

100 Books Everyone Should Read, from Around the World

Ok, more like 431, but who is counting

Federico Malatesta

In my book *They Are Lying to You*, I argue that the novel is "one of the great instruments we have for living more lives than we are issued." Each of us gets one childhood, one mother-tongue, and a life that begins in one place and in one moment in time. Every judgment we make is developed inside those limits. Fiction offers one route out of that box, open to anyone at any time. And a great novel, unlike a protocols book, "does not survive summary." You can't compress it into a fifteen-minute app, because the experience is in the reading itself.

There are plenty of "100 books to read" lists on the web. Some are simply horrible – especially the ones compiled by "influencers": a pile of productivity manuals, fantasy trilogies and founder's biographies, next to which Coelho starts to look like Tolstoy. A few are very good, and I highlight some of the best at the end of this document.

Hence the question, is there really a need for yet another list? And why would you need mine? I am not the right person to answer that, but here's how I see it. I am not a literary critic, and you can find better literary criticism elsewhere, a lot of it. Having said that, over the years I have built a personal library of more than 12,000 books, so this world is not exactly foreign to me. Yes, I know the next question: how many of them have you actually read? Umberto Eco, who kept more than 50,000 books at home, in hardcopy, was asked that all the time, and one of his stock answers was: "None of them. Otherwise, why would I keep them here?"

This list was built as a companion to *They Are Lying to You*. Every title on it had to pass the test I set out in Chapter 26: it has to show you a life through a lens you do not yet possess. The short commentaries in the following pages give a brief summary of each book. The themes running through them will be familiar, especially to those of you who have read the book: what success really means and how it changes over time, how little we know ourselves, how much the situation we are in shapes what we do, what it takes to let a part of a life end well, and how, at best, we are coauthors of our own life. The novels show this far better than I ever could.

This list is also very personal: it follows my own taste. You will find authors you may never have heard of, and miss a few you think belong here. The books are grouped by geography, but the book decides where it sits, not the author's passport: Rushdie, for instance, appears under India rather than Britain, because the novel I chose belongs there. Nabokov appears under "Russia", even if some of his work here was written in English. The list is uneven, too. I know the literature of some countries, Russia above all, far better than

that of large parts of the world, China for one, and of a whole continent, Africa. The imbalance reflects my reading, not a judgment on those literatures. This is mostly a list of novels. The exceptions are deliberate, and each is marked as such: the epics, plays and poems of the first section, and the plays, poems and memoirs further on. Of the epics, I kept only those that later literature keeps returning to, the Greek and the Roman. The great poems of national identity, such as Beowulf, the Finnish Kalevala, the Estonian Kalevipoeg, the Song of Roland or the Nibelungenlied, are left outside this selection.

Finally, why so many? Because a short list limits where you can go: it lays down a path that mirrors the compiler's own. I have been open about my preferences, but the choices, with their possibilities and their risks, should be yours.

Quoting a short passage from *They Are Lying to You*:

“In Being and Time, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger makes a claim that may sound abstract until you fully understand it: “Higher than actuality stands possibility.” A human being is not a thing with fixed properties, the way a stone is hard or a chair is wooden. We are what Heidegger calls Dasein, literally “being-there,” ... and our way of being is possibility itself, a potentiality-for-being (Seinkönnen). We are not, first of all, what we have already become. We are what we can still be. ... Possibility is power and risk in the same breath.”

Follow the book that pulls you. That is how you start authoring your own life.

Contents

FOUNDATIONS: FROM HOMER TO SHAKESPEARE

Greece · Rome · Italy · Spain and England · East Asia

BRITISH AND IRISH

FRENCH

ITALIAN

IBERIA: SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

RUSSIAN

GERMAN-LANGUAGE AND THE LOW COUNTRIES

Low Countries

NORDIC AND BALTIC

MITTELEUROPA

Czech · Polish · Hungarian · Romanian · Ukrainian · Belarusian

GREECE AND THE BALKANS

Greece · Yugoslavia (Bosnia) · Albania

THE WIDER MIDDLE EAST: TURKEY, ISRAEL, THE ARAB WORLD, IRAN

Azerbaijan · Turkey · Israel · The Arab world · Iran

NORTH AMERICA

LATIN AMERICA

INDIA AND THE SUBCONTINENT

ASIA: CHINA, JAPAN, KOREA, INDONESIA

AFRICA

OTHER LISTS WORTH YOUR TIME

WHERE TO START

FOUNDATIONS: FROM HOMER TO SHAKESPEARE

*Epic, drama and poetry from Homer to Shakespeare, written before the modern novel. In these books the language carries much of the meaning, so read them in the original if you can and, if you cannot, in a parallel-text edition with the original on the facing page. Cervantes and Shakespeare died within days of each other in April 1616, which is where the section stops. Language matters in later books too (Pushkin's *Onegin*, Joyce, Gadda, Guimarães Rosa), and the note on editions applies to them as well; this section is simply where it matters most.*

Greece

1. Homer, *The Iliad* (c. 8th c. BCE)

Achilles, the best fighter at Troy, sulks in his tent after his commander takes his prize, then returns to kill Hector when his friend dies. Along the way he notices that the coward and the brave end up equally dead.

2. Homer, *The Odyssey* (c. 8th c. BCE)

The first narrative of return. Odysseus takes ten years to get home from Troy and arrives disguised as a beggar. His dog, his old nurse and finally his wife recognize him, each by a different test. Identity tested by disguise, and settled by who still recognizes you. Even then the journey is not over.

3. Aeschylus, *The Oresteia* (458 BCE)

Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to get a fair wind for Troy; on his return his wife Clytemnestra kills him, their son Orestes kills her, and the Furies hunt him until the goddess Athena sets up a court in Athens to judge the case. The trilogy shows a society learning that a grievance needs a third party to settle it, and that the injured party is the worst judge of its own case.

4. Sophocles, *Antigone* (c. 441 BCE)

King Creon forbids the burial of a traitor, and the traitor's sister Antigone buries him anyway. Both are defending a real principle, and by the end Creon's son and wife are dead. No rule settles it; judgment must read the particular case. Hegel built a theory of tragedy on it.

5. Euripides, *Medea* (431 BCE)

Jason leaves Medea, who gave up her family and country for him, to marry the daughter of the king of Corinth. Medea kills the bride, the king and her own children. Euripides shows what happens when the story someone built her whole life inside is shattered by another person's decision, with no soft landing.

6. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 BCE)

Oedipus, king of Thebes, investigates a murder and discovers that he committed it, and that he married his mother. The truth does not heal him; he blinds himself. Freud took his name for a reason.

7. Aristophanes, *The Clouds* (423 BCE)

A farmer drowning in his son's horse-racing debts enrolls in Socrates's "Thinkery" to learn the argument that wins any case, so he never has to pay. His son learns it better and uses it to justify beating him. Aristophanes wrote the first satire of the wisdom business, and paying for technique still has the same side effects.

8. Euripides, *The Bacchae* (405 BCE)

Pentheus, the young king of Thebes, bans the rites of the new god Dionysus, goes to spy on them dressed as a woman, and is torn apart by the worshippers, led by his own mother. The play shows what happens to an order that makes no room for desire.

*Rome***9. Plautus, *The Pot of Gold (Aulularia)* (early 2nd c. BCE)**

Euclio, a poor old Athenian, finds a pot of gold and spends the play hiding it, moving it and accusing everyone of theft, ignoring the life which is happening around him, including his daughter's pregnancy and engagement. Beware of "success". Molière took the plot for *The Miser*.

10. Virgil, *The Aeneid* (19 BCE)

Aeneas escapes burning Troy with orders from the gods to found a new city in Italy. He abandons Dido, the queen who loves him, and she kills herself; the poem ends with him killing an enemy in a rage. Virgil makes his hero follow his duty and counts every cost of it, including to the winning side.

11. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (8 CE)

Hundreds of Greek and Roman myths of people turning into trees, birds, rivers and stars, linked by Ovid into one long poem. Nothing in it keeps its shape for long.

12. Seneca, *Thyestes* (1st c. CE)

King Atreus takes revenge on his brother Thyestes by cooking his sons and serving them to him at dinner. Seneca, the Stoic philosopher of calm in the Letters, wrote this too. Read it beside the Stoic paperbacks to see how much the productivity version of Seneca leaves out.

13. Petronius, *The Satyricon* (c. 60s CE)

A comic novel that survives in fragments; its best-known part is the dinner of Trimalchio, a freed slave turned millionaire who shows off everything he owns and stages a rehearsal of his own funeral. His wealth keeps growing and means less each course. Fitzgerald considered calling *Gatsby* "Trimalchio in West Egg."

14. Juvenal, *Satires* (early 2nd c. CE)

Sixteen verse satires on Rome: its crowds, rich men, flatterers, wives and lawyers. Juvenal gave us "bread and circuses" and "who will guard the guards?", and his Tenth Satire is a tour of things people pray for (wealth, power, fame, long life) and how each one ruins them. Sound familiar?

15. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (late 2nd c. CE)

Lucius, a young man curious about magic, borrows an ointment that turns him into a donkey instead of an owl. He spends the book being stolen, beaten and sold, and sees society from underneath. It is the only Latin novel that survives complete, and a fair warning about magical shortcuts to a new self.

*Italy***16. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1308–21)**

Dante, at thirty-five, finds himself lost in a dark wood. The poet Virgil, whom he trusts, leads him through Hell and Purgatory; Beatrice, and finally St. Bernard, guide him through Paradise. He does not find his way alone. It is

also the founding text of the Italian language.

17. Francesco Petrarca, *The Canzoniere* (c. 1336–74)

Three hundred and sixty-six poems about Laura, a woman who hardly speaks in them, and mostly about the man writing them. Petrarch kept revising and reordering the collection until the year he died.

18. Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (c. 1349–53)

In 1348 seven young women and three young men leave plague-struck Florence for the hills and tell each other a hundred stories over ten days. The stories are bawdy, cruel and funny, and they let the group live many lives while waiting out one death.

19. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* (1516–32)

The knight Orlando goes mad when the woman he loves marries someone else, and his friend Astolfo rides to the moon in St. John's chariot to fetch his wits back in a bottle. The moon, it turns out, also stores wasted time, broken vows and unfulfilled plans. Ariosto treats every grand quest with the same affectionate irony.

Spain and England

20. William Shakespeare, *Everything* (1590–1613)

If you insist on one play: King Lear, an old king who divides his kingdom among his daughters according to how loudly they say they love him, and learns what he was worth without his power. It is the great tragedy of a bad exit, the opposite of a dignified setting, of *tramontare*.

21. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605/1615)

A Spanish gentleman reads so many chivalry romances that he sets out as a knight, attacks windmills he takes for giants and names a farm girl his lady. He organizes his whole life around a borrowed genre. Every book here about a self written from a script descends from this one.

East Asia

22. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1010 · Japan)

Prince Genji, the emperor's gifted son, moves through love affairs and court politics in Heian Japan, and after his death the story follows his heirs into something sadder. A lady-in-waiting wrote it around 1010. It is often called the first novel, and for many readers it is still one of the finest on what people feel and do not say.

23. Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (14th c. · China)

The Han dynasty collapses and three rival states fight for a century over the right to rule China. Zhuge Liang's most famous trick, opening the gates of a defenseless city, works only because his opponent knows him to be cautious.

24. Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West* (c. 1592 · China)

The monk Xuanzang walks to India for Buddhist scriptures, guarded by a rebellious monkey king, a greedy pig and the fish spirit Sandy, through eighty-one ordeals. The novel mocks heaven's bureaucracy and its own pilgrims with real affection. Here the tradition laughs at itself from inside, which Buddhism sold back to the West as wellness never does.

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY

BRITISH AND IRISH

25. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726 · Ireland)

A ship's surgeon visits tiny people, giants, a flying island, an academy whose scientists try to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, and a land of rational horses. Each society looks reasonable from inside. Gulliver comes home preferring the horses to his family, which some horsemen will understand.

26. Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67)

Tristram sets out to tell his life story and takes several volumes to get himself born. Sterne draws his plot as a wandering line and promises to do better. It is the first novel to admit that a life does not arrive in order.

27. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

Elizabeth Bennet decides on first meeting that Mr. Darcy is arrogant and that the charming Mr. Wickham is honorable, and is wrong on both counts. Austen's working title was *First Impressions*. Elizabeth has to correct her gut reading against evidence: "trust your gut" is weak advice outside trained expertise.

28. Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1817)

Anne Elliot was persuaded at nineteen to break off her engagement to a naval officer with no fortune. Eight years later he comes back a rich captain and seems to have no interest in her. Austen's last finished novel is about a decision taken on other people's advice, and the eight years it cost her.

29. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)

Victor Frankenstein, a young scientist, builds a living man from dead parts and runs from him the moment he opens his eyes. The abandoned creature learns to speak, read and hate. Shelley wrote about making something because you can without asking what it is for.

30. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)

Jane, a poor orphan and governess, falls in love with her employer, Mr. Rochester, and leaves him the day she learns what is kept locked upstairs. Later she refuses a cousin who offers marriage as a missionary duty. She holds her own line with no money or position to back it.

31. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

Heathcliff, a foundling taken in by the Earnshaws, is humiliated, leaves, returns rich and spends two generations taking revenge on both families. The story comes through a fussy tenant and a housekeeper who both take sides. It is on the list for its portrait of desire turned into grievance.

32. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1847–48)

Becky Sharp, a poor governess with no family, climbs London society while her school friend Amelia stays loyal to a man who does not deserve it. Thackeray subtitled it *A Novel without a Hero* and closed by asking, "Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?"

33. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861)

Pip, a village orphan, is told he has "great expectations" from a secret benefactor and assumes it is the rich, eccentric Miss Havisham. The truth is the novel's business. He has built a self on a story someone else was writing.

34. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–72)

Dorothea Brooke marries an elderly scholar for his great work and finds it will never be finished, while the young doctor Lydgate watches his medical ambitions shrink under a bad marriage and debt. For many readers it is the best novel about vocation, and about direction: knowing what your work is for.

35. Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now* (1875)

Augustus Melmotte, a financier of mysterious origin, sells shares in a railway across America and Mexico that will never be built, and London's best families line up to invest. Trollope wrote it after a run of financial scandals. The business model has not changed: sell the promise and let the buyers do the believing.

36. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890 · Ireland)

A beautiful young man wishes that his portrait would age instead of him, and it does. He stays flawless while the painting records every cruelty and crime. Wilde wrote the perfect fable for "the best version of yourself": keep the surface perfect and send the cost somewhere else.

37. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891)

Tess, a poor farm girl, is sent to claim kinship with a rich family, is seduced and abandoned by its son, and is later rejected by her husband for a past he forgives in himself. Hardy shows the same person judged differently by each setting she lands in.

38. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (play) (1895 · Ireland)

Jack is Ernest in town and Jack in the country; his friend Algernon has invented an invalid called Bunbury so he can escape dull dinners. Both keep a second self for convenience, and both of the women they love will marry only a man called Ernest. Wilde's last play, and the best-built comedy in English.

39. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

Marlow, a sailor, travels up the Congo River for a Belgian trading company to find Kurtz, an ivory agent who has set himself up as a god among the people he exploits. Far from the courts and neighbors that held him in place, a civilized man's principles fail. The blueprint for *Apocalypse Now*.

40. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916 · Ireland)

Stephen Dedalus grows up in Dublin through Catholic school, religious terror and student argument, and decides to become a writer. Joyce writes the first pages in baby talk and the prose grows up with him, so you watch a self being composed instead of discovered.

41. D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (1920)

Two sisters, Ursula and Gudrun, and two men, Birkin and the mine-owner Gerald, try to work out what they want from love and from each other. Gerald runs his mines with ruthless efficiency, and the four end up together in the Alpine snow. Lawrence separates desire from appetite in scene after scene.

42. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922 · Ireland)

One ordinary Dublin Thursday, 16 June 1904, follows Leopold Bloom, an advertising canvasser, through work, a funeral, lunch and a bar, mapped chapter by chapter onto Homer's *Odyssey*. Joyce puts the hero's epic arc on a man buying a pork kidney for breakfast. Few books on this list survive summary less well. Not an easy read.

43. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924)

Adela, a young Englishwoman in colonial India, accuses Dr. Aziz of assaulting her in the Marabar Caves, and the trial splits the colony. Forster never says what happened in the cave. The novel asks the reader to tolerate the unanswered question.

44. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

One June day in London in 1923: Clarissa Dalloway buys flowers and gives a party, while Septimus Smith, a shell-shocked veteran, is failed by his doctors. The two never meet. Woolf shows how much of a life fits into one ordinary day, and how much of it is never said aloud.

45. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

The Ramsays summer on a Scottish island. Young James wants to sail to the lighthouse; his father, a philosopher who fears he has reached Q and will never reach R, says the weather won't allow it. Ten years pass in one short section, Mrs. Ramsay dies in square brackets, and they finally go. Woolf takes you inside each mind in turn, and the plot hardly matters.

46. Noël Coward, *Private Lives* (play) (1930)

Elyot and Amanda, divorced for five years, find themselves honeymooning with their new spouses on adjoining hotel balconies in Deauville. By the end of the first act they have run off to Paris together, where they love each other and fight exactly as they did before. Coward said he wrote it in four days.

47. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932)

A future world state produces people in bottles, conditions them for their jobs and keeps them happy with sex, shopping and a drug called soma. Nobody suffers, and nobody does anything that matters. Huxley took the optimized life to its finish line and found no one there.

48. Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* (1934)

Claudius, stammering, limping and taken for a fool by his own imperial family, survives the poisonings and purges of Augustus, Tiberius and Caligula precisely because nobody thinks him worth killing, and ends up emperor. Graves's Rome reads like a family business run by his grandmother Livia.

49. Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust* (1934)

Tony Last, a decent country gentleman devoted to his Gothic house, loses his wife to a bored affair and his son to a riding accident. He flees on an expedition to Brazil, and what the jungle holds for him is the novel's business. Many readers think it Waugh's best.

50. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (1940)

A nameless "whisky priest" is on the run in a Mexican state where the Church has been outlawed. He drinks, has fathered a child and is a coward, yet he keeps saying Mass and walks into a trap to hear a dying man's confession. Greene shows a commitment kept by someone with no virtue to show for it.

51. W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge* (1944)

Larry Darrell comes home from the First World War, turns down a job and a fiancée, and goes looking for meaning, which leads him to a guru in India. Maugham took the title from the Katha Upanishad. It is arguably the founding novel of the Western seeker in India: read it beside today's Eastern wisdom sold to the West.

52. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)

Charles Ryder, an army officer in the Second World War, is billeted at a great house and remembers his Oxford friendship with Sebastian Flyte and his love for the Flyte family. Memory gives his youth a shape it did not have while he lived it. The reworking of a life in hindsight, the creation of meaning.

53. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

Winston Smith rewrites old newspapers at the Ministry of Truth in a state that controls the past and the language. When the chocolate ration is cut from thirty grams to twenty, the Party announces that it has been raised, and the people thank it. The invented statistics of the self-help shelf are a gentler version of the same trade.

54. Anthony Powell, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–75)

Twelve novels covering fifty years of English life, narrated by Nick Jenkins as he watches his generation sort itself into those who rose and those who drifted. Where the relentless climber Widmerpool, who exploits himself and calls it ambition, finally ends up is the last volume's business.

55. Evelyn Waugh, *Sword of Honour* (1952–61)

Guy Crouchback, a Catholic gentleman, joins the army in 1939 believing the war is a crusade and learns that it is mostly administration, muddle and compromise. Three novels, and for many critics the best British fiction of the Second World War.

56. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (play) (1952 · Ireland)

Two tramps wait by a tree for a Mr. Godot, who sends word each evening that he will come tomorrow. One critic described it as a play in which nothing happens, twice. They keep the appointment anyway, which makes it the theater's purest study of living with a question that never gets answered.

57. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954)

A plane full of British schoolboys crashes on a desert island during a war, and with no adults they try to govern themselves. Within weeks the hunters have overthrown the voters. A novel on the importance of context; Golding was a schoolmaster. Don't take it for settled science, though.

58. Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (1954)

Jim Dixon, a junior history lecturer at a provincial university, cannot stand his subject, his professor or the article he is trying to publish on shipbuilding techniques in the fifteenth century. Then he has to give a public lecture on "Merrie England" he does not believe a word of, and he gives it drunk. The funniest English novel about faking expertise to keep a job.

59. Graham Greene, *Our Man in Havana* (1958)

Wormold, a vacuum-cleaner salesman in Havana, is recruited by British intelligence, needs the money, and starts inventing agents and reports. He sends drawings of vacuum-cleaner parts as secret military installations, and London believes him. Wormold is the untested expert: MI6 skipped the test because the story was what it wanted.

60. V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961 · Trinidad)

Mohun Biswas, a sign painter and journalist in Trinidad, spends his life trying to own a house of his own, against his wife's overbearing family and his own bad luck. He gets one, badly built and mortgaged, shortly before he dies. Comic and humiliating, it is an exact account of what a modest success may cost.

61. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962)

Anna Wulf, a blocked novelist in 1950s London, keeps four notebooks, black, red, yellow and blue, for her past in Africa, her Communist politics, her fiction and her daily life, because no single story can hold all of her. A fifth, golden notebook tries to bring them together. Lessing won the Nobel Prize in 2007.

62. John le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963)

Alec Leamas, a burned-out British agent, agrees to one last job: pose as a defector and destroy an East German spymaster. What the operation is for is the novel's business. The book that made le Carré, and the bleakest account on this list of an institution spending its own people.

63. John le Carré, *The Karla Trilogy: Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, The Honourable Schoolboy, Smiley's People* (1974–79)

George Smiley, a retired spy, is brought back to find a Soviet mole at the top of British intelligence, then spends two more novels hunting the spymaster Karla. The Circus has forgotten what it is for; Smiley has not. The trilogy says more about identity, values and organizational rot than most of the management shelf.

64. Harold Pinter, *Betrayal* (play) (1978)

The affair between Emma and Jerry, the best friend of her husband Robert, told backwards: the play opens two years after it ended and closes on the night it began. Knowing how it ends changes every line, and not everyone knew what the audience thinks they knew. Meaning is always interpreted, even if time runs backward.

65. Julian Mitchell, *Another Country* (play) (1981)

An English public school in the early 1930s. Guy Bennett, an iconoclast, he's confident that he will be elected one of the "Gods" who run the school, but watches that place slip away after a boy caught with another boy hangs himself and the prefects crack down. His friend Tommy Judd, a Marxist, refuses to play the game at all. The rise of Fascism across Europe is in the background. Mitchell modeled Bennett on Guy Burgess, the Cambridge spy.

66. John le Carré, *A Perfect Spy* (1986)

Magnus Pym, a senior British spy, vanishes after his father's funeral and hides in a seaside boarding house, writing his life story for his son while his own service hunts him. Pym's father is le Carré's own con-man father in disguise, and this is his most personal book. For those who still believe in an authentic self.

67. Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (1989)

Stevens, an English butler, drives to the West Country in 1956 and recalls decades of perfect service to Lord Darlington, a man who sympathized with the Nazis. His performance was flawless, excellence one could say today; he gave up life, love and desire, and never asked where he was going. Stevens is a perfect case of motion without direction.

68. Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (play) (1993)

In a Derbyshire country house, two stories alternate in the same room: a gifted thirteen-year-old girl and her tutor in 1809, and two modern scholars trying to reconstruct what happened there. The scholars get the past confidently wrong. Stoppard makes chaos theory, landscape gardening and literary gossip very funny, and then, at the end, very sad.

69. Martin Amis, *The Information* (1995)

Richard Tull, a failed novelist turning forty, watches his oldest friend Gwyn Barry, a writer he considers mediocre, become rich and famous, and sets out to ruin him. Amis's comedy of envy is also an exact account of measuring your life against someone else's scoreboard. Read it beside Bernhard's *The Loser*.

70. Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000)

Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, old army friends, raise families in north London, and each family has its own story about where it came from. Samad keeps returning to a heroic ancestor that the record does not support. Smith shows identity as inheritance and as argument.

71. Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (2001)

In 1935 thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis sees something she does not understand and accuses her sister's lover of a crime he did not commit. Decades later, as a novelist, she writes the story, and what that writing can and cannot repair is the novel's business. McEwan shows a life spent trying to rewrite one mistake.

72. Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (2004)

Nick Guest, a young gay graduate, lodges with the family of a Tory MP in 1980s Notting Hill and enjoys their parties and their money. How long the welcome lasts is the novel's business. Hollinghurst shows access mistaken for belonging.

73. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005)

Kathy and her friends grow up at Hailsham, an English boarding school whose guardians tell them only part of what they are for. The rest is disclosed slowly, and it is the novel's business. They never run away and barely protest. Ishiguro wrote the most disturbing book here on accepting the story you were given.

74. Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (2009)

Thomas Cromwell, a blacksmith's son who has been a soldier, merchant and lawyer, becomes Henry VIII's chief minister by reading every room he enters. Mantel writes from inside his head. He has phronesis, practical wisdom: seeing the particular situation and acting on the reading.

75. Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (2011)

Tony Webster, retired and comfortable, receives a small legacy that reopens his student years and a friend's suicide. His ex-girlfriend Veronica keeps telling him, "You just don't get it," and she is right. She is someone with the standing to contest the story he has told himself for forty years.

76. Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (2014)

A writer flies to Athens to teach a summer course, and the people she meets tell her their lives: marriages, divorces, failures, fresh starts. She says almost nothing about herself, so her shape appears only in outline, through what others say. The first of a trilogy, and a cool, exact book about how people narrate themselves.

77. Anna Burns, *Milkman* (2018 · Northern Ireland)

An eighteen-year-old girl in an unnamed city during the Troubles is pursued by a paramilitary known as Milkman, and the neighborhood decides she is having an affair with him. Her habit of reading while walking makes her more suspect than he is. Burns shows gossip working as a political system.

FRENCH

78. Molière, *Tartuffe* (play) (1664)

A religious fraud moves into a wealthy Paris household, and its master, Orgon, signs over his property and promises him his daughter. Molière's play shows the first guru and the first true believer: the expert who is manufactured, and the follower who pays for him.

79. Voltaire, *Candide* (1759)

Young Candide is taught by his tutor Pangloss that this is the best of all possible worlds, then meets war, the Lisbon earthquake and the Inquisition. Pangloss keeps the theory through every disaster. Voltaire answered positive thinking in 1759, and the answer still holds: go and cultivate your own garden.

80. Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782)

Two Parisian aristocrats, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont, run seduction as a strategy game and write each other progress reports. Their technique is flawless and their manners perfect. The novel shows what happens when people treat each other as projects to be managed, and it ends badly for both.

81. Stendhal, *The Red and the Black* (1830)

Julien Sorel, a carpenter's son who worships Napoleon, finds that after 1815 the army is closed to him and the road to the top runs through the Church. He reads the new rules well and climbs fast. The same ambition means something different once the situation changes.

82. Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions* (1837–43)

Lucien de Rubempré, a provincial poet, comes to Paris and learns that books and reputations are made by favors, paid reviews and newspaper puffery. He is good at the game for a while. It is the same machine that still manufactures experts, self-help experts included, and Balzac described it almost two centuries ago.

83. Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844–46)

Edmond Dantès is wrongly imprisoned for fourteen years, escapes, finds a fortune and spends years on revenge. The plotting is superb and the cost is total. Read it beside Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas: in both, a just grievance grows until it becomes the whole of a man's life.

84. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (serialized 1856; book 1857)

Emma Bovary, married to a dull country doctor, learned about love from novels and keeps looking for it in lovers, shopping and debt. Nothing she gets is ever what she wanted.

85. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (1862)

Jean Valjean, a convict, is changed by one act of mercy and becomes a respected mayor under another name, while the policeman Javert hunts him in the belief that a criminal stays a criminal. The novel argues that a self can be rewritten.

86. Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* (1869)

Frédéric Moreau spends his life waiting for the great love and the great career, and gets neither. At the end he and an old friend agree that the best moment of their lives was a teenage visit to a brothel where nothing happened.

87. Émile Zola, *Germinal* (1885)

Étienne Lantier arrives in a northern French mining town and leads a strike that ends in hunger, soldiers and a flooded pit. Zola went down a mine himself to research it. The novel is on this list for its account of what collective action costs the people who take it.

88. Guy de Maupassant, *Bel-Ami* (1885)

Georges Duroy, a former soldier with good looks and no talent, gets a job at a Paris newspaper and climbs through the wives and mistresses of the people above him. His first article is written for him by a colleague's wife.

89. André Gide, *The Immoralist* (1902)

Michel, a young scholar, nearly dies of tuberculosis in North Africa and decides to strip away his education to find the authentic being underneath. He finds it, and his wife pays for it. Gide follows this archaeology of the self to the end and does not endorse it.

90. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27)

A narrator spends seven volumes failing to become a writer, then understands in the last one that his whole life was the material. The meaning arrives at the end and changes everything before it. Start with Swann's Way and read to the end of Time Regained.

91. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932)

Ferdinand Bardamu goes from the trenches of 1914 to colonial Africa, Ford's factories in Detroit and a doctor's practice in a Paris slum, and finds nothing worth believing at any stop. The voice is savage and very funny. Read it, and keep in view the antisemitic pamphlets Céline wrote later; the two do not cancel each other.

92. André Malraux, *Man's Fate* (1933)

Communist conspirators in Shanghai in 1927 prepare an uprising that their own allies will betray. Each man commits his life without knowing whether the cause will hold. Malraux won the Goncourt for it.

93. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938)

Antoine Roquentin, a historian in a dull seaside town, is overcome by the sheer existence of things, most famously the root of a chestnut tree. He also realizes that an adventure exists only when you tell it afterward.

94. Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942)

Meursault, a clerk in Algiers, shoots a man on a beach, and at his trial the prosecution spends more time on his failure to cry at his mother's funeral than on the killing. He is convicted for having no acceptable story about himself.

95. Georges Simenon, *Dirty Snow* (1948 · Belgium)

Frank Friedmaier, nineteen, lives off his mother's brothel in an occupied town and commits crimes to prove he can. Simenon wrote hundreds of books at great speed, and this is one of the best. It is a study of a young man who tries to become someone by doing the worst thing available.

96. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951)

The emperor Hadrian, ill and near death, writes a long letter to the young Marcus Aurelius about his life, his loves and his government. He judges himself with neither vanity nor despair. A masterpiece on the second half of life.

97. Albert Camus, *The Fall* (1956)

Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a former Paris lawyer, confesses his vanity and cowardice to a stranger in an Amsterdam bar. By the end the confession turns out to be a method: he admits his faults so that he can judge yours. Public self-exposure as a position of power, half a century before Instagram.

98. Albert Cohen, *Belle du Seigneur* (1968)

In 1930s Geneva, Solal, a League of Nations official, seduces Ariane, the wife of his subordinate, while explaining to her in a famous speech that seduction is a trick any baboon could perform. The trick works, and the lovers then find nothing to live on.

99. Romain Gary (as Émile Ajar), *The Life Before Us* (1975)

Momo, an Arab boy in Paris's Belleville district, is raised by Madame Rosa, a former prostitute and Auschwitz survivor, and cares for her as she dies. Romain Gary won the Goncourt with it under a false name; he had already won it once, and the rules allow only one. A relative played Ajar for the press.

100. Georges Perec, *Life A User's Manual* (1978)

A Paris apartment building, a hundred lives, and a rich Englishman, Bartlebooth, who spends fifty years painting five hundred watercolors of seaports, having them cut into jigsaw puzzles, solving them and erasing them. Bartlebooth is a perfect case of motion without direction: flawless execution, arranged to produce nothing.

101. Patrick Modiano, *Missing Person* (1978)

A man with no memory has worked for years in a Paris detective agency, and when it closes he investigates the one case left: himself. He assembles a past from photographs, addresses and other people's recollections. Goncourt, 1978.

102. Marguerite Duras, *The Lover* (1984)

A fifteen-year-old French girl in colonial Indochina, a rich Chinese lover, and a family coming apart, remembered by the writer fifty years later. Duras tells it out of order, as memory does.

103. Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised* (1998)

Two half-brothers, Bruno, who spends his life chasing sex, and Michel, a molecular biologist who has given it up, grow up abandoned by a mother busy with the liberation of the 1960s. Both end up alone. Houellebecq describes a consumer society that promised fulfillment and delivered appetite.

104. Irène Némirovsky, *Suite Française* (written 1940–42; published 2004)

The fall of France in 1940, the flight from Paris and the German occupation of a village, written as they happened. Némirovsky planned five parts, finished two, and was deported to Auschwitz in 1942. Her daughters kept the manuscript for decades, believing it was a diary. It was published in 2004.

105. Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones* (2006)

Max Aue, a former SS officer, writes the memoir of his war on the Eastern Front, at Auschwitz and in Berlin: cultured, articulate, monstrous. Written in French by an American, it won the Goncourt in 2006. It is on the list for what it shows about education and refinement: they did not stop him.

106. Annie Ernaux, *The Years* (memoir) (2008)

Sixty years of French life, from the 1940s to the 2000s, told through photographs, songs, slogans, brands and family meals. Ernaux writes "we" and "she" where a memoir would say "I," so one woman's life dissolves into her generation's. She won the Nobel Prize in 2022.

ITALIAN

107. Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed* (1827/1840)

Renzo and Lucia, two young silk-workers near Lake Como, are kept from marrying by a local lord, and the plague of 1630 does the rest. One scholar, Don Ferrante, proves by Aristotle that the plague cannot exist and dies of it. He is a perfect case of a credential mistaken for knowledge.

108. Giovanni Verga, *The House by the Medlar Tree* (1881)

The Malavoglia, a fishing family in a Sicilian village, buy a cargo of lupins on credit to improve their position. The boat sinks, the debt remains, and the family comes apart over the following years. Verga offers no consolation and no lesson in either suffering or resilience, which is why the novel still reads as true.

109. Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Child of Pleasure* (1889)

Andrea Sperelli, a young Roman aristocrat, follows his father's advice to make his life a work of art, and divides himself between two women until he loses both. The novel shows a self built entirely as surface.

110. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (play) (1921)

A theater company is rehearsing a Pirandello play when six strangers walk in: characters abandoned by the author who invented them, demanding that someone stage their story. The actors try and get it wrong, and the characters protest. At the Rome premiere the audience shouted "Manicomio!" (madhouse). Pirandello asks who owns the story of a life.

111. Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience* (1923)

Zeno Cosini writes his life story at the request of his psychoanalyst, who publishes it out of spite when Zeno quits treatment. Zeno tells us everything and understands almost nothing, including why he keeps smoking his last cigarette.

112. Eugenio Montale, *Cuttlefish Bones (Ossi di seppia)* (poetry) (1925)

Montale's first collection, written on the Ligurian coast: a wall topped with broken bottle glass, dry riverbeds, a sea that offers no consolation. In one of its best-known poems he tells the reader not to ask him for the formula that opens worlds; all he can say is "ciò che non siamo, ciò che non vogliamo" (what we are not, what we do not want) As with Lacan, Montale refuses a positive definition of the self. Nobel Prize 1975.

113. Luigi Pirandello, *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* (1926)

Vitangelo Moscarda learns from his wife that his nose tilts slightly to the right, something he never noticed. He realizes that everyone he knows sees a different Moscarda, and sets out to break the images they hold of him. This is the self as shaped and contested by other people.

114. Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (1933)

Peasants in a poor village in the Abruzzo are cheated of their water, their land and their wages by every authority above them, and slowly learn to say so. Silone wrote it in exile, and it appeared first in German translation.

115. Dino Buzzati, *The Tartar Steppe* (1940)

Lieutenant Drogo waits for decades at a frontier fort for the enemy attack that will give his life meaning. What happens when the Tartars finally come is the novel's last irony. The novel is about hope that waits for meaning to

arrive from outside, and about what that waiting costs.

116. Elio Vittorini, *Conversations in Sicily* (1941)

Silvestro, a typesetter in Milan sunk in what he calls abstract furies, goes back to his mother in Sicily and, through a series of conversations, recovers a reason to care. Published under Fascism, it was read as a refusal.

117. Ennio Flaiano, *A Time to Kill (Tempo di uccidere)* (1947)

An Italian officer in Ethiopia, lost on his way to see a dentist, wounds a young local woman by accident and then kills her. He spends the rest of the novel hiding the act and convinced he has caught leprosy. Guilt that colonial certainty cannot absorb.

118. Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (memoir) (1947)

Primo Levi, a twenty-four-year-old chemist from Turin, was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and wrote down what he saw as a chemist would: exactly, without rhetoric, without asking for pity. Einaudi turned it down in 1947; a small publisher printed it, and it found its readers only when Einaudi reissued it in 1958.

119. Cesare Pavese, *The Moon and the Bonfires* (1950)

A foundling who left his Piedmont village returns rich from America and looks for the place he remembers. The people are dead or changed, and what happened there during the war is worse than he knew.

120. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Street Kids (Ragazzi di vita)* (1955)

Ricetto and his friends grow up in the slums at the edge of postwar Rome, stealing, swimming in the Tiber and getting by, written in their own dialect. Pasolini was prosecuted for obscenity over it. No one is redeemed and no one is lectured.

121. Carlo Emilio Gadda, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* (1957)

In 1927 Rome, Inspector Ingravallo investigates a jewel theft and a murder in the same apartment building, believing that every event has a hundred causes. The case is never neatly closed.

122. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (1958)

Prince Salina, a Sicilian aristocrat, watches Garibaldi's Italy replace his class, reads the change accurately and declines to pretend otherwise. His nephew says that everything must change so that everything can stay the same.

123. Alberto Moravia, *Boredom* (1960)

Dino, a wealthy painter in Rome who has stopped painting, starts an affair with Cecilia, a young model who gives him everything except the sense of possessing her. The more he pays, the less he has.

124. Leonardo Sciascia, *The Day of the Owl* (1961)

Captain Bellodi, a policeman from northern Italy, investigates a murder in a Sicilian town where nobody saw anything. Every witness, official and politician helps the Mafia by keeping silent. Sciascia shows how power works by making certain sentences unsayable, and how little a good detective can do about it.

125. Giorgio Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1962)

In Ferrara in the late 1930s, a wealthy Jewish family opens its walled garden to young people barred from the tennis club by the racial laws. The narrator falls in love with the daughter, Micòl, and loses her, and everyone in the garden is about to lose much more. A precise account of a world that believed it was safe as the situation changed.

126. Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Lexicon* (1963)

Natalia Ginzburg's family in Turin, from the 1920s to the 1950s, remembered through the phrases they kept repeating, above all her father's thundering insults at the dinner table. Fascism, prison, exile and the war pass through the house, and the family keeps talking. She asked that it be read as a novel.

127. Beppe Fenoglio, *Johnny the Partisan* (1968)

Johnny, a young English-literature student, joins the partisans in the Langhe hills of Piedmont and fights through the winter of 1944. Fenoglio fought there himself and wrote the book in a private mix of English and Italian; it was published after his death. It is a war novel with no speeches in it.

128. Elsa Morante, *History* (1974)

Ida, a widowed schoolteacher in Rome, is raped by a German soldier and raises the son born of it through the war and its aftermath. Morante tells the history of the period from the bottom, where ordinary people suffer it, and refuses any consoling shape.

129. Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979)

You, the Reader, buy Calvino's new novel and find a binding error after the first chapter. The replacement is a different novel, which also breaks off, and so on through ten openings and a fellow reader, Ludmilla. It is a novel about the pleasure of reading, built entirely from interruptions. It ends, happily, with two people in bed reading.

130. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1980)

In 1327 a learned friar, William of Baskerville, investigates a series of deaths in an Italian abbey. He builds a theory that the killings follow the Book of Revelation, and where that theory leads him is the novel's business.

131. Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?* (1982)

A band of Jewish partisans fights its way west from Belarus to Italy between 1943 and 1945. It is Primo Levi's only war novel, and the fiction to read beside his testimony of Auschwitz. It is on the list as a story of people choosing to act without any guarantee, understanding what the consequences might entail.

132. Gesualdo Bufalino, *Night's Lies (Le menzogne della notte)* (1988)

On a prison island in the Bourbon south, four conspirators due to be executed at dawn spend the night telling each other the stories of their lives, and any of them may be lying. Bufalino asks what a told life is worth.

133. Antonio Tabucchi, *Pereira Maintains* (1994)

Pereira, an aging, overweight editor of a Lisbon newspaper's culture page in 1938, hires a young man to write obituaries and is drawn, against his habits, into resisting Salazar's regime. His doctor tells him the self is a confederation of souls.

134. Niccolò Ammaniti, *I'm Not Scared* (2001)

In a village in southern Italy in 1978, nine-year-old Michele finds a boy chained in a hole and slowly works out who put him there. The novel is about a child discovering what the adults around him are. A fast, tense read.

135. Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend (the Neapolitan Quartet)* (2011–14)

Two girls from a poor Naples neighborhood, Lila and Elena, and sixty years of friendship, rivalry and comparison. Elena gets the degrees and the books; Lila stays, and remains the brilliant one in Elena's eyes. The four books keep asking which of them won.

136. Antonio Scurati, *M: Son of the Century* (2018)

Mussolini's rise from 1919 to January 1925 told from inside, through documents and his own voice, with no hindsight allowed. The reader knows how it ends and the characters do not. It is on the list as a study of an opportunist who changed his convictions as the situation required.

137. Sandro Veronesi, *The Hummingbird* (2019)

Marco Carrera, an eye doctor, stays steady while losses arrive one after another: a sister, a marriage, a daughter. His mother called him the hummingbird because he was small as a boy; as a man he spends great energy staying in place. A novel about endurance.

IBERIA: SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

Spain and Portugal, from the heirs of Cervantes to the present.

138. Leopoldo Alas (Clarín), *La Regenta* (1884–85)

Ana Ozores, the young wife of an older retired judge in a provincial Spanish cathedral city, is fought over by her confessor and the town's seducer. Neither religion nor romance offers her a part she can live in. The novel shows a whole city closing around one woman.

139. Benito Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata and Jacinta* (1886–87)

In 1870s Madrid, the rich and idle Juanito Santa Cruz divides his life between his wife, Jacinta, who cannot have children, and Fortunata, a working-class woman who can. Galdós gives the city and both women equal weight.

140. Eça de Queirós, *The Maias* (1888 · Portugal)

Carlos da Maia, rich, cultured and idle, falls in love in Lisbon with a beautiful, mysterious woman, and who she is turns out to be the novel's business. At the end he and his friend agree that nothing in life is worth hurrying for, then run to catch a tram.

141. Miguel de Unamuno, *Mist* (1914)

Augusto Pérez, a rich, idle young man, decides to kill himself and first goes to Salamanca to consult his author, Unamuno, who tells him he is a fictional character and will die when the author decides. Augusto replies that the author may be the fiction.

142. Carmen Laforet, *Nada* (1945)

Andrea, eighteen, arrives in Barcelona after the civil war to study, and lodges with relatives in a decaying apartment full of hunger, violence and resentment. She has no way to interpret what she sees, and the novel does not supply one.

143. Camilo José Cela, *The Hive* (1951)

A crowd of characters cross paths over a few winter days in Madrid in the early 1940s, centered on a café, with no protagonist. Censorship forced Cela to publish it in Buenos Aires. It shows a society under a dictatorship without comment, which is the comment.

144. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Southern Seas* (1979)

Pepe Carvalho, former communist, former CIA agent and gourmet who burns books in his fireplace, investigates a rich businessman who claimed to be leaving for the South Seas and was found stabbed in Barcelona. Where he spent the missing time is the case.

145. Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (1982 · Portugal)

Hundreds of fragments by Bernardo Soares, an assistant bookkeeper in Lisbon, one of the many invented writers Pessoa wrote as. Pessoa called it a factless autobiography. It is the record of a man who lived almost entirely inside his own head, and it is best read a few pages at a time.

146. José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984 · Portugal)

Ricardo Reis, one of the invented poets Fernando Pessoa wrote under, returns to Lisbon from Brazil after Pessoa's death in 1935, and Pessoa's ghost comes to visit him. A fictional self keeps living after its author.

147. Javier Marías, *A Heart So White* (1992)

Juan, an interpreter, newly married, slowly uncovers why his father's second wife, his aunt, shot herself on returning from her honeymoon. The secret has shaped the family for decades without being spoken. Marías is the novelist of the sentence that changes everything, and of the ones that never get said.

148. José Saramago, *Blindness* (1995 · Portugal)

An epidemic of blindness strikes a city, and the first victims are locked in an abandoned asylum, where order collapses within days. Only one woman can still see. Remove the institutions around people and you learn how much of their decency was the situation's work.

149. Javier Cercas, *Soldiers of Sálamis* (2001)

A journalist named Javier Cercas investigates why, in 1939, a Republican soldier found the Falangist writer Rafael Sánchez Mazas hiding after he escaped a firing squad and let him go. The search turns into a question about who gets to be the hero of a civil war. It is on the list for how a story gets assembled from evidence.

150. Antonio Muñoz Molina, *Sepharad* (2001)

Displaced lives across the twentieth century, Jewish exiles, deportees and refugees, connected only by the narrator's attention as he moves between Madrid, Vienna and the camps. Muñoz Molina presents exile as the century's common condition. It is on the list as a book about lives that were not chosen.

151. Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow* (2002–07)

Jacques Deza, a Spaniard in London, is hired by a secret service to watch people and predict what they will do. His talent is real, and it costs him. It is intuition as it works: trained, specific and fallible, very far from trusting your gut.

152. Rafael Chirbes, *On the Edge* (2013)

Esteban, seventy, has had to close his carpentry workshop in a Valencian town after losing his savings in a property scheme, and spends his days caring for his father and looking back. Chirbes treats the Spanish real-estate bubble as a moral collapse.

153. Fernando Aramburu, *Homeland* (2016)

Two Basque families are close friends until ETA kills one of the fathers, and the son of the other is in ETA. Years later the widow comes back to the village to ask for an apology. The novel shows how a community goes on living next to its own violence.

RUSSIAN

154. Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin* (1833)

A bored young dandy turns down Tatiana, the country girl who writes him a love letter, then kills his friend Lensky in a pointless duel. Years later he falls in love with her, now married, and she turns him down. Onegin has every refinement except a wish of his own, and Pushkin shows what that costs.

155. Nikolai Gogol, *The Overcoat and Other Petersburg Tales* (1835–42)

Akaky Akakievich, a poor copying clerk in St. Petersburg, starves himself to buy a new overcoat, and for one evening the coat makes him somebody. Then it is stolen, and he dies of the loss. “We all came out from under Gogol’s Overcoat” is credited to Dostoevsky, probably wrongly, and Russian fiction kept returning to this clerk.

156. Nikolai Gogol, *The Government Inspector* (play) (1836)

A provincial town hears that an inspector is coming from St. Petersburg incognito, and its officials take Khlestakov, a penniless young clerk stuck at the inn, for him. He accepts their bribes, courts the mayor’s wife and daughter, and leaves town. Gogol’s epigraph: “Don’t blame the mirror if your face is crooked.”

157. Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time* (1840)

Pechorin, a young officer in the Caucasus, is seen by an old captain, by a traveler who meets him once, and through his own journal. None of these views settles who he is. Even his candid diary shows a man who does not understand himself.

158. Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls* (1842)

Chichikov, a polite and tireless swindler, tours the provinces buying up serfs who have died since the last census, so he can mortgage them as if they were alive. The landowners haggle over the dead with complete seriousness. Gogol describes a business built on a product that does not exist.

159. Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov* (1859)

Ilya Oblomov, a landowner in St. Petersburg, dreams of the peaceful estate of his childhood and barely gets off his sofa in the whole first part of the novel. His friend Stolz supplies all the energy. Oblomov is the reverse of Motion without Direction: he knows the life he longs for and cannot take one step toward it.

160. Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (1862)

Bazarov, a young medical student and self-declared nihilist, visits his friend Arkady’s family estate and scorns everything the older generation believes. Then he falls in love with Anna Odintsova, which his theory had no room for. Turgenev is fair to both generations.

161. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864)

A retired official living alone in a wretched room in St. Petersburg argues that people will act against their own interest out of spite, simply to prove they are not piano keys. He mocks the Crystal Palace, the dream of a perfectly rational society. It is the case against the optimization worldview, written in 1864.

162. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

Raskolnikov, a penniless former student, decides that extraordinary men like Napoleon may step over the law, and kills an old pawnbroker to prove he is one. His theory survives the murder; his nerves and body do not.

163. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Gambler* (1866)

Alexei, a tutor with a Russian general's family at a German spa town, falls for the general's stepdaughter Polina and then for the roulette wheel, sure that one good night will fix his life. Dostoevsky dictated the novel to a stenographer to meet a publisher's deadline, and he was a gambler himself, so the research was already done.

164. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1869)

Three aristocratic families, the Rostovs, the Bolkonskys and the Bezukhovs, whose fortune lands on the awkward Pierre, live through Napoleon's wars from 1805 to 1812. Tolstoy argues that history is made by countless small causes, not great men: Napoleon comes off vain and deluded, and old Kutuzov wins mostly by waiting. Hard to compare with poems such as the Iliad and the Odyssey, but for the GOAT lovers out there, this is it.

165. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1878)

Anna leaves her husband for Vronsky and is destroyed by a society that forgives affairs as long as they stay hidden. In a parallel plot Levin, a landowner, wrestles with faith and finds a moment of meaning mowing hay alongside his peasants.

166. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

Three brothers and a murdered father, and at the center Ivan's tale of the Grand Inquisitor, who tells the returned Christ that people do not want freedom and will gladly trade it for miracle, mystery and authority.

167. Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, *The Golovlyov Family* (1880)

The Golovlyov family decays over a generation of drink and early death, and the son who inherits, Porfiry, nicknamed Little Judas, talks endlessly of God, family and duty while ruining everyone near him. His pious phrases never stop and never mean anything. For many readers it is the darkest family novel in Russian.

168. Anton Chekhov, *Selected Stories* (1880–1903)

Chekhov's stories follow clerks, doctors, landowners and unhappy couples, and he observes them exactly without lecturing them. A practicing doctor, he wrote that an artist must state a problem correctly and need not solve it. The stories leave the reader holding the question.

169. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886)

Ivan Ilyich, a judge who did everything correctly, falls ill in his forties and realizes on his deathbed that his proper, successful life was the wrong one. The story runs under a hundred pages. He is a perfect case of Success Inflation: the outward record keeps growing while what it means to you shrinks, and Ivan Ilyich finds out too late.

170. Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters* (play) (1901)

Olga, Masha and Irina, stranded in a provincial garrison town, keep saying that life will begin once they get back to Moscow. The officers who visit talk about how happy people will be in two or three hundred years, while the sisters' sister-in-law takes over the house one room at a time.

171. Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (play) (1904)

Ranevskaya comes home from Paris to her estate, about to be auctioned for debt. Everyone talks, no one acts, and the merchant Lopakhin, whose father was a serf there, buys it and starts cutting down the orchard. Chekhov called it a comedy.

172. Aleksandr Kuprin, *The Duel* (1905)

Romashov, a dreamy second lieutenant in a provincial garrison, watches officers drink, beat soldiers and obey a code of honor no one can justify. An ambitious officer's wife uses him, and the code draws him toward a duel. The army gives him drills and rules, and never a reason.

173. Ivan Bunin, *The Village* (1910)

Two brothers from a village called Durnovka, one a grasping shopkeeper and the other a self-taught would-be poet, look at the peasant life around them and find poverty, cruelty and drink. Bunin refused the hopeful story about the Russian peasant that educated Russians liked to tell, and many readers were offended. Storytelling is a powerful beast.

174. Leo Tolstoy, *Hadji Murat* (written 1896–1904; published 1912)

In 1851 Hadji Murat, a famed Caucasus resistance commander, defects to the Russians after a feud with the imam Shamil, and finds that neither side will trust him. His courage is intact; what he lacks is any position where it can do him good. Tolstoy had served there in those years; the novel appeared after his death.

175. Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy, *The Road to Calvary* (*The Sisters*, 1918, *Gloomy Morning*) (1922–41)

Two sisters, Katya and Dasha, and the men they love live through war, revolution and civil war. The author, a distant relative of Leo Tolstoy known as the Red Count returned from emigration, became Stalin's favorite, and revised the trilogy to fit the party line. It is a fine story, told by a man revising his own to stay safe.

176. Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (written 1920–21; first published in English 1924, in Russian 1952, in Russia 1988)

In the glass city of the One State, citizens live by the clock, and the engineer D-503 records his contentment until a woman and his own imagination disturb it. The state's cure is an operation to remove imagination. Zamyatin took the optimization worldview to its end in 1921. Orwell reviewed it in 1946; Huxley denied reading it.

177. Mikhail Bulgakov, *The White Guard* (1925–29)

In Kiev in the winter of 1918, the Turbins, two brothers and their sister, keep their apartment warm and their table set while the city passes from the German-backed Hetman to Petliura's army, with the Bolsheviks on the way. Bulgakov grew up in that city and that house. For many readers it is his most humane book.

178. Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry* (1926)

Lyutov, a bespectacled Jewish intellectual, rides as a newspaper correspondent with the Cossacks of the Red Cavalry in the Polish campaign of 1920. He wants their acceptance and records their brutality, and his own, in short stories of terrible exactness. In one story he kills a goose to prove himself, and it works.

179. Ilf and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs* (1928)

A former nobleman learns that his mother-in-law sewed the family diamonds into one of twelve dining chairs, now scattered across the Soviet Union, and teams up with the con man Ostap Bender to find them. For many readers it is the best con-man comedy in any language.

180. Mikhail Sholokhov, *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1928–40)

Grigory Melekhov, a Don Cossack, fights in the First World War and then on both sides of the civil war, while the Cossack world he belongs to is taken apart around him. Sholokhov won the Nobel Prize in 1965, and how much of the novel he wrote alone has been argued over for decades.

181. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (1937–38; complete 1952)

Fyodor, a young Russian émigré poet in 1920s Berlin, grows into a writer while living in rented rooms, falling in love, and writing a mocking life of the radical critic Chernyshevsky. You watch a self being drafted and revised. The Chernyshevsky chapter was cut when the novel was first serialized.

182. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (memoir) (1951; revised 1966)

Nabokov's childhood in St. Petersburg and on the family estate at Vyra: butterflies, tutors, a first love, and the father later murdered in Berlin, all recovered by a man who lost his country and never went back. The memory is not dug up but composed, with the care of a novelist setting a chess problem. A favorite of mine.

183. Vasily Grossman, *Stalingrad and Life and Fate* (1952 and 1980)

Grossman follows the Shaposhnikov family and many others from Stalingrad to German camps and Soviet laboratories. He sets the Nazi and Soviet states side by side and finds that the one thing neither can produce is small, senseless kindness. Read both as one novel: *Stalingrad*, censored in 1952 as *For a Just Cause*, is the first half.

184. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955)

Humbert Humbert, a European scholar in America, tells in elegant prose how he abused a twelve-year-old girl for two years, and asks the jury to see it his way. The beauty of the voice is the trap. Dolores never tells her own story, and no one can contest his.

185. Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* (1957, in Italian translation; in the USSR 1988)

Yuri Zhivago, a doctor and poet, tries to keep his family, his love for Lara and his poems intact through revolution and civil war, while history demands that he take sides. Refused in the Soviet Union, the novel first appeared in Italian in 1957, and Pasternak was pressured into declining the Nobel Prize the next year.

186. Konstantin Simonov, *The Living and the Dead trilogy* (*The Living and the Dead*, *Soldiers Are Not Born*, *The Last Summer*) (1959–71)

The trilogy follows the war from the collapse of June 1941 to the liberation of Belarus in 1944, and for decades it was the Soviet war novel everyone read. Simonov was a favored official writer, yet his hero, General Serpilin, is an officer arrested in the purges who returns from the camps to fight.

187. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962)

One day in a Soviet labor camp, from reveille to lights out, seen by the peasant prisoner Shukhov, who counts it a good day because he swiped an extra bowl of kasha and laid a brick wall. The novel shows how much a situation decides, and how much care a man can still put into the little left to him.

188. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962)

A 999-line poem by the American poet John Shade, followed by a commentary by his neighbor Charles Kinbote, who turns every line into the story of an exiled king of Zembla. Kinbote is Otto with footnotes (Otto is the character in *A Fish Called Wanda* who quotes philosophers he has not understood). It reads like a puzzle and is very funny. But not an easy read.

189. Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem* (poetry) (written 1935–61; published 1963)

For seventeen months Akhmatova stood in the prison lines of Leningrad waiting for news of her son. When a woman in the line asked her, "Can you describe this?" she said she could. The poems were too dangerous to keep on paper: friends memorized them and the drafts were burned. Published in Munich in 1963, in the Soviet Union only in 1987.

190. Vadim Kozhevnikov, *The Shield and the Sword* (1965)

A young Soviet agent, Alexander Belov, is planted inside German intelligence before and during the Second World War under the name Johann Weiss. The 1968 film made from it is the one Putin has said made him want to join the KGB. For Russian readers it is the national 007.

191. Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (written 1928–40; serialized 1966–67)

The devil arrives in 1930s Moscow as a foreign professor named Woland. Within hours of the literary official Berlioz explaining confidently that Jesus never existed, Berlioz is beheaded by a tram, as Woland predicted. The atheist bureaucracy proves easy work for him.

192. Mikhail Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog* (written 1925; published 1968)

In 1920s Moscow, the eminent surgeon Preobrazhensky transplants human glands into a stray dog, who turns into a crude man named Sharikov and soon runs a city department that hunts stray cats. The surgery is flawless and the result a disaster. It is a category error: perfect technique, applied where judgment was needed.

193. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle* (1968)

Scientists and engineers held in a special research prison near Moscow are fed well and set to build voice-scrambling and voice-identification systems for Stalin's secret police. Each must decide how far to cooperate; the mathematician Nerzhin refuses and is sent back to the harsher camps. Solzhenitsyn weighs what a decent person will trade for comfort.

194. Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit* (written 1929–30; published 1969, in the USSR 1987)

Workers outside a Soviet town dig the foundation pit for a vast building meant to house the whole proletariat, and keep enlarging the pit while the building never begins. Meanwhile collectivization reaches the nearby village. This is Motion without Direction on a national scale: endless labor toward a goal no one can see.

195. Yulian Semyonov, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1969)

In the spring of 1945 the Soviet agent Stierlitz, who has risen to colonel in the SS under a false name, works to expose secret peace talks between the Nazis and the Western Allies. The 1973 television series made from it became one of the most loved in Soviet history, and Stierlitz became the other Soviet 007.

196. Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line* (1973)

Venichka, an unemployed alcoholic, boards the suburban train from Moscow to Petushki, where the woman he loves is waiting, and drinks and philosophizes the whole way. Written in 1969 and passed around in samizdat, it is a comic prose poem about late-Soviet despair that includes cocktail recipes.

197. Yuri Trifonov, *The House on the Embankment* (1976)

Vadim Glebov, a successful Soviet scholar, recalls how as a student in the late 1940s he failed to defend his professor, the father of the girl he was to marry, during an ideological purge, and so cleared his own path. Glebov blames the times. Trifonov lets the reader weigh times against man.

198. Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales* (written 1954–73; published 1978)

Short stories from the gold-mining camps of Kolyma, in the Soviet Far East, where Shalamov was a prisoner from 1937 to 1951. They are brief, flat and exact: two men dig up a fresh corpse at night to trade its underwear for bread. Shalamov held that the camp teaches nothing good to anyone. Solzhenitsyn disagreed; read both.

199. Sergei Dovlatov, *The Suitcase* (1986)

An émigré in New York opens the suitcase he brought out of the USSR and tells a story for each thing in it: crepe socks, driving gloves, a good suit. He composes a self from stories about objects. Many readers find Dovlatov the funniest late-Soviet writer.

200. Anatoly Rybakov, *The Arbat cycle: Children of the Arbat, Fear, Dust and Ashes* (1987–94)

Sasha Pankratov, a loyal Moscow student, is arrested on a trivial charge and exiled to Siberia, while his friends from the Arbat adjust to the coming purges in their own ways. Held back for two decades, the cycle appeared under glasnost, in three or four volumes depending on edition.

201. Viktor Erofeyev, *Russian Beauty* (1990)

Irina Tarakanova, a beautiful young woman from the provinces, makes her way through Moscow's late-Soviet elite as the lover of diplomats, journalists and officials. She tells it herself, half confession and half boast. It became a bestseller in Russia when it could finally be published there in 1990.

202. Victor Pelevin, *Generation P* (1999)

Vavilen Tatarsky, a poet trained in the Soviet literary system, becomes an advertising copywriter in 1990s Moscow, adapting Western brands to the Russian soul. He discovers that the politicians on television are digital creations made by people like him. Pelevin imagines a whole country manufactured the way an industry manufactures its own experts.

203. Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006)

Andrei Komiaga, a member of the tsar's personal guard in a near-future Russia that has walled itself off from the West and revived the methods of Ivan the Terrible, goes through a working day of raids, executions, bribes and prayers. Sorokin wrote it in 2006, and it has read differently every year since.

204. Ludmila Ulitskaya, *The Big Green Tent* (2010)

Three school friends, a poet, a musician and a photographer, grow up in Moscow after Stalin's death under a literature teacher who taught them to think for themselves. They spend the following decades in the dissident world of samizdat, informers and arrests, and the novel follows them into the 1990s.

205. Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus* (2012)

In fifteenth-century Russia the healer Arseny lets the woman he loves die unconfessed in childbirth, and spends a long life atoning for her as a wandering holy fool, a pilgrim to Jerusalem and finally a monk, under four different names. Vodolazkin, a scholar of medieval Russian texts, writes as if all the centuries were present at once.

GERMAN-LANGUAGE AND THE LOW COUNTRIES

German, Austrian and Swiss writers, with the Low Countries at the end.

206. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)

A young man falls in love with Lotte, who is engaged to a sensible man, pours his feelings into letters, and shoots himself. Young readers copied his clothes, and Leipzig banned both book and costume for fear of imitation. It is an early case of a feeling sold as an identity you could buy and wear.

207. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96)

A merchant's son runs off with a traveling theater company, sure the stage is his calling, and learns over many years that it is not. Who has been watching him along the way is a discovery the novel saves for its last books. It became the model for the story in which a life rises in stages toward maturity.

208. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (play) (Part One 1808; Part Two 1832)

A scholar who has mastered every subject and feels nothing bets the devil his soul that no moment will ever make him ask it to stay. Goethe worked on it for about sixty years. Faust is the founding story of Motion without Direction: ceaseless striving in search of a moment worth stopping for.

209. Heinrich von Kleist, *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810)

In sixteenth-century Saxony, a horse dealer's two black horses are seized and ruined by a nobleman, and when the courts fail him he burns towns for justice. He gets his horses back, fattened and healthy, and is beheaded in the same scene. Kleist shows a justified grievance taking over a life until nothing else is left.

210. Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest* (1895)

Effi marries at seventeen a man twenty-one years older and has a brief affair. Years after it has ended, it comes to light, and her husband acts not from anger but because society expects it. Fontane shows a rule that nobody in the novel still believes, carried out to the letter.

211. Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901)

Four generations of a Lübeck merchant family rise and decline between 1835 and 1877. Each generation is more refined, more anxious and less able to run the firm, and the last heir would rather improvise at the piano than read a ledger. Mann published it at twenty-six, and the Nobel committee cited it above all his later work.

212. Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* (1912)

Gustav von Aschenbach, a famous writer who has lived by discipline and routine, takes a holiday in Venice, becomes obsessed with a Polish boy, and stays on while cholera spreads through the city. He dies in a beach chair. Mann shows what a lifetime of discipline and habits was holding down.

213. Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (1922)

A Brahmin's son in the Buddha's time leaves home, tries self-denial, then wealth and pleasure, and finds peace as a ferryman listening to a river. The novel shaped how the West imagines Eastern wisdom, and it was written by a German novelist.

214. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (1924)

Hans Castorp visits his cousin at a Swiss sanatorium for three weeks and stays seven years. Two tutors, a liberal humanist and a Jesuit-trained radical, fight over his mind and neither wins; the First World War ends the argument. Mann's coming-of-age novel turns into a parody of one.

215. Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1925 · Prague)

Josef K., a bank officer, is arrested on his thirtieth birthday without being told the charge. Every lawyer, clerk and painter he meets does his part competently, and none can say what the whole is for. It is Galimberti's world run by technique, where means replace ends; Kafka described it first.

216. Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (1926 · Prague)

A land surveyor known only as K. arrives in a village for a post the Castle may or may not have offered him. He spends the novel trying to reach the officials who could confirm it, and Kafka stopped writing before K. gets anywhere. It is about seeking approval from an authority that never answers and never disappears.

217. Arthur Schnitzler, *Dream Story* (1926 · Austria)

A Viennese doctor, shaken when his wife confesses a fantasy about another man, wanders the city at night and talks his way into a masked orgy. Kubrick filmed it as *Eyes Wide Shut*. Schnitzler, whom Freud admired for reaching by intuition what he had found by laborious work, wrote of desires that the marriage, and the man himself, cannot see.

218. Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929)

Franz Biberkopf leaves a Berlin prison after serving time for killing his girlfriend and swears to go straight. The city, written as a collage of ads, songs, news and street noise, keeps pulling him back toward crime and a dangerous friend.

219. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929)

Paul Bäumer enlists with his whole class, urged on by a schoolmaster who calls it their duty. In the trenches nothing he was taught applies, and on leave he cannot explain the war to anyone. Remarque wrote the best-known account of a generation sold a story about manhood that the facts did not support.

220. Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers* (1930–32 · Austria)

Three linked novels follow three men in 1888, 1903 and 1918: a Prussian officer, a bookkeeper and a deserter turned businessman. As the old world's shared values fall apart, each keeps running inside his own system, until the last of them has no values left at all.

221. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–43 · Austria)

In Vienna in 1913, Ulrich, a gifted man of thirty-two, takes a year off from life while a committee plans a jubilee for an empire with five years left. He can be anything, so he commits to nothing. Where commitments can be held seriously and provisionally, Ulrich shows the cost of holding none. Musil died with it unfinished.

222. Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March* (1932 · Austria)

Three generations of the Trotta family serve the Habsburg empire: a grandfather who saves the emperor's life at Solferino, a dutiful district official, and a grandson who drifts through garrisons toward 1914. Family and empire run down together, with good manners to the end.

223. Lion Feuchtwanger, *The Oppermanns* (1933)

A prosperous Jewish family in Berlin, owners of a furniture business, believes like most of its neighbors that Hitler will not last. In the months after January 1933 they lose the firm, a teenage son is hounded at school, and their faith in reason gives way. Feuchtwanger wrote it in exile that same year, so it reads like a report.

224. Elias Canetti, *Auto-da-Fé* (1935 · Austria)

Peter Kien, a renowned scholar of Chinese, owns Vienna's largest private library and speaks mostly to his books. He marries his housekeeper because she seems to respect them, and she strips him of everything. Kien lacks phronesis, practical wisdom: he knows everything except how to read the situation in front of him.

225. Joseph Roth, *The Emperor's Tomb* (1938 · Austria)

Franz Ferdinand Trotta, a cousin, lives through the war, the end of the empire and the shabby Vienna that follows. In 1938, as Germany annexes Austria, he goes to the Capuchin crypt where the emperors lie and has nowhere left to go.

226. Stefan Zweig, *Chess Story* (1942 · Austria)

On a liner to Buenos Aires, an unknown passenger takes on the world chess champion. He learned the game in Gestapo solitary confinement from a stolen book of master games, playing against himself until it nearly drove him mad. It was Zweig's last work, finished shortly before his death in Brazil in 1942, and it runs to about a hundred pages.

227. Max Frisch, *I'm Not Stiller* (1954 · Switzerland)

A man arrested at the Swiss border insists he is an American named White, not the missing sculptor Anatol Stiller; his wife, friends and the court insist he is. His prison notebooks make up the novel. Frisch puts one question at the center: is a self found, or made and remade under pressure from others? Pairs with Pirandello.

228. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Pledge* (1958 · Switzerland)

Inspector Matthäi swears to a mother that he will catch her small daughter's murderer, then gives up his career to keep the promise. He sets a trap at a gas station and waits for years. Dürrenmatt subtitled it Requiem for the Detective Novel.

229. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (1959)

Oskar Matzerath decides at three to stop growing, and narrates Danzig's slide into Nazism and the war from an asylum bed, drumming as he goes. He watches the adults from below and refuses every role they offer him. Grass gave postwar Germany a narrator who would not grow up, in a country that did not want to look back.

230. Ingeborg Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year* (1961 · Austria)

Seven stories. In the title story a man entering his thirtieth year leaves Vienna, travels and takes stock, aware that the years when everything was still possible are ending and that he will now have to become someone in particular.

231. Heinrich Böll, *The Clown* (1963)

Hans Schnier, a professional clown, has been left by Marie for a respectable Catholic, and comes home to his Bonn apartment with a bad knee and no money. He spends the evening phoning family and old friends, all doing well in the new West Germany. Böll shows postwar respectability through the one man who refused to join it.

232. Jurek Becker, *Jacob the Liar* (1969)

In a Polish ghetto, Jakob Heym overhears a German radio report that the Russians are advancing, and to be believed he claims to own a radio. He then has to keep inventing good news, and his neighbors start making plans again. Becker survived a ghetto and camps as a child.

233. Gregor von Rezzori, *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* (1979 · Austria)

Five linked stories follow a man from Bukovina, a corner of the Habsburg world that no longer exists, from youth to old age. He tells them charmingly and never notices how much his easy contempt for Jews gives away.

234. Thomas Bernhard, *The Loser* (1983 · Austria)

In 1953 the narrator and his friend Wertheimer study piano in Salzburg and hear a fellow student, Glenn Gould. Both give up performing, knowing they will never be that good, and Wertheimer's life comes apart. For many readers it is fiction's most exact account of what winner-take-all thinking does to the merely excellent.

235. Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader* (1995)

At fifteen, Michael Berg has an affair with Hanna, a tram conductor more than twice his age who loves being read to. Years later, he watches her tried as a former SS camp guard and grasps the secret she would rather go to prison than reveal. Schlink asks what a generation does with the truth about its parents.

236. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (2001)

Jacques Austerlitz, an architectural historian raised in Wales under another name, learns in middle age that he came to Britain as a small child on the Kindertransport from Prague. He tries to recover his parents from archives, buildings and photographs.

237. Daniel Kehlmann, *Measuring the World* (2005 · Austria and Germany)

Carl Friedrich Gauss measures the world from Göttingen with mathematics and hates to travel; Alexander von Humboldt measures it by hauling instruments up volcanoes and along the Orinoco. Both are geniuses and both are impossible company. Kehlmann wrote a dry comedy about two men who can measure almost anything except their own lives.

238. Jenny Erpenbeck, *Kairos* (2021)

In East Berlin in 1986, nineteen-year-old Katharina meets Hans, a married writer in his fifties, on a bus, and they begin an affair that turns into control and cruelty. The relationship decays in step with the East German state and ends at about the same time.

*Low Countries***239.** Multatuli, *Max Havelaar* (1860 · Netherlands)

A smug Amsterdam coffee broker publishes a manuscript about Max Havelaar, a Dutch official in Java who tries to stop local chiefs exploiting the people he governs and gets nowhere. The broker mainly hopes it will help the coffee trade. Multatuli, once a colonial official himself, attacked the system from inside its own accounts.

240. Harry Mulisch, *The Assault* (1982 · Netherlands)

In January 1945 in Haarlem, a collaborator is shot in the street and his body ends up outside the Steenwijk house; the Germans burn it and kill twelve-year-old Anton's parents and brother. Anton spends forty years avoiding the question until chance meetings hand him the answer. He is opaque to himself, and he works as an anesthetist,

putting people to sleep.

NORDIC AND BALTIC

241. Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt* (play) (1867 · Norway)

Peer, a farm boy who lies as easily as he breathes, runs off to the mountain trolls, gets rich trading slaves, plays the prophet in the desert and is crowned emperor in a Cairo madhouse. Old and back home, he peels an onion looking for its core and finds only layers. The best reply ever written to "find your true self."

242. Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* (play) (1884 · Norway)

Gregers Werle comes home convinced that the truth sets people free, and sets out to tell his old friend Hjalmar Ekdal the truth about his marriage. The Ekdals were living contentedly on their illusions, and on a wounded wild duck kept in the attic. Dr. Relling has a name for what Gregers is taking away from them: the "life-lie."

243. Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (1890 · Norway)

A starving young writer wanders Kristiania (today Oslo), too proud to accept help, and narrates his own unraveling from inside his head. Many critics date modern fiction from this book. Hamsun later supported the Nazi occupation of Norway, which is worth knowing as you read.

244. Hjalmar Söderberg, *Doctor Glas* (1905 · Sweden)

Doctor Glas, a Stockholm physician, keeps a diary as he talks himself toward poisoning a pastor whose wife has asked for his help. Each entry is reasonable, and the sum points to murder.

245. Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920–22 · Norway)

Kristin, a farmer's daughter in fourteenth-century Norway, defies her father to marry the man she wants and lives the consequences for decades, into the years of the Black Death. Undset won the Nobel Prize in 1928. It is a whole life measured against its choices, held seriously and revised.

246. A. H. Tammsaare, *Truth and Justice* (1926–33 · Estonia)

Estonia's national novel, in five volumes. The first follows two farming neighbors, Andres and Pearu, who feud for decades over ditches, fences, and pride while Andres drains a swamp in pursuit of a better life. It shows how much motion one lifetime can produce without arriving anywhere.

247. Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934 · Denmark, written in English)

Seven long tales set mostly in nineteenth-century Europe, full of masks, storytellers and people who are not who they seem. In "The Dreamers" an opera singer who has lost her voice goes on living as several different women in several towns. Blixen held that all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story.

248. Halldór Laxness, *Independent People* (1934–35 · Iceland)

Bjartur, an Icelandic sheep farmer, wants only to owe nothing to anyone, and sacrifices his wife and children to keep that independence. He calls it freedom. Laxness won the Nobel Prize in 1955.

249. Väinö Linna, *The Unknown Soldier* (1954 · Finland)

A Finnish machine-gun company fights through the war against the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1944, told by the soldiers in the ranks, with their jokes and their contempt for officers. It is one of Finland's best-loved books. It is on the list as a great war novel more than for an argument.

250. Tarjei Vesaas, *The Ice Palace* (1963 · Norway)

Two eleven-year-old girls in rural Norway meet once, and Unn hints at a secret before she walks into the frozen waterfall and disappears. Siss is left to live with what she will never know. Vesaas explains nothing.

251. Jaan Kross, *Between Three Plagues* (1970–80 · Estonia)

Balthasar Russow, a peasant boy in sixteenth-century Tallinn, learns German and Latin, studies theology in Stettin and becomes a pastor and the chronicler of the Livonian War, while Denmark, Sweden, Poland and Russia fight over his country. He never fully belongs to the peasants or to the German nobility. Kross, who spent eight years in Soviet camps, wrote it in Soviet Estonia, where a story of foreign rule felt close to home.

252. Tove Jansson, *The Summer Book* (1972 · Finland, written in Swedish)

A six-year-old girl and her grandmother spend a summer on a small island in the Gulf of Finland, after the girl's mother has died. They argue, explore, and talk about death without instructions or lessons.

253. Per Petterson, *Out Stealing Horses* (2003 · Norway)

Trond, sixty-seven, moves alone to a cabin in eastern Norway and remembers the summer of 1948: the stolen horses, his father's wartime secrets, and the day his father left. He takes up the past without self-pity.

254. Sofi Oksanen, *Purge* (2008 · Finland and Estonia)

In 1992 a young woman fleeing traffickers turns up at an old woman's farmhouse in rural Estonia. Their pasts are linked by what Soviet and Nazi occupation made people do to each other. Oksanen shows how far the situation decides what people become.

255. Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle* (2009–11 · Norway)

Six volumes, about 3,600 pages, of one man's ordinary life: his father's drinking, his marriages, the children, the dishes. Knausgaard tries to leave nothing out, and still has to choose what goes in. Even total recall turns out to be composition.

256. Jon Fosse, *Septology* (2019–21 · Norway)

Asle, an aging painter on the Norwegian coast, keeps meeting another Asle, also a painter, a drinker, and alone, the man he might have become. The whole work is a single sentence across seven parts. Fosse won the Nobel Prize in 2023. It is a novel about the other lives a person might have lived.

MITTELEUROPA

Central Europe as its own literary space, not an annex of the German or Russian ones.

Czech

257. Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921–23)

Josef Švejk, a Prague dog seller certified as an idiot by army doctors, is called up in 1914 and follows every order so literally that nothing works. Nobody can tell whether he is a fool or a saboteur. Hašek wrote one of the great comic novels about surviving an institution, and died before finishing it.

258. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984 in French; Czech original 1985)

In Prague around 1968, the surgeon Tomas cannot give up other women, his wife Tereza cannot bear it, and the Soviet invasion forces both to choose. Kundera asks whether a committed life is heavier or lighter than one without commitment, and declines to answer.

Polish

259. Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934)

A boy remembers his family and his small town in Galicia, where his father's strange experiments and the cheap shops of Crocodile Street turn into private myth. Schulz, a Jewish art teacher in Drohobych, was shot in the street by a Gestapo officer in 1942, and the novel he was writing was lost.

260. Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (1937)

Józio, a thirty-year-old writer, is turned back into a schoolboy by a professor who declares him immature, then shuttled to school, a modern family's house and a country manor. At every stop people impose a shape on him that he cannot shake off. Gombrowicz shows how much of a self others compose.

261. Stanisław Lem, *Solaris* (1961)

Kris Kelvin arrives at a station above a planet covered by an ocean that seems alive. The ocean sends each scientist a visitor from his past, and Kelvin's is his dead wife; a century of study has explained neither. Lem's subject is the urge to understand what will not be understood.

262. Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009)

Janina Duszejko, an elderly English teacher and astrologer in a Polish village on the Czech border, insists that the local hunters dying one after another were killed by animals. The police treat her as a harmless crank, and what lies behind the deaths is the novel's business. Tokarczuk received the Nobel Prize for 2018.

Hungarian

263. Dezső Kosztolányi, *Skylark* (1924)

In a small Hungarian town in 1899, an elderly couple send their plain, unmarried daughter, Skylark, to relatives for a week. Without her they go to the theater, eat in restaurants, see old friends and discover how much they enjoy life. Then she comes home, and Kosztolányi lets everyone go back to pretending.

264. Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (1940)

Rubashov, an old Bolshevik leader arrested in Stalin's purges, is interrogated in his cell and reasons himself into confessing to crimes he did not commit, for the sake of the Party's logic. Koestler, Hungarian-born, wrote it in German, and it first appeared in English. It shows a brilliant mind turned against its owner.

265. Sándor Márai, *Embers* (1942)

In 1940, in a Hungarian castle, an old general receives the friend who vanished forty-one years earlier, the day after they went hunting together. Over one dinner and one night, the general asks what he has waited four decades to ask. Márai shows a man who has organized a whole life around a single question.

266. Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness* (1975)

György Köves, a fourteen-year-old from Budapest, is deported to Auschwitz and Buchenwald and narrates it all in a flat, reasonable voice, as if each step made sense. Back home, he refuses to give his experience the uplifting meaning people expect.

267. László Krasznahorkai, *Satantango* (1985)

On a collapsing collective farm, villagers waiting in the rain hear that Irimiás, a charismatic man they thought dead, is coming back. He arrives like a prophet and collects their savings with a promise of a new life. Irimiás is a case study in how a guru is made, and Krasznahorkai (Nobel 2025) shows how little one needs.

268. Magda Szabó, *The Door* (1987)

A successful writer in Budapest hires Emerence, a fiercely capable old housekeeper who lets nobody through the door of her own home. Over twenty years the two women grow close without either knowing the other, and the writer's one act of rescue becomes a betrayal. Szabó asks how much one person may know about another.

*Romanian***269.** Mihail Sebastian, *For Two Thousand Years* (1934)

A Jewish student in 1920s and 1930s Bucharest keeps a diary while antisemitic riots break out at the university and his brilliant friends, his admired professor among them, drift toward fascism. Sebastian published it with a preface by that real professor, Nae Ionescu, attacking him. It shows how little brilliance protects anyone from bad ideas.

270. Mircea Cărtărescu, *Solenoid* (2015)

A schoolteacher in Bucharest, who gave up poetry after one humiliating reading, keeps a diary of a city full of anomalies: a giant solenoid under his house, a sect that pickets against death, and the famous writer he might have been. Many critics call it Romania's major novel of recent decades.

*Ukrainian***271.** Taras Shevchenko, *Kobzar* (poetry) (1840)

The founding book of modern Ukrainian literature, by a former serf whose freedom was bought in 1838 by raffling a portrait painted by Karl Bryullov. The first edition had eight poems; the book grew through Shevchenko's life, including ten years of army exile under a ban on writing. A kobzar is a wandering minstrel, often blind.

272. Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman* (1894–1916)

Tevye, a poor Jewish milkman in a village near Kyiv, talks to God and to his listener, Sholem Aleichem himself, about his daughters, who leave his world one by one: for a poor tailor, a revolutionary, a Christian. Written in Yiddish over twenty years, it became *Fiddler on the Roof*.

273. Valerian Pidmohylny, *The City* (1928)

Stepan Radchenko, a village youth, comes to Kyiv in the 1920s to study and remakes himself into a successful writer, using women and friends as steps along the way. Readers call it the Ukrainian *Bel-Ami*. Pidmohylny was shot in 1937, one of hundreds of Ukrainian writers killed in Stalin's purges.

274. Andrey Kurkov, *Death and the Penguin* (1996)

Viktor, an out-of-work writer in post-Soviet Kyiv, lives with Misha, a depressed king penguin adopted from the bankrupt zoo. A newspaper hires him to write obituaries of prominent people who are still alive, and they start dying soon after he finishes. Kurkov, a Ukrainian who writes in Russian, makes the 1990s gangster economy look like office work.

275. Oksana Zabuzhko, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (2009)

Daryna, a Kyiv television journalist, finds an old photograph of Olena Dovhan, a fighter in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army killed in 1947, and sets out to make a film about her. The novel moves across three generations of what Soviet history did not let Ukraine remember.

276. Serhiy Zhadan, *Voroshilovgrad* (2010)

Herman, a political consultant in Kharkiv, goes back to his hometown in the Donbas because his brother has vanished, leaving a gas station that local businessmen want to take. He means to sell it and leave, and instead stays to defend it with old friends. Zhadan wrote it four years before war came to the same towns.

*Belarusian***277.** Vasil Bykaŭ, *Sotnikov* (1970)

In the winter of 1942, two Belarusian partisans, Sotnikov and Rybak, go out to find food for their unit and are captured. Rybak is the strong and practical one, Sotnikov sick and awkward, and captivity tests what each is made of. Larisa Shepitko filmed it as *The Ascent*.

278. Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time* (oral history) (2013)

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Alexievich spent two decades recording ordinary people: believers and former believers, the new rich and the new poor, all trying to say who they were once the story they had lived inside was gone. She keeps herself out and lets the voices run. She won the Nobel Prize in 2015.

279. Sasha Filipenko, *The Former Son* (2014)

Francisk, a teenage music student, is crushed in the 1999 stampede at Nemiga metro station in Minsk and lies in a coma for about ten years while his grandmother refuses to give up on him. When he wakes, Belarus has the same ruler and very little else has changed either. Filipenko wrote it in Russian.

280. Alhierd Bacharevič, *Dogs of Europe* (2017)

Six linked stories run from a Minsk amateur linguist who invents his own language to a future in which Belarus has been absorbed into a new Russian empire. Bacharevič wrote it in Belarusian, and the Belarusian authorities

have since declared it extremist and had copies destroyed.

GREECE AND THE BALKANS

Greece

281. C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems* (poetry) (written 1890s–1933; collected 1935 · Alexandria)

A Greek civil servant in Alexandria who printed his poems on loose sheets for friends rather than publish a book. Ancient kings, minor officials and young men in rented rooms, all seen with the same irony and tenderness. "Ithaka" tells the traveler to hope the road is long, and not to expect the island to make him rich.

282. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek* (1946 · Greece)

A bookish young narrator leases a lignite mine on Crete and hires Alexis Zorba, an aging laborer who lives entirely in the present, dances when words fail, and wrecks the venture with a cable railway. Zorba keeps contesting the story the narrator tells about himself. Read it past the 1964 film.

Yugoslavia (Bosnia)

283. Ivo Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945)

The bridge at Višegrad, completed for an Ottoman grand vizier in 1571, stands while three and a half centuries of Bosnian history cross it: impalement, floods, Austrian rule and the First World War, when it is partly blown up. Andrić tells the town's story at the pace of stone. He received the Nobel Prize in 1961.

Albania

284. Ismail Kadare, *The Palace of Dreams* (1981)

Mark-Alem, a young man from a powerful family, takes a job at the Palace of Dreams, the Ottoman ministry that collects its subjects' dreams and searches them for threats to the state. He rises through its departments without ever understanding them. Kadare wrote it in Hoxha's Albania, where it was banned soon after it appeared.

THE WIDER MIDDLE EAST: TURKEY, ISRAEL, THE ARAB WORLD, IRAN

Azerbaijan

285. Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino* (1937)

Baku, before and after 1918: Ali Khan Shirvanshir, a Muslim Azerbaijani, loves Nino Kipiani, a Christian Georgian princess, while the Russian empire collapses and the short-lived Azerbaijani republic rises and falls. It was published in Vienna in 1937 under the name Kurban Said, most likely Lev Nussimbaum, a Baku-born Jew who reinvented himself as a Muslim prince. The author's invented self is a novel of its own.

Turkey

286. Yaşar Kemal, *Memed, My Hawk* (1955)

In the Taurus mountains of southern Turkey, a boy mistreated by the village landlord flees, becomes a bandit, and turns into a folk hero for the peasants. Kemal tells it as a straight adventure, with mountains, ambushes and a villain worth hating. For many readers it is Turkey's best-loved popular novel.

287. Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *The Time Regulation Institute* (1961)

Hayri İrdal, an idle clock repairer, falls in with Halit Ayarç, who founds an institute to fine people whose clocks are wrong. It grows staff, offices and procedures, and no one can say what it is for. It is a perfect case of motion without direction: activity that keeps growing while pointing nowhere.

288. Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* (1998)

In Istanbul in 1591, the sultan's miniaturists are secretly illustrating a book in the Venetian style, with perspective, and one of them is murdered. The narrators include a corpse and the color red, and Pamuk never decides which way of seeing is right. The question stays open for five hundred pages.

289. Orhan Pamuk, *Snow* (2002)

Ka, an exiled poet, goes to the snowbound border city of Kars in the 1990s to report on a wave of suicides among young women barred from wearing headscarves, and is caught between Islamists, secularists and a military coup staged during a theater performance. It is Pamuk at his most political.

Israel

290. S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday* (1945)

Isaac Kumer, a young Zionist pioneer, arrives in Ottoman Palestine around 1908 expecting to work the land and ends up painting houses. On a whim he paints "mad dog" on a stray, the town believes it, and the joke ends badly. For many readers it is the greatest modern Hebrew novel.

291. Amos Oz, *My Michael* (1968)

Hannah Gonen, a young woman in 1950s Jerusalem, marries Michael, a steady and decent geology student, and over the next decade drifts away from the life she chose into fantasy. Oz tells it entirely in her voice. Nothing goes

wrong in the marriage, and that is the problem.

292. Aharon Appelfeld, *Badenheim 1939* (1978)

Jewish holiday-makers arrive at an Austrian spa town in the spring of 1939 for the music festival, and the Sanitation Department starts registering them. Each new rule is explained away as reasonable, even attractive, until the trains to Poland arrive.

293. David Grossman, *See Under: Love* (1986)

Momik, a nine-year-old in 1959 Jerusalem, hears adults mention "the Nazi beast" and sets out to capture it in his parents' cellar so that he can understand what happened to them. The later sections change form completely, and the book asks a lot of its reader.

294. A. B. Yehoshua, *Mr. Mani* (1990)

Five conversations, with only one speaker audible, move backward from 1982 to 1848 through six generations of a Sephardic Jewish family. Each speaker explains a Mani to someone, and the reader assembles the family from the gaps.

295. David Grossman, *To the End of the Land* (2008)

When her son goes back to the army for an offensive, Ora hikes across the Galilee with a former lover, reasoning that bad news cannot be delivered to an empty house. Grossman's son Uri was killed in Lebanon in 2006, while Grossman was still writing the novel.

The Arab world

296. Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy* (1956–57 · Egypt)

Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad rules his Cairo household strictly by day and enjoys music, wine and singers by night, while his sons and grandsons move toward nationalism, communism, the Muslim Brotherhood and doubt between 1917 and 1944. Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize in 1988. For many readers this is the central achievement of Arabic fiction.

297. Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma* (1956 · Algeria)

Four young Algerian men, drifting between building sites, prison and their tribal past, all love Nedjma, a woman of uncertain parentage who comes to stand for Algeria. Kateb tells it out of order, in French, and published it in 1956, two years into the war of independence.

298. Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun* (1962 · Palestine)

Three Palestinian refugees pay a smuggler to carry them across the desert to work in Kuwait, hidden in the empty water tank of his truck. At the last border post the officials keep the driver talking in the midday heat. The ending, and its final question, are among the hardest in Arabic fiction.

299. Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (1966 · Sudan)

A Sudanese narrator comes home from studying in England to his village on the Nile and meets Mustafa Saeed, a stranger with a past: in London he was a brilliant economist and a seducer of Englishwomen, and where that led is the novel's slow disclosure. Salih reverses the colonial story without giving anyone, the narrator included, an easy position.

300. Mohamed Choukri, *For Bread Alone* (1973 · Morocco)

Choukri tells his own childhood as an autobiographical novel: famine in the Rif, a brutal father, the streets of Tangier, theft and survival, and learning to read only as an adult. Paul Bowles's English translation appeared in 1973, years before the Arabic original could be printed, and Morocco kept it banned until 2000.

301. Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (1974 · Palestinian, in Israel)

Saeed, a Palestinian who lives in Israel after 1948 and becomes an informer for the state, tells his life in letters, aided, he says, by beings from outer space. Habiby's title fuses "pessimist" and "optimist" into one word. Saeed finds a bright side in every humiliation, which is positive thinking under occupation.

302. Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra* (1980 · Lebanon)

Zahra, a shy, damaged young woman from Beirut, tells of her childhood, a flight to an uncle in Africa, and her return as the civil war begins, when she starts an affair with the sniper on her street. The narration passes between her and the people around her. The novel was banned in several Arab countries.

303. Sonallah Ibrahim, *The Committee* (1981 · Egypt)

A man appears before a committee judging his fitness and, asked for the greatest achievement of the twentieth century, lectures them on Coca-Cola. He is then told to research the greatest living Arab luminary, the research consumes him, and the committee's verdict is the novel's last and darkest joke. Ibrahim takes Byung-Chul Han's achievement-subject, who exploits himself and calls it freedom, to the letter.

304. Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt* (1984 · Saudi Arabia and Jordan)

An American company finds oil beneath Wadi al-Uyoun, a desert oasis, and with the emir's help bulldozes it, moves its people to a coastal labor camp and turns Bedouin into workers. Munif, who trained as an oil economist, tells it from the side of the people who lived above the oil. Saudi Arabia banned the book.

305. Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun* (1998 · Lebanon)

In a makeshift hospital in Beirut's Shatila camp, Khalil, a barely trained camp "doctor," sits beside Yunes, a legendary Palestinian fighter in a coma, and tells him stories to keep him alive. The stories cover fifty years of exile, and Khalil keeps revising them.

306. Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building* (2002 · Egypt)

One downtown Cairo apartment building holds an aging aristocrat, a corrupt politician and, on the roof, the poor, including a doorman's son rejected by the police academy because of his father's job. Taha has the grades and the wrong father, and the rejection pushes him toward militancy.

307. Jokha Alharthi, *Celestial Bodies* (2010 · Oman)

In the Omani village of al-Awafi, three sisters, Mayya, Asma and Khawla, marry in three different ways, while the country moves from a slave-holding past to oil money within a few generations. The story passes among many voices and decades. It was the first novel written in Arabic to win the International Booker Prize, in 2019.

308. Khaled Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* (2013 · Syria)

A family in Aleppo, a mother, her children and her musician brother, falls apart over the decades between the 1963 Baath coup and the 2000s, while the city declines around them. Khalifa records the humiliations in long, patient sentences. The novel won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature and was banned in Syria.

309. Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013 · Iraq)

In Baghdad in 2005, Hadi, a junk dealer, stitches together body parts from bomb victims so that one whole corpse can be buried, and it walks off to avenge each person it is made of. Each completed revenge makes a part rot, so it needs parts from fresh victims. It won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014.

310. Kamel Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation* (2013 · Algeria)

Harun, an old man in an Oran bar, is the brother of the Arab whom Meursault shoots in Camus's *The Stranger*. He names him, Musa, and tells the family's story, including a killing of his own. Harun contests Camus's story. Read it beside *The Stranger*.

*Iran***311.** Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl* (1937)

A painter who decorates pen cases with the same scene over and over writes for his shadow on the wall, telling an opium-soaked story of a woman, a corpse and a murder that may be dream or memory. Hedayat first issued it in a small hand-produced edition in Bombay in 1937. For many readers it founded modern Persian fiction.

312. Simin Daneshvar, *Savushun* (1969)

In Shiraz during the Allied occupation of Iran in the Second World War, Zari watches her husband Yusof refuse to sell his harvest to the occupying army while local people go hungry, and fears what his principles will cost the family. It is widely described as the first novel published by an Iranian woman.

313. Iraj Pezeshkzad, *My Uncle Napoleon* (1973)

In 1940s Tehran, a boy loves his cousin, whose father, Dear Uncle, a retired officer who idolizes Napoleon, blames every misfortune on the British, and relatives exploit his paranoia. The 1976 television version made the title shorthand for conspiracy thinking in Iran.

NORTH AMERICA

314. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

In Puritan Boston, Hester Prynne must wear a scarlet A for adultery, while the minister who fathered her child hides his guilt and wastes away. Over the years her conduct changes what the letter means to her neighbors.

315. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851)

Captain Ahab drives the whaler Pequod and its skilled crew around the world to kill one white whale, and nearly everyone dies doing it. The ship runs perfectly and the goal is madness. Ahab is a perfect case of Motion without Direction: flawless execution, year after year, pointed at something nobody stopped to question.

316. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

Huck runs away down the Mississippi with Jim, an escaped slave, and his conscience, trained by everyone around him, tells him to turn Jim in. He tears up the letter and says, "All right, then, I'll go to hell." The novel shows a boy who authors his own life.

317. Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (1903)

Lambert Strether, fifty-five, is sent from Massachusetts to Paris to bring a rich widow's son home, and finds the life he never had. In a Paris garden he tells a young man, "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to."

318. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)

Jim Burden, a successful New York lawyer, looks back on his Nebraska prairie childhood and on Ántonia, the Bohemian immigrant girl who stayed and farmed. He left and got the career; she stayed and got the full life. Cather lets the reader decide which of them did better.

319. Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (1920)

In 1870s New York, Newland Archer loves the unconventional Countess Ellen Olenska and marries her proper cousin May instead. Twenty-six years later he sits outside Ellen's Paris apartment and decides not to go up. Wharton shows a man who kept his commitment and paid for it, and leaves the verdict to you. It won the 1921 Pulitzer.

320. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (1922)

George F. Babbitt sells real estate in the booming city of Zenith, belongs to every right club, and slowly notices that none of it pleases him. His brief rebellion ends with him back at the lunch table. Babbitt is a case of Success Inflation: the outward record keeps growing while what it means to him shrinks.

321. Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (1925)

Clyde Griffiths, a poor boy from a family of street preachers, gets a job in his rich uncle's factory and a glimpse of society. When his pregnant girlfriend stands between him and a rich marriage, he takes her out on a lake. Dreiser built it from a real 1906 case, and shows a man made almost entirely of what he wants.

322. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

James Gatz, a poor farm boy from the Midwest, reinvents himself as Jay Gatsby, the rich host of Long Island parties, to win back Daisy Buchanan. He shows the cost of writing a self for one reader.

323. Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

Jake Barnes, wounded in the war, loves Lady Brett Ashley, who cannot stay with any man. Their group drifts from Paris to the fiesta at Pamplona, where the young bullfighter Romero does something difficult well, at real risk, while everyone else talks and drinks. They have the vocabulary of meaning and none of its grammar.

324. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)

The Compson family of Mississippi falls apart, told four times: by Benjy, who cannot speak; by Quentin, on the day he kills himself; by Jason, who is cruel; and finally by a narrator who follows Dilsey, the family's servant. No one sees the whole story.

325. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Babylon Revisited* (1931)

After the 1929 Crash, Charlie Wales returns to Paris sober, hoping to win back his young daughter from his late wife's sister, who blames him for the past. One visit from two drinking friends from the old days undoes it. Adulthood: making decisions, taking on responsibilities. In my humble opinion, the best short story ever written.

326. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is the Night* (1934)

Dick Diver, a brilliant young psychiatrist, marries his wealthy patient Nicole and spends his gifts on the Riviera, managing her illness and entertaining their friends. As she recovers, he declines, until he ends up practicing in small towns in upstate New York. Fitzgerald shows talent spent on keeping a party going. Was it worth it?

327. Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (1934)

A broke American writer in 1930s Paris lives on borrowed meals, borrowed beds and his own appetite, and writes it all down in a rush. Published in Paris in 1934, it was banned in the United States until 1964. Crude, funny and very much alive: a man choosing to live rather than to succeed.

328. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934)

David Schearl, a small Jewish immigrant boy, grows up in the tenements of Brownsville and the Lower East Side around 1910, caught between his mother's Yiddish, his father's rage and the English of the street. After this first novel, Roth did not publish another for sixty years.

329. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

The Joad family loses its Oklahoma farm in the Dust Bowl and drives to California, where work is scarce and the growers have the power. Hard work and character do not save them.

330. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)

Bigger Thomas, a young Black man in Chicago's South Side, takes a job with a rich white family and accidentally kills their daughter, then commits a second murder trying to escape. Wright puts the city, the housing market and the courts on trial along with Bigger.

331. Eugene O'Neill, *The Iceman Cometh* (play) (1946)

In 1912, in Harry Hope's saloon in New York, a dozen drunks live on their "pipe dreams": the job, the comeback, the trip home they will make tomorrow. Then Hickey, a hardware salesman and their favorite guest, arrives sober, determined to sell them the truth and set them free. Why he is so determined is the play's business.

332. Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (play) (1947)

Blanche DuBois, a faded Southern belle who has lost the family estate, arrives at her sister Stella's two-room apartment in New Orleans and meets Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche lives on manners, soft lighting and stories about herself; Stanley has no use for any of them. "I don't want realism. I want magic!"

333. Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (play) (1949)

Willy Loman, sixty-three, has spent thirty-four years selling on the belief that being well liked is the key to success, and has raised his two sons on it. Now his firm has no use for him and the sons have gone nowhere. Miller wrote the tragedy of the American success creed, and it has not dated.

334. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

Holden Caulfield, sixteen, thrown out of yet another prep school, spends three days in New York calling everyone a phony while grieving a younger brother he can barely mention. Every adolescent's book for seventy years. Reread as an adult, Holden's contempt for phonies looks like what it is, a defense.

335. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

A nameless Black narrator moves from a Southern college to Harlem, and at every stage someone else tells him who he is: the college president, the factory, the political Brotherhood. He ends up living underground, unseen. Ellison shows how much of a self others try to compose for you.

336. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)

On his fourteenth birthday in 1935 Harlem, John Grimes struggles with his stepfather, a harsh preacher, and with the storefront church at the center of his family's life. Baldwin shows with sympathy the real needs that drive people toward certainty. He had already criticized *Native Son* in print.

337. Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)

Tom Ripley, a small-time New York grifter, is sent to Italy to bring home a rich man's son, Dickie Greenleaf, and ends up killing him and becoming him. Highsmith makes you want him to get away with it, and he does. The perfect self-made man, made out of someone else's life.

338. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (poetry) (1956)

Ginsberg's long poem opens with "the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" and names their destroyer Moloch, a god of money, machines and conformity. The book was seized and put on trial for obscenity in 1957, and won. It is an early, loud refusal of the world of technique.

339. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)

In 1930s Alabama, the lawyer Atticus Finch defends a Black man falsely accused of rape, and his young daughter Scout watches the town decide the case before the trial begins. A decent man doing his job well against the whole weight of the place he lives in.

340. John Updike, *The Rabbit Angstrom novels* (1960–90)

Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom was a high-school basketball star in Pennsylvania, and in four novels over thirty years he keeps running from wife, job and town, and keeps coming back. Two of the books won the Pulitzer. Rabbit is a warning against using sports as a model for a whole life: his best years ended at eighteen.

341. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (1961)

Binx Bolling, a young stockbroker in suburban New Orleans, has money, girlfriends and a pleasant routine, and spends his evenings at the movies. He is also on what he calls “the search,” without knowing for what. A comfortable life with no sense of where it is going.

342. Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961)

Frank and April Wheeler, a young Connecticut couple in 1955, believe they are too special for the suburbs and plan to move to Paris so Frank can find his true self. The plan collapses and ends in disaster. The true self waiting to be discovered elsewhere is a myth; Yates shows what believing it costs.

343. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1961)

Yossarian, a bomber pilot on an island off Italy in World War II, wants to stop flying missions, but the rule says anyone who asks to be grounded is sane enough to fly. Every officer follows the system correctly and the results are lethal.

344. Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962)

Randle McMurphy, a convict, fakes insanity to serve his time in a psychiatric ward instead of a work farm, and takes on Nurse Ratched, who runs the ward through rules, schedules and polite humiliation. The story is told by a patient everyone believes is deaf and mute. An institution that calls control therapy.

345. Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (play) (1962)

George, a history professor, and Martha, the college president's daughter, come home drunk at two in the morning and entertain a new young colleague and his wife with games they call Humiliate the Host and Get the Guests. By dawn every couple's illusions have been taken apart, including the one George and Martha share.

346. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963)

Esther Greenwood, a prize-winning student, spends the summer of 1953 as a guest editor at a New York magazine and falls into a breakdown. She pictures her possible lives as figs on a tree, rotting while she fails to choose. Plath shows how “the best version of yourself” becomes a permanent sense of falling short.

347. Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964)

Moses Herzog, a professor whose second wife has left him for his best friend, writes letters he never sends, to his ex-wife, to Eisenhower, to Nietzsche and to Heidegger. He knows the philosophers well, and they cannot fix his life. Bellow shows that a well-stocked mind is a different thing from a well-lived life.

348. John Williams, *Stoner* (1965)

William Stoner, a farmer's son, teaches English at the University of Missouri for forty years: an unhappy marriage, a stalled career, one love affair, little fame. The novel does not treat him as a failure. A culture obsessed with winning blames the people it calls losers, and Stoner is the best answer on this list.

349. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies, A Love Story* (1966; English 1972)

Herman Broder, a Holocaust survivor in 1949 New York, is married to the Polish peasant woman who hid him, keeps a mistress, and then finds his first wife alive. He earns his living ghostwriting for a rabbi and lies to all of them. Singer shows a man the past has left with three lives and no story he can live in.

350. Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer* (1966)

Yakov Bok, a Jewish handyman in Kyiv in 1911, is jailed for a ritual murder he did not commit and held for years without trial. Self-taught, he has read Spinoza and understood some of it, and in his cell he finds what he will not give up. Malamud based it on the real Beilis case.

351. Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (1971)

O'Connor's stories take place in the rural South among people sure of their own goodness, such as the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," until a stranger, an accident or a violent act breaks the certainty. She saw these moments as grace. The collection won the National Book Award in 1972, eight years after her death.

352. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)

In London in 1944, the American officer Tyrone Slothrop discovers that German V-2 rockets seem to fall where he has had sex, and the agencies studying him care more about the data than about him. The Pulitzer jury chose it in 1974; the board refused, and no prize was given.

353. Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (1975)

Charlie Citrine is a rich, prize-winning Chicago writer; his old mentor, the poet Humboldt, died broke and forgotten. While a small-time gangster harasses him and his ex-wife sues him, Citrine takes up Rudolf Steiner's spiritual teachings. The novel weighs success against failure and gives neither the last word.

354. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1975)

In New York in the early 1900s, an invented family crosses paths with Houdini, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford and Emma Goldman, while Coalhouse Walker, a Black pianist, seeks justice after his car is vandalized. Doctorow mixes real and invented people openly, and the reader cannot always tell which is which.

355. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977)

Macon Dead III, known as Milkman, the son of the richest Black man in a Michigan town, drifts through his twenties until a hunt for family gold takes him south, where he finds his ancestors' story instead. Morrison's novel about learning who you are by learning where your name came from.

356. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (essays) (1979)

Essays on California from 1968 into the 1970s: the Doors in a recording studio, Huey Newton in jail, the Manson murders, dams, shopping malls, the Getty. The title essay opens with "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," which is very fitting in our context. And then it shows a woman whose stories have stopped working, quoting the psychiatric report written about her in the summer of 1968.

357. Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984)

A young New Yorker works as a fact-checker at a famous magazine, loses his wife to modeling and his nights to cocaine, and avoids thinking about his mother's death. The novel is told in the second person ("you"), in the present tense, mostly after midnight. All that motion keeps him from the one thing he needs to face.

358. David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (play) (1984)

Four Chicago real-estate salesmen push doubtful land deals in a sales contest: the top man wins a Cadillac, the bottom two lose their jobs, and the good leads go only to those already closing. Mamet's dialogue runs on obscenity and fear, the motivational speech with its real meaning left in. Pulitzer Prize 1984. The film adaptation, is one of the best ever made.

359. Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove* (1985)

Two retired Texas Rangers, Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call, drive a cattle herd from the Rio Grande to Montana, mostly because Call cannot stand to stop working. What the trail costs them is the novel's business.

360. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (1985)

In 1849, a teenage runaway joins a gang of scalp hunters on the Texas–Mexico border, led in spirit by Judge Holden, a huge, learned man who speaks many languages and believes war is god. The Judge has an answer for everything. McCarthy makes the most persuasive speaker in the book its most dangerous man.

361. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985)

Jack Gladney, a professor who founded the field of Hitler Studies, lives in fear of death with his wife Babette, who shares the fear and is keeping a secret about it. Then a chemical cloud drifts over their town. Fear of death is one of the needs the self-help industry exploits, and Babette turns out to be its ideal customer.

362. Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (1986)

Frank Bascombe, a failed novelist turned sportswriter in suburban New Jersey, divorced and grieving a son, spends an Easter weekend trying very hard to stay cheerful. The first Bascombe novel, before *Independence Day*: a man determined not to expect too much from life, and funny about it.

363. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

In Ohio after the Civil War, Sethe, who escaped slavery, lives with the ghost of the daughter she killed to keep her from being taken back, until a young woman named Beloved arrives. Morrison shows a past that does not take orders.

364. Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987)

Sherman McCoy, a Wall Street bond trader who privately calls himself a Master of the Universe, takes a wrong exit in the Bronx with his mistress, and their car hits a young Black man. Politicians, prosecutors and the press take everything he has.

365. Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl* (1989)

In a Nazi camp, Rosa hides her baby Magda in a shawl; when the shawl is taken from her, a guard throws the child against the electrified fence. In the second story, set decades later in Miami, Rosa still refuses to accept the death and writes letters to Magda as if she grew up. The whole book runs about seventy pages.

366. Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991)

Patrick Bateman, a young investment banker at Pierce & Pierce in 1980s Manhattan, describes his skincare routine, his business card and his restaurant reservations with the same flat precision he brings to murder. Nobody around him notices, because nobody is looking. Simon & Schuster dropped it before publication; Vintage published it in 1991. Be warned: the violence is extreme.

367. Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (1995)

Frank Bascombe, a divorced real-estate agent in New Jersey, drives his troubled teenage son to the basketball and baseball halls of fame over the Fourth of July weekend. Frank calls this stage of his life the “Existence Period,” a time of avoiding big decisions. It was the first novel to win both the Pulitzer and the PEN/Faulkner award.

368. Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (1997)

Seymour “Swede” Levov, a star athlete who takes over his father’s glove factory in Newark, does everything expected of him, and in 1968 his teenage daughter bombs the local post office and kills a man.

369. Mordecai Richler, *Barney’s Version* (1997 · Canada)

Barney Panofsky, a Montreal television producer acquitted years earlier of killing his best friend, writes his own account of his life and three marriages before his memory fails. His son adds corrective footnotes. Richler shows how a man edits his own story, and how much gets left out.

370. Alice Munro, *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998 · Canada)

Eight long stories set mostly in small-town Ontario. In the title story, boys find a drowned optometrist in his car, and a nurse caring for a dying woman hears an account of who put him there. Munro shows ordinary choices paying out decades later, which is how most lives turn. Her stellar reputation took a turn for the worse in 2024, after her daughter revealed that she had been abused as a child by Munro’s husband, and that Munro stayed with him.

371. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000)

Coleman Silk, a classics professor, loses his job over one word he used about two absent students. He has also kept a secret for fifty years, and the novel takes its time disclosing it. He built a self by choice and paid for it.

372. Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000)

In 1939, Josef Kavalier escapes Nazi-occupied Prague to New York and teams up with his cousin Sammy Clay to create a comic-book hero called the Escapist, while Joe tries to get his family out. The novel won the Pulitzer in 2001.

373. Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001)

Enid Lambert wants her three adult children home in the Midwest for one last Christmas while her husband Alfred declines with Parkinson’s disease. One plot line follows a company selling a brain treatment that promises to cure everything from depression to Parkinson’s.

374. Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (2005)

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, near retirement in West Texas, pursues the killer Anton Chigurh after a drug deal goes wrong, and admits he no longer understands the world he polices. He retires.

375. Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (memoir) (2005)

On December 30, 2003, Joan Didion’s husband, John Gregory Dunne, collapsed at the dinner table and died, while their daughter lay in a coma in a hospital. Didion records the following year with a reporter’s precision, including why she could not give away his shoes: he would need them when he came back.

376. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

After an unnamed disaster, a father and his young son walk south through a burned America, with no government, no law and very little food. The father keeps telling the boy they are “carrying the fire.”

377. Denis Johnson, *Train Dreams* (2011)

Robert Grainier works on railroads and logging crews in early twentieth-century Idaho, loses his wife and daughter to a forest fire, and lives on alone for decades. Johnson covers his whole life in about a hundred pages. Like Stoner’s, his is a full life by no measure of success the industry would recognize.

LATIN AMERICA

378. Machado de Assis, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881 · Brazil)

Brás Cubas, a rich and idle Brazilian, narrates his life after his death, with total candor and no achievements to report. He died of pneumonia caught while working on a plaster to cure humanity's melancholy, a wellness product that killed only its inventor. For many readers it is Brazil's greatest novel.

379. Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926 · Argentina)

Fabio, a runaway boy on the Argentine pampas, learns the trade of a cattle drover from the old gaucho Don Segundo over five years on the road. Almost nothing is taught in words; it is learned by watching and doing. This is what real expert intuition looks like: trained, and bound to its context.

380. Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (1944 · Argentina)

Seventeen stories that each test an idea to destruction: a library holding every possible book, a man who forgets nothing and can therefore think nothing, a writer who recreates chapters of Don Quixote word for word. Borges shows that identical words mean something else three centuries later.

381. Ernesto Sabato, *The Tunnel* (1948 · Argentina)

Juan Pablo Castel, a painter in Buenos Aires, explains from prison why he killed the only woman who understood his work. His reasoning is clear at every step and wrong about himself throughout.

382. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph* (1949 · Argentina)

In the title story, a vain poet shows Borges a point in a Buenos Aires cellar that contains every other point in the universe. The poet has used it to write an endless bad poem. Borges sees everything and cannot describe it, and the collection keeps asking what a mind can hold.

383. Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo* (1955 · Mexico)

Juan Preciado goes to the village of Comala to find his father, Pedro Páramo, and finds a town of whispering dead. The book runs to barely a hundred and twenty pages and changed Latin American fiction; García Márquez said he could recite it by heart. It is here as a masterpiece more than for an argument.

384. João Guimarães Rosa, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* (1956 · Brazil)

Riobaldo, an old former gunman in the Brazilian backlands, tells his life to a silent visitor from the city, trying to settle whether he once made a pact with the devil. He never settles it. Guimarães Rosa invents half the language to tell it, and the narrator lives with the open question.

385. Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers (El hacedor)* (1960 · Argentina)

A short book of prose pieces and poems that includes "Borges and I," one page in which the writer distinguishes himself from the public Borges and ends unsure which of them is writing.

386. Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962 · Mexico)

Artemio Cruz, a revolutionary turned corrupt tycoon, lies dying in 1959 and reviews the choices that made him rich. The record grows at every step and means less each time.

387. Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (1963 · Argentina)

Horacio Oliveira drifts through Paris and Buenos Aires, losing La Maga and most of his friends. Cortázar gives two ways to read the book, straight through or hopping between chapters by a table at the front. The reader assembles the story.

388. Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964 · Brazil)

G.H., an amateur sculptor in a Rio penthouse, crushes a cockroach in the door of her former maid's wardrobe, and over one afternoon the self she has built falls away. What she finds underneath is nothing personal and nothing reassuring. For anyone sold the idea of a true self waiting inside, it is possibly the most severe book on this list.

389. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967 · Colombia)

Seven generations of the Buendía family in the town of Macondo repeat the same names, obsessions, and mistakes. Time moves in circles, and nobody learns.

390. Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969 · Peru)

Santiago Zavala, a journalist who dropped out of his privileged family, runs into his father's old chauffeur, Ambrosio, in Lima, and they talk in a bar called The Cathedral. Together they piece together the Odría dictatorship and the question that opens the book: at what moment did Peru get screwed. It takes about six hundred pages to answer.

391. Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976 · Argentina)

Two men share a cell in Buenos Aires: Valentín, a political prisoner, and Molina, who passes the nights retelling old movies. The stories keep them alive and change both of them.

392. Isabel Allende, *The House of the Spirits* (1982 · Chile)

Three generations of women in the Trueba family live under a violent patriarch in an unnamed Latin American country, until a military coup arrives. It is the novel that carried the Latin American boom to a broad readership. It is on the list as a family saga more than for an argument.

393. Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives* (1998 · Chile)

Two young poets, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, vanish into Mexico, Europe, and Africa, and we see them only through the testimony of dozens of people who knew them a little. No one has the whole picture. Their lives exist as other people's accounts.

394. Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004 · Chile)

Five loosely linked parts, published after Bolaño's death: critics hunting an elusive German novelist and, at the center, the murders of hundreds of women in Santa Teresa, a city modeled on Ciudad Juárez, recorded case by case. El País named it the best book of the century so far. Long, unfinished and impossible to forget.

INDIA AND THE SUBCONTINENT

Several of these novels were written from inside the traditions that the West later repackaged as wisdom and wellness, by people watching it happen.

395. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (1910)

Gora, a fiercely orthodox young Hindu in Calcutta, defends every rule of caste, and the novel keeps back until its last pages a fact about his own birth that tests all of it. Tagore asks what a self is built on.

396. Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* (1916)

During the 1905 Swadeshi movement in Bengal, the charismatic nationalist Sandip draws Bimala away from her husband Nikhil with fervent, borrowed rhetoric. Nikhil, the patient one, pays for it. The novel shows how a gifted speaker turns sincere feeling into a following.

397. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Pather Panchali* (1929)

Apu grows up in a poor Brahmin family in a Bengali village, with a sister, an absent father chasing work, and a mother holding the house together, until illness and poverty force them out. Nothing in it is exotic or spiritual. It is the India the wellness market leaves out.

398. Premchand, *Godaan* (1936)

Hori, a poor peasant in northern India, wants one thing: a cow of his own. Debt, caste, and moneylenders take everything else, and at his death his wife hands over her last coins for the ritual gift of a cow he never kept. Premchand shows a man blamed for failing at a game rigged from the start.

399. G. V. Desani, *All About H. Hatterr* (1948)

H. Hatterr, the son of a European merchant officer and a woman from Penang, sets out to learn the meaning of life from seven Indian sages and is fooled, robbed, or humiliated by each of them. Desani writes it in a wild English all his own. It is the comic novel of the export of Eastern wisdom, written before the export trade even began.

400. R. K. Narayan, *The Guide* (1958)

Raju, a tourist guide in a small South Indian town, ruins a dancer's marriage, goes to prison for forgery, and on release is taken by villagers for a holy man. He plays along until they expect him to fast for rain. Narayan shows how a guru gets manufactured by his audience.

401. Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire* (1959)

The same few characters, Gautam, Champa, Kamal and others, reappear across the history of the subcontinent from the fourth century BC to the years after Partition. Hyder wrote it in Urdu in 1959 and rewrote it in English herself decades later. It is on the list as one of the great novels of the region rather than for a thesis.

402. Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960)

Ramaswamy, a South Indian Brahmin scholar living in France, watches his marriage to Madeleine, a French woman drawn to Buddhism, come apart. Raja Rao was himself a student of Advaita Vedanta, and the novel carries the full weight of that tradition. Read it beside any wellness studio's version of non-duality to see what gets stripped out.

403. U. R. Ananthamurthy, *Samskara* (1965)

In a South Indian village, a Brahmin who broke every rule has died, and no one knows whether a Brahmin may cremate him. The learned Praneshacharya searches the scriptures, finds no answer, and his own certainties start to fail. This is a living tradition from the inside: demanding, argued over, and nothing like the serenity sold to the West.

404. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (1975)

In 1923 Olivia, a bored English wife, leaves her husband for a local prince; fifty years later her husband's granddaughter by his second marriage retraces her steps and finds herself on a similar path. Along the way she meets young Westerners who came to India looking for enlightenment and found dysentery. It won the Booker Prize in 1975.

405. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)

Saleem Sinai is born at the stroke of midnight on India's independence day, and his life tracks the nation's. He narrates both and admits some of his dates are wrong.

406. Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca* (1995)

In the 1970s Matteo, a young Italian, drags his German wife Sophie to India in search of a guru and ends up devoted to an ashram's Mother. Sophie, unconvinced, tracks down the Mother's past. Desai takes the longing seriously and the seekers less so.

407. Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance* (1995)

A widow, two tailors from a low caste, and a student share a Bombay flat during the 1975 Emergency, and the state grinds them down one decree at a time. No amount of character or effort changes their odds.

408. Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997)

In Kerala in 1969, the twins Estha and Rahel watch their mother Ammu fall in love with Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, and watch the family and the police make them pay for it. Roy calls the rules about who may be loved, and how much, the Love Laws. It won the Booker Prize in 1997.

409. Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* (2008)

Balam Halwai, a driver from a poor village, murders his employer and becomes an entrepreneur in Bangalore. He tells the story in a long letter to the Premier of China, as a lesson in success. It is the self-made-man story told by a man who took it literally.

ASIA: CHINA, JAPAN, KOREA, INDONESIA

410. Cao Xueqin, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (c. 1760; first printed 1791 · China)

Jia Baoyu grows up among his cousins in a great household while the family slides toward ruin. A Buddhist monk and a Daoist priest open and close the story, and their teaching that attachment is a dream shapes the plot.

411. Natsume Sōseki, *Kokoro* (1914 · Japan)

A Tokyo student befriends a withdrawn older man he calls Sensei, who will not explain himself. The explanation arrives late, as a long letter, and what it holds is the novel's business.

412. Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China* (1918–36 · China)

Ah Q, a village laborer, is mocked and beaten by everyone and turns each defeat into a victory in his head. His “spiritual victories” change everything except what happens to him, which is the trouble with believing that thoughts create reality. Lovell's edition collects all of Lu Xun's fiction.

413. Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country* (1935–48 · Japan)

Shimamura, a wealthy Tokyo dilettante, keeps returning to a hot-spring town in the snowbound mountains for Komako, a geisha who loves him far more than he can love anyone. Kawabata records what is wasted between them with great precision and no comment. He took about thirteen years to finish a short novel.

414. Lao She, *Rickshaw Boy* (serialized 1936–37 · China)

Xiangzi, a strong young peasant in 1920s Beijing, works and saves for years to own his rickshaw, then loses it, his savings and nearly everything else to soldiers, an extortionist and bad luck. Lao She shows a man who does everything the advice books recommend and loses anyway.

415. Eileen Chang, *Love in a Fallen City* (1943 · China)

Bai Liusu, a divorcée tolerated by her Shanghai family, goes to Hong Kong to win marriage from a rich playboy who wants only an affair. The Japanese attack on Hong Kong in 1941 settles what their maneuvering could not.

416. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *The Makioka Sisters* (1943–48 · Japan)

Four sisters of a declining Osaka merchant family spend the years 1936 to 1941 trying to marry off the third, Yukiko, through a series of polite and disastrous formal introductions. The war that will end their world stays at the edge of the page. Military censors halted its serialization in 1943 because it was too frivolous for wartime.

417. Qian Zhongshu, *Fortress Besieged* (1947 · China)

Fang Hongjian comes home to China in 1937 from his studies in Europe with a doctorate from a fake American university, bought from a shady Irishman. He then talks his way into a provincial college staffed by people with similar credentials. Credentials and knowledge part company throughout, and Qian makes the point with jokes, many of them very good.

418. Osamu Dazai, *No Longer Human* (1948 · Japan)

Ōba Yōzō learns as a boy to play the clown so no one notices he cannot understand people, and keeps up the act through drink, failed affairs and confinement in an asylum. Dazai offers no cure.

419. Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956 · Japan)

Mizoguchi, a stammering acolyte at Kyoto's Golden Pavilion, becomes obsessed with the temple's beauty and finally burns it down. Mishima based the novel on the real arson of 1950 and follows the young man's reasoning step by step without excusing it.

420. Kōbō Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962 · Japan)

An insect collector hunting a rare beetle is trapped by villagers in a sand pit, where he must shovel every night beside a widow to keep her house from being buried.

421. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *This Earth of Mankind (first of the Buru Quartet)* (1980 · Indonesia)

Minke, a Javanese student with a Dutch education, falls in love and learns how the colony's racial law can take everything away from a native family. Pramoedya composed the quartet as a political prisoner on Buru Island, telling it aloud to fellow prisoners before he was allowed to write. Indonesia banned it.

422. Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood* (1987 · Japan)

In late-1960s Tokyo, the student Toru Watanabe is torn between Naoko, the fragile girlfriend of his dead best friend, and Midori, who is alive in every sense. The novel lets grief take as long as it takes, which few books on loss allow. It sold millions of copies in Japan and made Murakami famous.

423. Yu Hua, *To Live* (1993 · China)

Fugui gambles away his family's fortune in the 1940s, then lives through civil war and the Cultural Revolution, losing, one by one, nearly everyone he loves. He ends the book old, plowing with an ox he has named after himself. Yu Hua never turns the suffering into a growth story.

424. Mo Yan, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006 · China)

Ximen Nao, a landowner shot during land reform in 1948, is reborn in his own village as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog and a monkey, and watches fifty years of collectivization and market reform from the farmyard. Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in 2012. The animals understand the politics better than most of the people.

425. Han Kang, *The Vegetarian* (2007 · South Korea)

After a bloody dream, Yeong-hye, an unremarkable Seoul housewife, stops eating meat and will not say why. Her husband, her brother-in-law and her sister each supply an explanation that suits them. Han Kang won the Nobel Prize in 2024.

AFRICA

426. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958 · Nigeria)

Okonkwo, a wrestler and farmer in the Igbo village of Umuofia, has built his life on not resembling his idle father. The first half shows the clan's laws, rituals and justice working; the second shows missionaries and colonial government breaking them, and Okonkwo with them.

427. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967 · Kenya)

In the days before Kenya's independence in December 1963, a village prepares to honor Mugo, a solitary man everyone believes is a hero of the Mau Mau struggle. Memories gradually surface around the betrayal of the rebel Kihika, and who wears the winner's halo is the question the village has to settle.

428. Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (1981 · South Africa)

When revolution breaks out in South Africa, the Smales, a liberal white family from Johannesburg, flee to the home village of their servant, July, who now holds their safety and their car keys. Every habit of the old arrangement means something different there.

429. Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise* (1994 · Tanzania)

Yusuf, a twelve-year-old boy, is handed by his father to a rich merchant he calls Uncle Aziz to settle a debt, and travels with his trading caravans into the interior of East Africa before the First World War. Gurnah, who won the Nobel Prize in 2021, writes an education in servitude. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

430. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (1999 · South Africa)

David Lurie, a Cape Town professor, is dismissed after an affair with a student and refuses the public apology that would save his job. On his daughter's farm, a violent attack forces both to face what is owed and to whom. Coetzee denies him the redemption arc.

431. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006 · Nigeria)

Ugwu, a village boy who becomes houseboy to a radical professor, Olanna, the professor's lover, and Richard, an English writer, live through Nigeria in the 1960s, the secession of Biafra and the war and famine that followed. Adichie tells it from these three positions. It won the Orange Prize in 2007.

OTHER LISTS WORTH YOUR TIME

- The Guardian, The 100 Greatest Novels of All Time (2026). Voted by 172 writers, critics and scholars, with far more women and more of the world than the older lists. Middlemarch came first.
- Bokklubben World Library (2002). One hundred authors from fifty-four countries chose the most central works of world literature; Don Quixote was named the best.
- Le Monde, 100 Books of the Century (1999). A French readers' poll of the twentieth century, with Camus's The Stranger at the top.
- Time, All-TIME 100 Novels (2005). English-language novels since 1923, chosen by the critics Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo.
- The Modern Library, 100 Best Novels (1998). The classic American-British board list, with Ulysses first.
- The New York Times, The 100 Best Books of the 21st Century (2024). Chosen by more than five hundred writers and critics; My Brilliant Friend came first.
- El País (Babelia), The 50 Best Books of the 21st Century (2019). A Spanish-language view of the century so far, with Bolaño's 2666 at the top.

WHERE TO START

You made it all the way down here, so here is a reward. I said a short list lays down the compiler's path; here is mine anyway, for anyone who would rather not choose from four hundred. Start with these:

- 27. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
- 84. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857)
- 165. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1878)
- 211. Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901)
- 177. Mikhail Bulgakov, *The White Guard* (1925–29)
- 222. Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March* (1932)
- 92. André Malraux, *Man's Fate* (1933)
- 94. Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942)
- 283. Ivo Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945)
- 52. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)
- 334. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
- 296. Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy* (1956–57)
- 122. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (1958)
- 124. Leonardo Sciascia, *The Day of the Owl* (1961)
- 63. John le Carré, *The Karla Trilogy* (1974–79)
- 356. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (1979)
- 405. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)
- 358. David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984)
- 67. Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (1989)