Essential reading: Fiction

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Illustration by Tim Cook

We asked some of our favorite novelists and poets to tell us about three recent works of fiction that they found especially moving, helpful, challenging, or beautiful and that speak to them in a deep way.

Three novels have left an indelible impression on me in recent months. The Irish author Edna O'Brien is in her mideighties, but she has now written what Philip Roth has proclaimed "her masterpiece." In its depiction of an infamous Bosnian war criminal finally brought to justice, *The Little Red Chairs* is a profound study on the nature of evil. Dr. Vladimir Dragan is a frightening figure, particularly in his seduction of Fidelma McBride, the novel's central character. It is a disturbing book, but Fidelma's quest for redemption offers the possibility of a moment when, as

Seamus Heaney's poem "The Cure at Troy" states, "hope and history rhyme."

Jonathan Miles's novel *Anatomy of a Miracle* has a fascinating premise: a young man paralyzed in the Gulf War experiences a miracle and is suddenly able to walk again. Exactly how the miracle has happened, and why to this particular person, is at the center of the story as both believers and nonbelievers attempt to find explanations. The novel is hilarious at times, but it rises above mere satire to address the deepest questions of faith, be it faith in science or faith in religion.

But of all the recent novels I've read, Tim Winton's latest, *The Shepherd's Hut*, is the most memorable. Winton is Australia's premier living novelist, and he is deservedly mentioned as a leading contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Winton is a believer, as he himself has described it, of a "Christianity with its sleeves rolled up," and this story of a defrocked priest and a young runaway has the power of a parable. Winton is a magnificent stylist, and the voice he creates for his young runaway is both colloquial and poetic, as when he floors his car's accelerator, streaking across the desolate Australian outback: "It brings on this angel feeling, like you're just one arrow of light."

Ron Rash

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* picks up where *A Passage to India* ends, updating the postcolonial conversation. You start off not knowing this is about historical events—it's an absorbing story with amiable characters. Slowly you realize that they face a huge event you've read about in schoolbooks. Shamsie makes the horrific event as intimate as the skin on your shoulders—and this is only the first tier of the novel. The story unfolds to ask again and again, in different countries connected by the story of three families, what happens when personhood isn't granted to those in one's country or home. Even after the plot moves from midcentury Nagasaki to 1980s Pakistan to postmillennial Manhattan, you want this novel to go on. Then you realize that what happens next is us, because at the end of *Burnt Shadows* we are here, today, wondering if other people's personhood ends at our national borders.

The Moor's Account, by Laila Lalami, rewrites Cabeza de Vaca's account of the Spanish conquest of what are now southern parts of the United States. The premise? A mention in the conquistador's record of "Estevanico, an Arab Negro from Azamor." Lalami's novel fills in history's gaps fictionally, winding its story through indigenous

towns and tribes as the “Moor” learns the local healing herbs, escapes Spanish shackles, and seeks love. Reading it will change the way you look at Texas, the way you see black people in the United States, and the way you consider the presence of Muslims in America, because someone Muslim and black may have been here before any white man. That also suggests that we, too, are implicated in the conquest of indigenous peoples by colonial-settler Europeans.

In Saleem Haddad’s *Guapa* we meet a gay Arab man during a youthful uprising against dictatorship in an unnamed country that sure feels like Syria to this Syrian. Over the course of a single day, the narrative spins Rasa’s childhood and adulthood, friends and lovers, drag queen and lesbian club owner. With the uprising failing, Islamists stirring, and the love of his life about to get married, can Rasa shape a life for himself? The novel is an antidote to simplistic pinkwashing narratives of pity for queer Arabs. Rasa’s world is hip and multifaceted, and in this narrative all things liberatory do not come from the United States. The story closes on a note of opening: from a migrant domestic worker, from the overlooked margins of Rasa’s society, comes a key to hope.

Mohja Kahf

I generally read a novel a week, for spiritual and mental health reasons. If I’m not reading fiction that speaks to me in some way, I start to get cross. What I most often look for is that feeling of immersion in another life—fiction’s great benefit. Perhaps oddly, I also look for pain, for the ways in which characters live with their challenges. I want to know how people survive.

Within that context, I recommend *The Immortalists*, by Chloe Benjamin, which begins with four young siblings being told by a fortune-teller about the respective dates on which they will die. Benjamin inhabits her four main characters intimately and completely, investigating the ways in which our expectations—our presumed knowledge of the future— affect our sense of self and the entire trajectory of our lives.

I also loved Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, a novel structured like no other. It begins with two half-sisters in 18th-century Ghana, one of whom remains in Africa while the other is sold and sent to the United States as a slave. Each chapter moves forward in time by a generation, with the novel ping-ponging back and forth between

continents as new characters are born and introduced. Gyasi beautifully depicts the connections—often unseen by the characters themselves—between generations. The past, Gyasi knows, lives viscerally on in the present.

Anything Elizabeth Strout writes is exquisite, and the title of her novel *Anything Is Possible* is an apt reference to her talent. Strout isn't interested primarily in plot but in the blend of loyalty, cruelty, love, and neglect that rules her characters' lives. Read *Anything Is Possible* along with Strout's *My Name Is Lucy Barton* and marvel at how inextricable sorrow and beauty and failure and wonder—and the human resilience that contains them—can be.

Julie Schumacher

I'd want to read Kate Moses's *Wintering* for its evocations of motherhood, even if the mother in question were not Sylvia Plath. Retrieving a child's hand fallen out of the crib while gently unweaving her fingers through the slats, the child's first time peeing in the potty—in Kate Moses's deeply attentive prose, these become sacramental moments. "Wintering," the Plath poem from which the novel takes its name, recounts the poet's journey to the cellar of her country home, as she stores the first jars of honey from her own hive to keep in readiness for spring. The poem was intended to come at the end of *Ariel*. The book would then have started with the word *love* and ended with *spring*—a spring that never materialized for Plath.

Standard Dreaming, by Hortense Calisher, tells the story of a support group for parents repudiated by their children who are in jail or on drugs or missing. There is no therapist, simply a healing circle of five mismatched parents. Dr. Berners, the central figure, is a plastic surgeon whose son—an only child—seems to be fasting to death. Berners has abandoned his lucrative vanity practice and now devotes himself to desperate cases, in particular the reattachment of severed hands. Since he is forbidden to visit his son, other members of the group spy for him, as he does for them. This novella has haunted me for decades. It is now widely available as an e-book—but not always accessible, for its prose has the density of poetry.

J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is divided into eight "lessons" or "lectures" delivered by a distinguished Australian novelist named Elizabeth Costello. The topics range widely—from "Realism" to "The Humanities in Africa" to "The Lives of Animals." The fictional lecturer's intensity seems to wear thin in the last chapter.

Earlier her arguments, whether cogent or cranky, are always passionate, personal. Her late confession, “I have beliefs but do not believe in them,” seems to call into question all that has come before. But books can be as instructive in the dissatisfactions they engender as in their fulfillments. Reverberations from the questions put to Elizabeth Costello have set me going on my own path, asking: What do you believe? And what is belief?

A. G. Mojtabai

Three contemporary novels have affected me deeply, not just because of their profound human questions but also because of each author’s ability to elevate those questions in new ways.

Kamila Shamsie’s novel *Home Fire* is a brilliant retelling of Antigone that interrogates family, loyalty, and love against the backdrop of terrorism, gentrification, and Islamophobia. Shamsie tells the story from five different points of view (each of which gets one section of the novel), ordering the distinctive voices in such a way that each character’s voice raises the stakes for the one who follows.

In *News of the World*, Paulette Jiles illustrates an unlikely friendship between an elderly widower who travels through northern Texas in the 1870s, reading aloud the news of the world, and an orphaned white girl who recently returned to “civilization” after spending four years as a captive of the Kiowa raiders who slaughtered her family. Jiles uses a traditional heroic journey—there are obstacles, gunfights, heroes, and villains—to question many of our traditional assumptions about family, culture, and what “news” we actually need in order to survive.

Red Clocks, by Leni Zumas, offers a “paratopian” perspective on what might happen to four different women if abortion once again became illegal and the rules of adoption narrowed to exclude anyone outside of a traditional mother-father households. Zumas pairs the political reality with lyrical attention to the familiar tasks, objects, and gestures of each woman’s life so that we see the ways the personal becomes political and the political becomes personal.

Kaethe Schwehn

I encountered Teju Cole's 2011 novel *Open City* as an MFA student, and from the first page, I was struck by his approach. The novel follows Nigerian American Julius through a series of "aimless wanderings" around New York, but by the third page or so, it's clear that the stakes of Julius's explorations are extremely high. Filled with intertextual references, meditations on visual culture, alterity, and ethics, this art novel is so artfully written that the moment I finished it, I returned to the first page to reread. And indeed, on that first page was the foreshadowing I needed to prepare me for the very dark and surprising final third of the book.

A second Nigerian novel, Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, caused a similar reaction and is aptly titled. The basic story explores infertility and infant mortality's long-term effects on a marriage. But the novel's revelations about desire and the risks people take to save their reputations add such depth and nuance that I found myself still thinking about the story long after I'd finished it.

There are no duds in Ottessa Moshfegh's short story collection, *Homesick for Another World*, nor are there any happy resolutions. The structure of the stories—Moshfegh's resistance toward epiphany—is the most striking part of the collection. I love the *en medias res* quality of each ending and the gut punch that each delivers.

Rather than allowing me a reprieve or retreat from the pressing concerns of real life, each of these fictional works made me confront them head on. Isn't that part of the work of art?

Nafissa Thompson-Spires

I'm a bit late to the party, but I now know why so many friends and colleagues have been raving about *Night at the Fiestas*, by Kirstin Valdez Quade. This debut collection features not only an astonishingly assured command of narrative form but the capacity to imbue each short story with almost novelistic depth. Most of these tales come from the author's native New Mexico, including the heartrending instant classic "The Five Wounds," about the reenactment of the Passion by the traditionalist rural sect known as the *penitentes*.

When Denis Johnson passed away last year, American letters lost one of our most original and unforgettable voices. Much applauded though still too little read,

Johnson wrote fiction, poetry, plays, and essays, coming to prominence with *Jesus' Son* (1992), linked stories about a group of addicts and losers searching for bliss. The stories in the posthumous collection *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden* aren't connected, but they possess everything that made Johnson so memorable a writer: the capacity, without sentimentality, to enable us to identify with wounded souls and see ourselves in their losses and their desires.

I confess that my first encounter with Richard Russo happened when I saw the film of his novel *Nobody's Fool*, starring Paul Newman. There was something so winning, so strangely comic and melancholic, about that film that it made me want to read his books. I was not disappointed. Russo has written about a range of milieus (including his send-up of academia, *Straight Man*), but he is best known for his depictions of the blue collar, Rust Belt towns of upstate New York. In *Everybody's Fool*, Newman's character, Sully, returns for an encore. Russo's tragicomic genius (tinged by his Catholic background) is once again on full display.

Gregory Wolfe

Julia Glass's *A House among the Trees* is the story of Mort Lear, a beloved author of children's books. Glass's writing is evocative: a movie star is described as "indelible . . . impossible to stop looking at, demanding memorization" and a wildly famous author as "trapped between solitude and celebrity." The book's religious themes lie in its questions about what Morty's life means and whether it is possible to take control of the past. Mainly, the novel is about "the possibility that art will burst out into life," which I think is as good a definition as we have of the purpose of faith.

Rachel Cantor's *Good on Paper* is part translation of the Song of Songs, part love letter to the affordable Manhattan of the past, and part love story with a New Age–flavored quasi-rabbi figure as the love interest. The other characters include a Nobel Prize–winning poet, a faltering writer who translates the poet's latest work, and the translator's best friend, a gay economics professor of Pakistani origin. The typical translation reads like this: "Love is ferocious like death, its jealousy cruel as Sheol, its sparks, sparks of fire: a great God-flame" (Song of Songs 8:6). And the advice that follows? We love by "trying to imagine the other's experience." It's as good a reason as any for reading fiction.

“Revelationator” is the name given to Israeli writer Shimon Adaf by the hosts of a podcast about his novel *Sunburnt Faces*, whose subject is the nature of revelation in the modern world. The plot is launched by a 12-year-old girl hearing a voice from her family television and includes a trip she makes to the Sinai with her class. The young woman grows up to write children’s fiction and her heroine “discovers her destiny, to serve as seer and revelator for the city’s inhabitants, their fairy detective.” Adaf is both a poet and a musician, and the language in this novel—even translated from the original Hebrew—carries traces of both.

Beth Kissileff

Recently three books have moved me to see anew the beauty of our world and our humanity in all our brokenness and grace-filled hope.

My son brought home *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup* by Sharon Creech and said, “Mama, you’ve got to read this!” I read the book in one sitting, and it brought me to tears. It’s the story of a 12-year-old girl, Rosie, and her friend, a boy named Bailey. They’ve been friends from babyhood, but they’re getting older and new feelings Rosie doesn’t understand are making things difficult. Rosie’s grandmother gently guides the children through the rough patches, sharing her wisdom while she cooks with them. It’s a sweet, poignant read.

When Kent Haruf wrote his life-affirming novel *Our Souls at Night*, he was in the final stages of lung disease. His characters, Addie and Louis, are alone—their spouses are long dead, their children are distant, and their small town is colorless and quiet. As they form a connection, their family and neighbors try to snatch away their joy for unknown reasons. Haruf’s story is mesmerizing: it’s bare and simple, yet laden with tenderness, emotion, and desire.“You have been good for me,” Louis tells Addie. “What more could anyone ask for? I’m a better person than I was before we got together.” I feel this way about Haruf’s book, written with the passion and immediacy of a soul who knew it would be his last.

I began reading George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo* with bewilderment and ended it in wonder. In the early days of the Civil War, President Lincoln visits the body of his son Willie, buried in a crypt surrounded by a community of less than restful souls. While Lincoln quietly grieves, these ancillary characters spend a lot of time talking, stating their cases, and comparing their death stories. But in a pivotal

scene, the situation changes. It becomes apparent that these dead souls—just like the readers, who are still alive—are seeking a sense of connection, and even empathy. One soul, Mr. Vollman, observes, “My God, what a thing! To find oneself thus expanded!”

Sophfronia Scott