

February 2021 Staff Picks

1. Author: Lois McMaster Bujold Title: Curse of Chalion

This is a fantasy book in which the main character is a former soldier rebuilding his life after a terrible betrayal sent him to the slave galleys of a neighboring kingdom. I loved this book because at the core of it you have a good man who is holding on to his personal integrity through tremendous adversity, and his actions have far-reaching, kingdom-changing consequences. Incidentally, just about everything by this author is great! I recommend her entire backlist, you should read ALL of it!

2. Author: Sherry Thomas Title: A Study in Scarlet Women

Every once in a while I stumble on a historical fiction novel that is a little genre-bending or which defies the expected societal norms. In this case we have a novel featuring the infamous literary character Sherlock Holmes but in a twist “Sherlock Holmes” is a persona for a brilliant and unusual young woman who lives in a day and age in which her life and work are constrained by her gender. It’s a fascinating Victorian-era mystery!

3. Author: Alan Bradley Title: The Sweetness at the bottom of the Pie

A relatively quiet murder mystery set in the countryside of post-WWII England. The main character is what makes this title stand out. Flavia de Luce is, at eleven years old, a budding chemist who prides herself on her scientific reasoning. As a character mashup Flavia is what you would get if you crossed a chemistry-inclined mad scientist with a Sherlockian Nancy Drew.

4. Author: Caroline Kepnes Title: You

This book is crazy-town and I couldn’t put it down. It is also a two-season series on Netflix.

5. Author: Sinclair Lewis Title: It Can’t Happen Here

Imagine America electing a populist candidate for President who promises to lift the country out of the deep rut it’s fallen into. Imagine Congress granting almost unlimited power to this man. Imagine armed militias taking control of America’s Heartland. Don’t think no one saw this coming. I recommend It Can’t Happen Here, written by Sinclair Lewis, not in 2021 but in 1935. You’ll find it all too believable.

6. Author: Max Barry Title: Company

If you’re interested in a book that highlights, with pinpoint accuracy, the absurdity of modern corporate life then I recommend you read Company, by Max Barry. The protagonist finds himself working in sales for a company with a rather vague business plan and a CEO who’s more of a rumor than an actual person. While he’s trying to figure out just what he’s supposed to be selling, he meets the receptionist who’s paid twice as much as he is, yet doesn’t seem to do any actual work, and gets involved in the crisis of whose stealing donuts. A hilarious and mindboggling accurate portrayal of modern business practices taken to their logical extreme.

7. **Author: Jim Butcher** **Title: Storm Front**

Harry Dresden is a nearly broke wizard trying to make his rent as a private detective. He supplements that meager income helping the police with their more esoteric crimes. Storm Front, by Jim Butcher, is the first of many books that follow Dresden on his journey from crime consultant nobody takes too seriously to powerful protector of the blissfully oblivious citizens of Chicago. If you like fantasy and hard-boiled detective stories, this book is for you.

8. **Author: TJ Klune** **Title: The House in the Cerulean Sea**

Charming fantasy, entertaining read. You will fall in love with the magical orphans and Linus as he grows from by-the-book to letting his kind heart rule.

9. **Author: Christopher Paolini** **Title: To Sleep in a Sea of Stars**

Futuristic Space SciFi. While a very long book (over 800 pages!), it really didn't feel like it until the last 20%. The plot flows well with action and the SciFi technology descriptions are not overwhelming or confusing. Paolini does a good job creating his futuristic world and characters. I thought the internal struggle of the main character Kira, who is cohabitating with the alien, was well-written. Science Fiction is not a genre I typically read so I cannot give comparisons to similar books. However I did enjoy this and will explore more in the genre.

10. **Author: Sarah J Maas** **Title: Catwoman: Soul Stealer (DC Icons Series #3)**

I'm so excited about this recommendation! I'm a HUGE fan of the DC Icons series, and this one is my favorite so far. I've always been a big fangirl of DC comics and to have a series of books written by notable YA authors (Leigh Bardugo, Marie Lu, Sarah J. Maas, Matt De La Peña, Alexandra Monir) that tell the backstories of notable DC characters (Wonder Woman, Batman, Catwoman, Superman, and Black Canary respectively) is right up my ally! Despite the fact that these stories are not "canon" stories (widely accepted "true" accounts), they are still creative, original, and show off the individual style of each author. The story of Catwoman (or Gatúbela as she's called in Spanish) is one of my favorites, but Sarah J. Maas gives a different take on her backstory. Selina Kyle, the young girl who grows up to become the infamous cat burglar, is more than meets the eye in this tale. She begins this story as a young girl living with a single struggling mother, a younger sister, and no hope for the future. She must fight the mean streets, rob the wealthy families, and try to find odd jobs to help her family survive. Selina eventually realizes that she is not alone; there are many poor young girls in her same situation. Selina eventually becomes a mentor of sorts and fights to help other young girls like herself. She eventually eyes a larger target, the Wayne Mansion. It is then that Selina crosses path with an unlikely partner (also a future -often underrated-member of the Bat family). With the help of her new partner, Selina is able to maximize her skills and also realizes her future potential as an advocate for those who cannot help themselves. The question is, will Selina use her newfound skills to better society or to bring it down?

11. Author: Simon Sinek Title: Start with Why

In six parts and fourteen chapters, Sinek reveals what organizations need to do to be industry leaders. Surprisingly simply, leaders need to remind employees why the organization was founded in the first place; they need to remember their WHY.

Those organizations that forget their WHY experience a strange bifurcation between what they do and why they do it. According to Sinek, Dell, Microsoft, Walmart, and Starbucks are some of the companies that have forgotten their original purpose.

For Sinek, it all comes down to a golden circle. At the center of the circle is the company's purpose or passion. The leader turns this golden circle, now imagined as a cone, into a megaphone. Everything the company does, even the people it hires must be aligned with company's purpose. Using anecdotes and historical examples, Sinek explains how a trend is different from a fad, how novelty is different from innovation. Real innovation changes the industry and can change society. Sinek highlight those companies that inspire - most notably Apple, Virgin Records, Southwest Airlines - but also some less well-known companies.

To be successful, these companies need to market to early adopters and others that share their values. They need a marketing team that effuse their message; products and services that pass the celery test. They need good successors that keep the WHY alive.

12. Author: Ann Cleeves Title: Raven Black

Raven Black is the first in the Ann Cleeves's Shetland series. Unique among detective stories, readers know who the killer is near the start of the novel. At least, he gives the appearance of being the murderer. Magnus Tait is an eccentric recluse who lives by himself at Hilhead. Few of the residents of Lerwick speak to him; they have long suspected he was daft and possibly dangerous. Tait's home is close to where the body was found. He even had the girl, Catherine, in for tea on the day she disappeared.

The town alternately mourns and revels in the notoriety of the tragedy. Sally, the deceased's best friend, is oddly ambivalent about her friend's death. Sally, as it turns out, has her heart set on Robert Ibitser, a well-known, affluent local. Robert who attended a party with Catherine at the Haa may have known her better than he lets on. More and more strange juxtapositions occur as the mystery deepens. In this novel, Cleeves introduces readers to the series' detective, Jimmy Perez, who will play a prominent part in the later Shetland mysteries. If you watch the PBS' series Shetland, you will be familiar with the characters. The PBS series is based on the books but many of the events are different.

Cleeves won the Duncan Lawrie Dagger award of the Crime Writer's Association in 2006 for *Raven Black*.

13. Author: Felicity McLean Title: The Van Apfel Girls are Gone

This debut by Australian author, Felicity McLean, is a tantalizing page-turner. This exciting novel is a mystery and coming-of-age story in one. McLean has a delightful sardonic wit.

14. Author: Patrick Ness Title: A Monster Calls

This YA novel is a beautiful allegorical story about a young person's journey from grief to acceptance. What's best about this novel is how psychologically astute the writing is. Connor has two nightmares that bother him. One comes in the shape of walking yew tree that

something visits at 12:07AM. The other monster that is more real and frightening he cannot even describe. He calls it his “nightmare.” Connor has many troubles: his mother his dying, his father has a new family and has moved to America, his Grandmother, who wants to adopt him, is obtuse and annoying. Connor would give anything for his mother to live, even befriend a yew-tree monster who claims he can cure every human ailment.

15. Author: James Clear Title: Atomic Habits

An interesting perspective in the self-improvement genre for those looking to make changes in their life but always seem to fall back into “bad” habits. Quotes from the book:

You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.

Every Action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become.

True behavior change is identity change. You might start a habit because of motivation, but the only reason you’ll stick with one is that it becomes part of your identity.

16. Author: Margaret Atwood Title: The Handmaid’s Tale: The Graphic Novel

After binge-watching the TV show, I looked into reading the novel. I found this graphic novel instead that made the story pop in a whole new way. This adaptation is a great way to read this classic quickly.

17. Author: Matt Ruff Title: 88 Names

In the near future people can fully immerse themselves into a multitude of on-line worlds. Mystical forests, abandoned planets, and monster infested dungeons all await to be explored. John Chu, the protagonist in 88 Names, by Matt Ruff, earns a good living guiding rich players through these environs, and it’s a relatively safe living until one client pulls him into a web of lies and international intrigue that leaks out into the real world. 88 Names is a more interesting and thoughtful take on virtual reality than Ready Player One.

18. Author: Mira Grant Title: Feed

This is NOT your grandma’s zombie apocalypse thriller. Feed, by Mira Grant takes place fifteen years after the event that lead to the creation of flesh eating zombies. We’ve moved on, learned to live with the monsters by isolating ourselves in secure enclaves. Two bloggers - yes the internet is still very active - covering a presidential campaign end up in the middle of a much darker story. I recommend this book for anyone who wants a scary action-packed zombie tale with a good dose of intelligence and wit. And if you end up liking this one, there are two excellent books that follow.

19. Author: Neal’s Yard Remedies Title: Essential Herbs

Discover the treatment potential for each herb, and how you can prepare and use them to best effect