

## April / May 2021 Staff Picks

**Author: L.M. Montgomery    Title: The Blue Castle**

My all-time favorite book (besides the picture book *Corduroy* by Don Freeman) is *The Blue Castle* by L.M. Montgomery. I have read it more times than any other novel—about six or seven times. Sometimes when I need a pick-me-up or need to feel empowered, I read it again. It is the story of “Valancy Stirling, an inhibited twenty-nine-year-old spinster, [who] undergoes a total personality change when a doctor tells her she has no more than one year to live.” You’ll cheer for Valancy all the way and then cheer some more with the surprise at the ending.

**Author: Genevieve Cogman    Title: The Invisible Library Book 1 in the Invisible Library Series**

This book is the first in a series that promises lots of fantastical fun for those who love fantasy, mystery, and (of course) librarian superheroes! The Invisible Library series follows the adventures of an elusive, interdimensional library that exists solely for the purpose of protecting rare and valuable from across many different worlds and dimensions. This library is guarded and run by team of brave librarians whose job is to collect, rescue, and fight for rare and endangered books. This unusual team constantly scans the many different worlds to find books that are anachronistic to that world, books that are endangered, books that are illegally transported from world to world, or books that contain information dangerous to that world. Once such books have been located, these librarians spring into action (risking both life and limb) in order to collect these endangered books and bring them to the safety of the Invisible Library. (The librarians also have a cadre of special weapons at their disposal, such as anti-magic tattoos, advanced technological cyber training, and a special language that trans-morphs reality). This series follows a very talented librarian named Irene with a mysterious past that is unknown even to her! Joining Irene on her adventures is her partner Kai (a shape-shifting Dragon Prince), Peregrine Vale (a gifted detective from an alternate 1800's London), and her apprentice Catherine (a young Fae who is the niece of a powerful Fairy Lord). As Irene and her friends travel the different worlds, collect and preserve books, battle different villains, and narrowly escape death, readers of all types will be sure to fall in love with this captivating series which only gets better with each new volume!

**Author: Kafka Asagiri    Title: Bungo Stray Dogs**

This is truly a fun, creative, and humorous series that I think any literature fan would enjoy! Even for those who do not appreciate manga, the creativity and background information of this series is worth the read. In my opinion, what makes Bungo Stray Dogs so unique is that every character in this series is named after a real-life writer (whether Japanese, American, Canadian, European, etc...). Not only is every character named for a real-life writer, but each character is given a "special skill" (aka "superpower") that is based upon the major literary by that writer. In the translation notes, the author even gives the reader notes about the real-life writers

upon whom the characters are based and the major literary works which gave these characters their powers. For this reason, I think this particular author has gone the extra mile to bring these literary characters to life in a unique way!

The plot of Bungo Stray Dogs revolves around a group of "special skill users" (all named for Japanese writers) called The Armed Detective Agency who work for the government and use their skills to solve crimes that the police are unable to solve. Often times comical, The Agency members try not to let their "skills" get in the way of doing their jobs and they are usually successful. Their main opponents are another group of special skill users called the Port Mafia (also all named for Japanese writers) who mainly use their skills for stealing, extortion, or entering into illegal trading. Their battles continue (as well as their comedic antics) until the emergence of a third group of special skill users from the USA who call themselves The Guild (all named for American writers). While trying to keep the peace, form new alliances, and avoid all-out war, these special skill users provide readers with wild adventures and hilarious dialogue! Bungo Stray Dogs really is a fun find for those looking for literary treasure!

**Author: Jacqueline Winspear Title: This Time Next Year We'll be Laughing: A Memoir**

I do not normally read memoirs but this one caught my eye when I saw that it is written by Ms. Winspear, the author of the historical fiction series Maisie Dobbs. Every fan of Maisie Dobbs will love this memoir and say "Ah!" when you realize that some of the characters, situations, and events in her fiction series are drawn from her own life and the lives of her parents and grandparents.

**Author: Karen Russell Title: Swamplandia**

The Bigtrees have grown up in the Southwest tip of Florida—in the Ten Thousand Islands—where they have run a unique theme park, Swamplandia. Their successful business collapses when their star dies of cancer, leaving the business in debt. Poor Ava Bigtree has been abandoned by her mother; her father; her brother; and her sister, who eloped with a ghost. No wonder she befriends the Bird Man and jumps at the chance to find Ossie in the Underworld, which coincidentally is in the Florida swamplands. The premise is one of the strangest in all of literature but it's written with great charm, humor, and insight.

**Author: Joni Agee Title: The River Wife**

The River Wife is a panoramic story—from the 1812 New Madrid quake to the 1930s. Central to the story is the enigmatic, Jacques DuCharme, a one-armed river pirate whose wealth and wild ways become legendary. *The River Wife* is a fast-paced read filled with adventure, heartache, tragedy, and beauty. If you like family dramas and historical novels, you will enjoy this book.

**Author: Deborah Lawrenson Title: The Lantern**

When she and her boyfriend, Dom, move into a crumbling Provencal house, Eve doesn't expect to be drawn into the hamlet's mystery. Eve never questions her boyfriend's past or why he left his ex-wife Rachel. A mystery woman, Sabine, seems to have some of the answers but Dom wants to force Eve and Sabine apart. Strange events, flickering lights, strange scents, stones thrown against a window pane and a falling light fixture cause Eve alarm; plus, there is a growing distance between her and Dom. Under a floorboard,

she finds a child's book of Provençal tales and the history of the house's former owners, the Lincels, begins to unfold. Eve is fascinated by the Lincel's story—Pierre's cruelty and Marthe's determination to become a perfume maker despite her blindness. After creating a famous scent, *Lavande du Nuit*, Marthe disappears under mysterious circumstances. The author who spends much of her time in Provence drew inspiration for this book from the fact that the company, L'Occitane en Provence, formed a foundation in 1997 to introduce visually impaired children to perfume creation.

**Author: Alice LaPlante Title: Turn of Mind**

LaPlante's award-winning book is cleverly narrated by Elizabeth White, a murder suspect who happens to have the advanced stages of dementia. She is also a former renowned hand-surgeon. This a psychological suspense novel at its finest. The story hinges on the killer's motivation. Divided into four parts, this novel is horrifying but also fascinating. Like the best thrillers, the ending comes as a surprise. Deeply moving and affecting, this is a powerful novel.

Turn of Mind has won the *Wellcome Trust Book Prize* that celebrates medicine in literature.

**Author: Grady Hendrix Title: We Sold Our Souls**

Some achieve fame because they're lucky, others earn it from hard work; more often it requires both. Our protagonist finds it requires a sacrifice, one she doesn't remember making. And if she did pay the price, why is she stuck working in a flea bag motel while her former bandmate is a superstar rocker. Hendrix spins a dizzying tale of suspense and horror as he slowly reveals what happened on the fateful night the metal band DÜRT WÜRK was offered fame and fortune and one of the members took the deal. If you like modern gothic horror you'll love this book and you'll always remember it every time a brown UPS truck drives by.

**Author: Tara Westover Title: Educated: a Memoir**

Tara Westover was seventeen the first time she set foot in a classroom. Born to survivalists in the mountains of Idaho, her father distrusted the medical establishment and kept them isolated from mainstream society. When her brother got himself into college and came back with news of the world beyond the mountain, Tara decided to try a new kind of life. She taught herself enough to take the ACT and was admitted to Brigham Young University. Her quest for knowledge transformed her, taking her over oceans and across continents, to Harvard and to Cambridge University. Only then would she wonder if she'd traveled too far, if there was still a way home.

I absolutely loved this book even though it disturbed me on so many levels. The despicable things that Tara and her siblings had to endure growing up are exactly what educators as myself are trying to protect our students from. Tara is a perfect example of what education has to offer people who are trying to reinvent themselves and their lives. I highly recommend this memoir!

**Author: Jeff VanderMeer Title: Borne**

This is an absolute stunner in every sense of the word—rich prose, tight plotting, and imaginative twists and turns.

The Company has manufactured biotech that wreak havoc upon the City. The actions of Mord, a man-made bear-like creature, and his proxies cause the Magician and her pseudo-children to rebel. Even before the rebellion, however, the City has been wrecked, leaving many scavengers. Rachel, who lives in the Balcony Cliff with Wick, has learned the art of scavenging.

Though there is a gap in her memories, Rachel remembers once living on an island. Later, as the waters rose, she became a climate refugee and moved to the City.

Perhaps she sees something of herself in the creature, Borne, who helplessly clings to Mord's flank. She nurtures him yet she doesn't know exactly what he is.

No one does, not even Borne himself. For a time, he ponders if he is a biotech weapon created by the Company. Wick suggests that they deconstruct him to see what he is but Rachel feels outraged. He is a "person" in her eyes yet he at first seems little more than a plant with eyes.

**Author: Nora Roberts Title: Three Fates**

Nora Roberts, my favorite romance author, always creates compelling characters with a great mix of drama and love story. This book intertwines multiple character arcs, and past with present, in nonstop action that makes you want to keep reading to find out how the plot lines will connect. I enjoy how each character still gets written with enough attention to detail that you feel connected. This book may be almost 20 years old (!! ) but is one that I re-read often.

**Author: Mary Robinette Kowal Title: The Calculating Stars**

An alternative history saga that begins with the destruction of half the eastern seaboard of the United States. A huge meteorite hits and brings with it death and destruction, along with a rapidly changing climate that is becoming increasingly inhospitable. But that's not what the story's about, instead it focuses on what happens after the fall and how the race to space becomes key to humanity's survival. Kowal creates fully fleshed out female characters and well-written science-based plots that keep the reader hooked until the very last word is read.

**Author: Chloe Gong Title: These Violent Delights**

In honor of Asian Heritage Month, I wanted to recommend one of the best Asian authored and inspired books that I have read this year! This book is by debut author Chloe Gong (a New Zealand native and student at the University of Pennsylvania) and it blew me away! *These Violent Delights* is actually a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* set in Shanghai in the year 1926. The story centers around Juliette Chai, the 18-year-old heir to the Scarlet Gang who has recently arrived back in her hometown after spending several years abroad for training. She is then reunited with her former flame, Roma Montagov, the 19-year-old heir of the Russian White Flowers- the main rivals of the Scarlet Gang for control of Shanghai. Soon after the two teenage heirs (and rivals) have been reunited, a new mysterious (and almost supernatural) threat appears on the streets of Shanghai. This new threat is so powerful that it not only threatens the lives of the Scarlet Gang and White Flowers, but also the lives of the innocent citizens and foreigners of the city as well! Juliette and Roma realize that in order to locate and defeat this threat to their city, they must put their past differences aside and learn to work together- and more importantly TRUST each other- once again. However, in order to work effectively, they both must fight the growing attraction that they feel for one another.

Even if you are not a fan of Shakespeare, this story has a bit of something for everyone! This is a novel of mystery, intrigue, suspense, romance, and even a bit of nostalgia for a bygone era. The author has set the stage with a time period that is authentic and lends as much to the story as the cast of diverse and endearing characters. I will admit that the author has remained committed to the source material and very rarely deviates from the original story (although the setting is drastically different), but she has inundated the plot with rich content and delightful details that bibliophiles will truly enjoy. There are twists and turns throughout the book to keep the reader guessing and a surprise ending that I NEVER saw coming! I can't wait for the sequel, *Our Violent Ends*!

**Author: Jacqueline Carey Title: Kushiel's Dart**

An adult fantasy in every aspect of the phrase. The action takes place in a world that is modeled on our own, but with a few subtle and not so subtle twists. Phedre is sold into indentured servitude as a child. Some see the red mote in her eye as a defect or curse, but her master knows better; she's been marked by Kushiel as something special. Phedre grows up to be a courtesan and spy, her talents of observation and seduction of equal value. There's plenty of mystery, court intrigue, and romance with a definite erotic twist. The characters are multifaceted and the plot is intelligent and intense. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. And as an added bonus, if you enjoy book one of this series, there's seven more that follow.

**Author: Janice Hadlow Title: The Other Bennet Sister: A Novel**

For those who loved *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and hated to see it end, have I got a book for you!! *The Other Bennet Sister* by Janice Hadlow is the story of the overlooked and underappreciated middle sister Mary Bennet. This story does for *Pride and Prejudice* what *Wicked* did for *The Wizard of Oz*—it gives you the other side of the story. Despite a slow start, the novel picks up after 100 pages so don't give up too soon. And, just like with Austen's classic, you won't want this one to end either.

**Author: Deborah Harkness Title: A Discovery of Witches**

A book about witches, vampires, and demons who outnumber humans at Oxford's Bodleian Library, where witch and Yale historian Diana Bishop discovers an enchanted manuscript. She soon finds herself being stalked and harassed by the other supernatural beings, where she turns to 1500 year old vampire geneticist Matthew Clairmont for protection. Set in our contemporary world and 1590 with a magical twists, readers will find themselves invested in Diana's success at unlocking the secrets of the manuscript.

**Author: Erin Morgenstern Title: The Night Circus**

In this fanciful and breathtaking novel, two young people are drawn into a dangerous game by their caretakers. Both have been trained in the arts of real magic, not illusory magic, and have been brought up to fight a magical duel. Their challenge will take place at the traveling circus which shows up unannounced at various cities throughout the world. The love story and denouement of this novel are particularly impressive. The conclusion is bittersweet but satisfying.