhere,” “Everything I Never Told You”) explores race, family and belonging. Here the setting is a near-future dystopian America where 12-year-old Bird Gardner is searching for his estranged mother in a society where anti-Asian sentiment threatens his every move.

## ‘Our Wives Under the Sea,’ by Julia Armfield

Both a love story and a horror story, “Our Wives” follows a couple through some unusual twists in their relationship, as one spouse returns from a deep-sea expedition forever changed. There’s more than a drop of “The Turn of the Screw” in this exquisitely suspenseful debut novel.

## ‘The Passenger,’ by Cormac McCarthy

The first novel from McCarthy, now 89, since “The Road” in 2006 features Bobby Western, a contemplative, haunted salvage diver. What starts at the pace of a thriller — with a mystery surrounding a private jet on the ocean floor — becomes an extended rumination on subjects from atomic bombs (Bobby’s father helped create them) to the inappropriate, obsessive love between a brother and sister.

## ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida,’ by Shehan Karunatilaka

The winner of this year’s Booker Prize is a very unlikely combination: a murder mystery and a zany comedy about military atrocities. Narrated by a dead man. In the second person. Karunatilaka has said the combination of tragedy and absurdity was inspired by Kurt Vonnegut, but his story drifts across Sri Lankan history and culture with a spirit entirely its own.

‘Call Me A Horse,’ by Taylor Jenkins Reid — translated by DL:W

# **Saika Vaika, by Halldor Laxness, translated by Philip Roughton**

This newly retranslated novel by Laxness, the prolific Icelandic writer who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955, focuses on the fortitude and inner life of the title character, who has to make it on her own in a small village. Marxism vs. capitalism is one theme of the book as it charts the changing social and economic circumstances of the village over the course of about 20 years.

## **‘Sea of Tranquility,’ by Emily St. John Mandel**

St. John Mandel’s follow-up to “Station Eleven” and “The Glass Hotel” is a curious thought experiment that opens in 1912 before hopping ahead to 2203 and then 2401. This is science fiction that keeps its science largely in abeyance, as dark matter for a story about loneliness, grief and finding purpose.

## **‘Shrines of Gaiety,’ by Kate Atkinson**

Atkinson sets out to evoke — with gusto and precision — a lost Roaring Twenties London that, perhaps, never was. This is a sprawling and sparkling tale overrun with flappers, gangsters, disillusioned war veterans, crooked coppers, a serial killer, absinthe cocktails, teenage runaways and a bevy of Bright Young Things.

## **‘Signal Fires,’ by Dani Shapiro**

Shapiro’s novel, which balances grief with grace, starts in 1985, when 15-year-old Theo Wilf crashes his mother’s Buick into a huge oak tree in the family’s front yard. The story then hops through time to fill in the details of that event and how the secrecy surrounding it shaped, or deformed, the lives of the Wilfs.

## **‘The Singularities,’ by John Banville**

Every page of Banville’s latest beautifully written novel is an enigmatic delight. A man named Felix Mordaunt, just released from prison, wanders onto the property where he spent his boyhood. But is that really his name? And is this his ancestral home? Unreliability runs throughout.

## **‘The Stone World,’ by Joel Agee**

Agee has published acclaimed nonfiction about his boyhood in East Germany with his mother and stepfather after the family migrated from Mexico. (His father was the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer James Agee.) This new novel, written with wondrous simplicity and depth, is a kind of fictional prequel: Set in an unnamed Mexican town in the 1940s, it tells the story of a quiet, sensitive boy named Peter.

## **‘Thrust,’ by Lidia Yuknavitch**

“Thrust” is part history, part prophecy and all fever dream. Its chapters ebb and flow across 200 years in and around the New York Harbor, moving from 19th-century laborers toiling to erect the Statue of Liberty to a drowned East Coast in 2079. This sometimes surreal book offers a mind-blowing critique of America’s ideals.

## **‘To Paradise,’ by Hanya Yanagihara**

Seven years after her novel “A Little Life,” Yanagihara returns with another epic, this one made up of three

novella-length sections set in the past, present and future. The final one is a blistering analysis of what an endless cycle of pandemics can do to a society. “To Paradise” demonstrates the inexhaustible ingenuity of an author who keeps shattering expectations.

## **‘Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow,’ by Gabrielle Zevin**

This novel about two childhood friends who reunite in college and design a successful video game together is not really a workplace romance; it’s a novel about the romance of work. It portrays a creative partnership as intense and as fraught as a marriage, and it draws readers into the pioneering days of a vast entertainment industry too often scorned by bookworms.

## **‘Trespases,’ by Louise Kennedy**

Kennedy’s captivating first novel manages to be beautiful and devastating in equal measure. It’s set in Northern Ireland during the 1970s amid the Troubles. The book’s protagonist, 24-year-old Cushla Lavery, lives with her mother in a small, “mixed” town outside Belfast, and she emerges as a flawed, bruised but ultimately defiant heroine.

## **‘True Biz,’ by Sara Nović**

“True Biz” follows an eventful year in the lives of students and a headmistress at a residential school for the deaf. Nović is a thoughtful tour guide through her own deaf culture, careful to explain what people unaware of her world may be missing, and providing mini history lessons and illustrations of vocabulary words in American Sign Language.

## **‘The Unfolding,’ by A.M. Homes**

Homes’s latest novel is very funny and often unsettling. The sharp satire begins after the election of Barack Obama, when a major Republican donor referred to only as the Big Guy assembles a group of advisers who devise a long-term plan for retaking control of American politics.

## **‘Vladimir,’ by Julia May Jonas**

Jonas’s provocative debut novel revolves around the fallout from accusations of sexual misconduct against the unnamed narrator’s husband, who is chair of the English department at the college where they both teach. The narrator is filled with both desire and shame about aging, and has at least one foot on the wrong side of #MeToo.

## **‘We All Want Impossible Things,’ by Catherine Newman**

Genuinely heartbreaking and hilarious is a tough combination to pull off, but Newman does it in her first novel for adults. Edith and Ashley have been the closest of friends for more than 40 years. When Edith’s ovarian cancer diagnosis becomes terminal, the women contend with Edi’s transition into hospice. Tears mix with laughter in everyday moments, showing the power of female friendship.

## **‘The Whalebone Theatre,’ by Joanna Quinn**

Quinn’s richly imagined and energetically told debut novel, set mostly in England before and during World War II, focuses on a creative young girl named Cristabel and her stepsiblings. These spunky, somewhat benignly neglected children, with a pedigree stretching from Charles Dickens to Lemony Snicket, might seem familiar, but they have their own peculiar and particular charm.

## **‘Yonder,’ by Jabari Asim**

Set on a Southern plantation in 1852, “Yonder” explores with great depth the intertwined lives of four enslaved people, alternating between the points of view of each character. The final section of the book follows their exodus, a bold and dangerous journey whose outcome remains uncertain until the very last page.