

June 2021 Staff Picks

1. Author: Daryl Gregory Title: We Are All Completely Fine

A dark psychological thriller that tells you up front, this one is going to be different. It begins with a group therapy session involving individuals who each sustained some sort of physical or emotional trauma. As the story unfolds, the group dives deeper into what haunts them, and discovers a bizarre and unexplained connection they all share. Spoiler, one mystery that is never really solved is who the narrator is. The voice continues to insist it is a part of the group yet holds itself distinct from each individual member. The only conclusion I could come up with was the narrator was the group, but I could be wrong. That's the wonder of this book.

2. Author: Rosamund Lupton Title: The Quality of Silence

This is a novel that pulls readers in immediately because there's so much at stake for Yasmin and her daughter, Ruby. The pair hope to rescue Matt, Yasmin's husband and Ruby's father, from an outpost in Northern Alaska that burned to the ground. This is a complex novel about motherhood, disability, and ethical choices.

3. Author: Elizabeth Strout Title: My Name is Lucy Barton

A psychological portrait of a woman who has survived a terrible upbringing of cruelty and poverty. At the start of the novel, Lucy, who is temporarily hospitalized, received visits from her mother. Lucy is grateful for the visits and grateful for the doctor who seems to genuinely care for her. Underneath the mother's kindness, however, there is an undercurrent of cruelty. Lucy is the only one who has successfully escaped her humble beginnings and gone to college. This novel is set in the 1980s before cell phones and smart phones. Another crucial part of the novel is the AIDS epidemic; Lucy feels a connection with outcasts and with the neighbor who is dying.

4. Author: Sally Rooney Title: Normal People

In this novel, two teenagers avoid each other at school yet are also fiercely, strangely attracted to one other. The two come from different worlds. In spite of this, the two teenagers come together for secret trysts. Their on/off relationship continues to be passionate, volatile, and heart-breaking through the years. This novel, which was long listed for a Man Booker prize, is a drama series on Hulu.

5. Author: Melissa Albert Title: The Hazel Wood

This book takes tried-and-true fairy tale elements and gives them a refreshing contemporary context. Time spent in a fairytale world is depicted as a kidnapping; characters from one world or the other are "refugees." As dark as that sounds, it is possible to change a story's ending.

Alice becomes obsessed with her grandmother, Althea Prosperine, whom she has never met. She is also obsessed with reading her grandmother's book, *Tales from the Hinterland*. The book has generated a lot of passionate fans who keep in touch on websites. Then

her mother, Ella, vanishes. Alice's only clues are things left behind by the strange man at the coffee shop: a feather, comb, and bone and a rhyme given to her by one of her Grandmother's "fans."

6. Author: Maggie O'Farrell Title: The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox

Though it's hard to believe, in the not too distant past women could be placed in insane asylums by their families if they refused to conform to norms. Women could be sent to psychiatric institutes indefinitely if she "was not behaving as she should." O'Farrell takes a subject which could have been depressing and infuses with humor and telling details. The ending comes as a surprise but well-justified in this well-plotted, psychological novel. The novel begins by Iris learning she has a Great-Aunt she never knew about, Esme, who has been in a mental institution for sixty years. When Esme moves back home to live with Iris, they work to determine why she became confined. Esme has an excellent memory and searches her past for clues--when did her life go disastrously wrong? Did it go wrong on New Year's Eve in the 1930's when she danced with an attractive boy? Or did her problems begin much earlier when the family lived abroad?

7. Author: Dani Shapiro Title: Inheritance

An intimate memoir about the author's revelation of her family truth after taking a DNA test. She explores the pain and healing journey her family go through when the secrets of her donor-parentage are revealed. In addition, she digs deeper, investigating the way cryo-banks currently operate. She interviews dozens of donor-conceived individual who feel just as exiled and lost as she does. As she forges deeper relationships with her biological family, however, Shapiro begins to see everything in a new light: as a blessing. Shapiro's story is so important in this age when DNA kits are becoming more and more recreational.

8. Author: Shirley Jackson Title: We Have Always Lived in the Castle

A murder-mystery that combines Gothic elements with psychological suspense. Though it gives the routine of two seemingly ordinary women, it also peers into the mind of a deranged young girl. She believes in magic and lives wholly in her own imagination. An unexpected visit from a greedy relative alters the family in irreversible ways.

9. Author: Greer MacAllister Title: The Magician's Lie

One night in Waterloo, Iowa, the Amazing Arden, completes a magic trick she has done many times before. She is famous for her half-man trick in which she saws a man in half. This time, however, she innovates and uses a fire ax. The man, presumably her husband, is later found under the stage--killed by an ax wound to the chest. Arden claims to be innocent and readers must decide whether her story is believable. The characters are fascinating and many accurate details are described in this historical fiction.

10. Author: Mary Miller Title: Biloxi

Louis McDonald, Jr always assumed he would inherit his father's estate after he retired. He didn't count on his wife leaving him and his Dad leaving the bulk of his estate to her. Though he is, at times, an unlikeable character who drinks too much, Louis can also make amusing, wry observations. His life goes in an unexpected direction when Layla, an overweight mixed-breed dog, and her wacky owner, Sasha, comes into life. Louis' plight will appeal to anyone whose life didn't turn out the way they expected. His life is peppered with a myriad of inconveniences. He is an endearing curmudgeon who has a hard time finding the right things to say to people. The only one who seems to accept his failures are Layla, the dog who has entered his life by coincidence. While there's not much action, there's a lot of reflection and humor in this novel.

11. Author: Sally Kilpatrick Title: Oh My Stars

A delightful romance that will put even the weariest in a good mood. The quirky inhabitants of this little town don't expect a Christmas miracle in their drive-through nativity. The nativity, after all, is located in a Dollar General parking lot. Ivy, who reluctantly plays Mary in the Christmas Nativity, works at the Dollar General. Broke and living with her mother in her childhood home, Ivy is mourning the death of her ex-husband and the loss of a foster baby. A "Christmas Miracle" occurs when an abandoned baby is left in the manger. Ivy bonds with the baby and the man playing Joseph.

12. Author: Guy Raz Title: How I Built This

Business podcaster and journalist, Guy Raz, offers insights on how many innovative companies got started. He summarizes key takeaways from his interviews with founders. Success stories are shared as well as the obstacles and setbacks. An enjoyable and engaging read; great for those who want to dip their feet into the entrepreneurial waters.

13. Author: Ellery Adams Title: The Secret, Book, & Scone Society

A cozy mystery set in North Carolina with ladies who team up to solve murders. The first in a series with charming characters.

14. Author: Marion Zimmer Bradley Title: The Mists of Avalon

A classic fantasy to escape to another world.

15. Author: Sarah Rayne Title: A Dark Dividing

A thriller, a mystery, and a gothic horror story, this is an intriguing novel about the power of secrets, telepathy and ghostly occurrences. This hypnotic novel tells the story of Mortmain House and the two sets of conjoined twins whose lives intersect with its sad history.

16. Author: Seanan McGuire Title: Every Heart a Doorway

The universe extends an invitation to certain children: a door to a new world. This new world, whether it be called Confection, or Prism, or Halls of the Dead is a magical place where the individual feels completely at home. Some of these children are never seen

again. Others are forced or told to return to the real world for a short time. These children who have made this magical journey are heart-broken when they find themselves back in the real world. All of the students that end up at Eleanor West's School for Wayward Children want desperately to find the door back to their new world.

17. Author: Gilly MacMillan Title: What She Knew

Rachel deeply regrets letting her eight-year-old run ahead of her while walking in the woods. Ben Finch disappears, leaving almost no clues except his clothing, which was found near a pond. Rachel was trying to allow Ben independence when she let him run ahead on their walk. Now, Rachel finds herself rethinking that decision—as well as everything in her life—because nothing is as it seems. The author spends a great deal of effort making several key players look suspicious.

18. Author: Alexandra Monir Title: Black Canary: Breaking Silence

With this latest incarnation of the DC Icon series, I am once again very excited and eager to share! I'm a HUGE fan of this series, and (even though I have said it before) this latest one is my favorite! As a fangirl of DC comics and a fan of YA literature, I was thrilled 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). 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.

This newest book tells the story of Black Canary. In this latest incarnation of Black Canary, a teenage Dinah Lance is living in a dystopian Gotham City which is run by the Court of Owls and the Court has "stolen" the singing voices of all women by way of a poisonous gas that infiltrated the city many years prior. Having lost her mother (who was a celebrated singer) at a young age and being raised by her police detective father, young Dinah not only longs to change Gotham City for the better, but also longs to find her singing voice! When Dinah discovers an underground network of freedom fighters connected to her late mother and realizes that there are others who have been fighting all along to overthrow the Court of Owls, she suddenly finds the courage to lend her voice to their cause! With the help of her new-found ally and classmate, Oliver Queen, and the network of freedom fighters who were aligned with her mother (the former Black Canary), Dinah Lance is prepared to lead Gotham City into a new era!

Although this backstory is VASTLY different from Black Canary's origin story in DC Comics, I still enjoyed this story so much! The main reason that I wanted to read this book is because Black Canary is a primary member of the *Birds of Prey* (my all-time favorite comic book series), and I wanted to see how this origin story treated her character. I am a HUGE *Birds of Prey* fan (I named my cat after a member of the *Birds of Prey*), and I was so excited to see a cameo appearance by a few members in this book. Also, I was thrilled to see how the theme of music played such a central theme in this story. My interest was especially piqued

because I have a music degree and I read in the author's bio that she has played and performed in a band for several years as well! I love how the transformative power of music plays such a key part in the plot of this story (no pun intended).

Seriously, if you have enjoyed any of the books (or comic book versions) in this series DO NOT miss out on this one!!

19. Author: Hiroyuki Asada Title: Tegami Bachi: The Letter Bee

As July is celebrating Graphic Novels in Libraries Month, I thought I would throw in a few of my favorites. This series is set in the fictional world of AmberGround; trapped in an eternal nighttime since a cataclysmic event many years ago and is only lit by an artificial sun. A dangerous, but very important job in this land is that of a Letter Bee, or delivery courier. Sending letters is the only way in which people in this barren land can communicate, making the job incredibly important. The central character is Lag Seeing, a young orphan who was once a package himself; both discovered and trained by fellow Letter Bee Gauche Suede. Now Lag has recently become a Letter Bee and is eager to make his mentor proud. However, what makes a Letter Bee's job so dangerous are the monstrous Gaichuu (giant beetles), who attack Letter Bees and eat the "hearts" that their letters contain. The only defense that the Letter Bees have are Shindan bullets- the only things that can effectively kill the Gaichuu (but which are unfortunately powered by the hearts contained in their letters).

As Lag and his fellow Letter Bees continue to deliver letters, he discovers that his mentor and hero, Gauche Suede, has disappeared. While searching for Gauche, an uprising begins that turns the general population against the Letter Bees. The uprising is fueled by a secret hiding under the surface of this mysterious world involving Lag Seeing (unbeknownst to Lag) and a secret society sworn to hide this secret. Sadly, just as Lag discovers what happened to Gauche, he discovers a greater truth that threatens the very existence of AmberGround and its artificial sun.

What immediately drew me to this series was the breath-taking artwork and the unusual storyline. Unlike most Shonen manga of this period, Tegami Bachi draws the reader in with stunning illustrations, unusual characters, and a plot that doesn't rely on fighting/war/martial arts. The semi-dystopian backdrop provides for a bit of mystery to the story, while the quirky and fun characters give the reader the right mix of entertainment and interest. There are enough twists and turns in the story, along with just the right mix of heart-tugging drama, to keep the reader engaged until the end.

20. Author: J.Ryan Stradal Title: Kitchens of the Great Midwest

A series of interlinked short stories tell a rising young chef life story. Each short story is a chapter that is named for an ingredient or recipe that is somehow pertinent to her life. Ironic and darkly humorous, this novel is a wonderful read. Book clubs and anyone looking for quirky, yet delightful story will enjoy this book.

21. Author: Holly Black Title: The Darkest Part of the Forest

Mysterious, intriguing, and fast-paced, this a wonderful YA read. Hazel is a hero most girls can look up to. In a town called Fairfolk, which lies close to the woods, mysterious things always happened. Things get even stranger after someone breaks into a glass coffin that holds a strange, horned boy. For years, townspeople have told stories about this local legend. Many townspeople stated that he was a statue. Hazel not only knows the Prince is real, but she also wants to be the one that saves him from the curse.

22. Author: Donna Leon Title: Transient Desires

One of the most exquisite and subtle detective series ever. While this is the 30th (!) in the series, it is completely fine to read as stand-alone. Leon makes me want to travel to Italy since she really captures the local life and culture.

23. Author: Sy Montgomery Title: The Soul of an Octopus

If you enjoyed Netflix's *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), you may also enjoy this heartfelt story. The author shares her observations of the highly intelligent and emotional creatures. It is interesting to learn about their similarities to humans and bittersweet to follow her octopus "friend" throughout its shorter (average three years) lifespan.

24. Author: Deborah Levy Title: Swimming Home

Nothing is as it appears in this novel about two couples vacationing in France. Everything rings true, however. The characters are well-developed and the scenes are well-crafted. This startling novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize.

25. Author: Peter Heller Title: Celine

The titular character is an aristocratic PI with emphysema, an excellent shot, and a mind as quick as a trap. Celine prefers reuniting birth families pro-bono. She doesn't care for any other kind of detective work, though she once worked for the F.B.I. Celine is given a strange case—a woman who was abandoned twice by her own father. The woman is in her 40s now and would like to find her father so that he can meet his grandchild. Celine has her own secrets. The second mystery that unfolds is who Celine really is and what she's hiding from her "Watson," her husband, Peter, and her son, Hank.

26. Author: Chris Bohjalian Title: Night Strangers

All Chip Linton wants when he moves to Bethel, New Hampshire is a little peace and quiet for his family. He has already survived the unthinkable, a plane crash. Since he was the pilot, he blames himself for not being able to pull off a "Miracle on the Hudson" type maneuver.

The family finds the new house to have a creepy history. The former inhabitant's twelve-year-old son is rumored to have killed himself in the house. The house's internal structure is strange: each of the three floors is a little narrower than the preceding one, the wallpaper is hideous, and the basement has a bolted door that seemingly leads nowhere. In addition, why are there so many greenhouses in Bethel? And why does everyone in the town seem overly interested in the Linton twins. Bohjalian's narrative moves freely back and forth among all the characters but it is actually the twins' impressions which stand out as they face the greater dangers.

27. Author: Karen Thompson Walker Title: Age of Miracles

A group of Californians—and the rest of the world—are noticing that days are getting longer. The earth is slowing resulting in famine, gravity sickness, disruption of the magnetic fields, and radiation poisoning. Amidst the disaster, Walker portrays the ordinary struggles and triumphs of a twelve-year-old girl, Julia. As the days and nights grow longer, everything is thrown into chaos. This novel definitely made me appreciate the smaller things in life

28. Author: Heather Gudenkauf Title: These Things Hidden

A powerful, complicated story about the ties that bind us to our families. Completely unpredictable, this novel will have readers guessing about what will unfold next. Newly released from prison, Alison tries to contact her family without much success. She was their “golden girl” upon whom everyone placed their hopes. No one planned on Alison making a mistake—dating an older student and becoming pregnant. No one planned on “perfect” Alison tossing her newborn baby girl in the Druid River. The second thread is Claire’s story. Faced with infertility, Claire happily adopts a baby boy whom someone has left at the Linden Falls fire station. She and her husband own a bookstore where she meets many members of the community, including Alison. Few people know that Alison is “that girl”—the girl that killed her newborn. When Claire hires Alison to work at her bookstore, the truth begins to unravel. Two other women, Charm, a nursing student, and Alison’s sister, Brynn, play an important role in this taut, interconnected drama.

29. Author: Emily Fridlund Title: History of Wolves

“What’s the difference between what you want to believe and what you do? And what’s the difference between what you think and what you end up doing,” Madeleine wonders. She’s a kid surrounded by adults—her parents, Mr. Grierson, the Gardners who shirk their duties and blame others for mistakes they make. The worst offender is probably Patra who illogically blames Madeleine for the death of her four-year-old. Though Madeleine is expert at hiking and traversing the streams in her woods, she is less expert at deciphering social cues or understanding human relationships. A coming-of-age story that transcends genre.

30. Author: Stacey Swann Title: Olympus, Texas

A total page-turner. It is about a troubled family in small-town Olympus, Texas as they become increasingly consumed by secrets, scandals, and betrayals.