Mistborn: The Final Empire by Brandon Sanderson

For years, Brandon Sanderson spent his nights behind the desk at a Provo, Utah hotel, churning out manuscripts that he hoped one day might take their place on shelves. *Mistborn: The Final Empire* wasn’t Sanderson’s first novel to find a publisher—that was 2005’s *Elantris*—but it was the book that defined his approach to writing fantasy and set him on a path toward widespread recognition. Now, he’s one of the genre’s most beloved—and prolific—authors. With *Mistborn: The Final Empire*, Sanderson popularized his approach to crafting complex magic systems, in which the rules that govern the extraordinary have more in common with a chemical equation than with a wave of a wand. The 2006 epic fantasy follows a pair of allomancers—individuals who ingest small amounts of metal to fuel magical abilities—as they rebel against an immortal ruler’s thousand-year reign. The detail with which Sanderson explores the hows and whys of allomancy in the novel, setting up a crescendo of action and adventure by its end, is a solid illustration of his own “First Law of Magics,” which posits that a writer’s capacity to resolve a story’s conflict using magic is directly correlated with readers’ understanding of how that magic works. —*Cate Matthews*

# Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince by J.K. Rowling

# With his sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in full swing, Harry Potter’s slow march toward an inevitable final confrontation with Lord Voldemort grows ever grimmer. So, the Boy Who Lived and Professor Albus Dumbledore, the school’s ever-wise headmaster, attempt to discover the horrible secret behind the dark wizard’s power. Marked by magical journeys into the past, long-awaited revelations and a heartbreaking final twist, the penultimate installment in J.K. Rowling’s seven-book series expertly sets the stage for the story’s epic conclusion. Now shouldering the full weight of his destiny, Harry sheds the teenage angst of *The Order of Phoenix*to become the young leader he was prophesied to be. As readers debate the [fate of their fandom](https://time.com/5888999/jk-rowling-troubled-blood-transphobia-authors/) in the wake of Rowling’s[transphobic comments](https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269406094595588096?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1269407862234775552%7Ctwgr%5Eshare_3&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fvariety.com%2F2020%2Ffilm%2Fnews%2Fjk-rowling-transphobic-tweets-controversy-1234627081%2F) and[writing](https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues/), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* remains one of the books that carries the most emotional weight in the series. —*Megan McCluskey*

# The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms by N.K. Jemisin

# With a record-setting three consecutive Hugo Awards for Best Novel to her name, 2020 MacArthur Fellow [N.K. Jemisin](https://time.com/5802555/nk-jemisin-the-city-we-became/) is one of the most celebrated authors working in science fiction and fantasy. Her ascent to the genre’s pinnacle began with the publication of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*in 2010. As with a number of her later works, the former psychologist’s debut depicts a society that oppresses those who might otherwise wield power: in this case, captive gods made to serve the ethereal city of Sky who become the unlikely allies of Yeine Darr, an heir to the very throne that subjugates them. The novel, which blends fantasy with romance and social critique, won the Locus Award for Best First Novel, establishing Jemisin as a writer on the rise and spotlighting her talent for building complex worlds filled with dangerously flawed people. —*Cate Matthews*

# Angelfall by Susan Ee

# Northern California is left devastated when angels of the apocalypse descend from the sky with the intent of destroying the world. There, 17-year-old Penryn lives with her younger sister Paige, who is disabled, and their schizophrenic mother. While trying to escape their apartment, Paige is abducted by an angel. At the same time, a wounded angel is left for dead, but Penryn nurses him back to health in the hopes that he’ll know where his fellow angels took her sister. Together, they travel to San Francisco to rescue Paige, and risk everything in order to get her back. Penryn is a refreshing and realistic heroine in this moody dystopian universe, which Susan Ee captures through gritty and electrifying prose. It’s Penryn’s rise as such a fierce protagonist that makes *Angelfall*, which Ee self-published a year before it was re-released by Amazon Children’s Publishing in 2012, such a captivating read. The love that drives her heroism is a gutting reflection on the strength of sisterhood. —*Annabel Gutterman*

# A Storm of Swords by George R.R. Martin

# At nearly 1,000 pages, George R.R. Martin’s *A Storm of Swords*—the third installment in his *A Song of Ice and Fire*series—is one of his most eventful and most lauded. Martin’s unpredictable medieval world is rendered with unflinching brutality: the so-called Red Wedding and the Purple Wedding, both turning points for his series, unfold here. And the characters, which he spent thousands of pages painstakingly developing in the first two novels, take flight: Jon Snow finds forbidden love, Danaerys Targaryen unleashes her powers of fire, and Robb and Catelyn Stark scheme and sacrifice. The breadth of Martin’s vision comes fully into focus in *A Storm of Swords*, as does his continued willingness to upset expectations. If the first book in the series set the precedent for killing off beloved characters, then *A Storm of Swords* is where Martin makes it clear no one is safe. These are the scenes that became show-stopping centerpieces in [HBO’s *Game of Thrones* series](https://time.com/game-of-thrones-2017/), and continue to indicate the high-water mark for shocking plot twists. Martin, a [frequent subject of controversy](https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a33532809/george-rr-martin-hugo-awards-2020-controversy-explained/), may not be pushing the field toward equity or more inclusive storytelling. But his groundbreaking series remains an important source of inspiration for writers like [Marlon James](https://time.com/5521259/marlon-james-black-leopard-red-wolf-book/). —*Raisa Bruner*

# City of Glass by Cassandra Clare

# *City of Bones*, the first installment in the bestselling *The* *Mortal Instruments*series, introduces readers to the world of [Shadowhunters](https://entertainment.time.com/2013/02/15/casters-and-shadowhunters-and-aliens-oh-my-7-young-adult-novel-supernatural-beings-making-their-way-to-cinemas/slide/shadowhunters/), a powerful line of human-angel hybrids secretly living—and slaying demons—alongside “mundanes,” or normal humans. But it’s the saga’s third entry that dramatically raises the stakes of teenage protagonists Clary Fray and Jace Wayland’s struggle to prevent the evil Valentine Morgenstern from creating a dark new order of otherworldly warriors. In the midst of a young adult fantasy boom, it was Cassandra Clare’s ability to capture the beauty and pain of young love—for heroes of varied sexual identities—coupled with her flair for the supernatural that distinguished her books from the pack. Since completing the first three volumes of *The* *Mortal Instruments*, Clare has expanded her Shadowhunters universe to include four other series—for a current total of 15 novels—as well as a number of short story collections, companion books and graphic novels. —*Megan McCluskey*

# Akata Witch by Nnedi Okorafor

# Born in New York to Nigerian parents, 12-year-old Sunny follows her family back to their home country, where she finds it hard to fit in. Not only is she treated like a foreigner, but she is albino and ostracized at school for her differences. Until, that is, she falls in with a new group of friends who are descended from Leopard People, mysterious practitioners of old magic tied to ancient African religions. In the world of the Leopard People, Sunny’s albinism is a portent of great power, but first she has to learn how to wield it. *Akata Witch* (retitled *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* in Nigeria and the U.K. due to the derogatory meaning of ‘akata’ in some Nigerian dialects) is the first in a trilogy by Hugo and Nebula award-winning Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor. Okorafor’s novels tend to reflect both her West-African heritage and American experiences, but in this series, she creates a stunningly original world of African magic that draws on Nigerian folk beliefs and rituals instead of relying on the predictable tropes of Western fantasy novels. —*Aryn Baker*

# An Ember in the Ashes by Sabaa Tahir

# What is it like to never feel safe? The question is at the center of Sabaa Tahir’s bruising debut young adult novel. Laia lives under the Martial Empire, where she’s never to defy the Emperor unless she wants to risk her family’s lives, and her powerless existence is made even worse when her brother is arrested. In order to rescue him, she makes a deal with the rebels and becomes a slave at the Empire’s military academy, where she spies for the people who have agreed to bring her brother home. It’s there that she meets Elias, the school’s top soldier, who desperately wants to escape the tyranny he’s been born into. Tahir flips between their perspectives, revealing their violent world, fractured by class and haunted by forces both strange and unsettling. Tahir imbues her dystopian setting with elements of fantasy that help create an unforgettable narrative about finding hope even in the most dire of circumstances. —*Annabel Gutterman*

# The Fifth Season by N.K. Jemisin

# If her debut novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, established N.K. Jemisin as an author on the ascent, it was *The Fifth Season*—and its history-making Hugo Award win in 2016, when Jemisin became the first Black author to take home Best Novel—that launched her into science fiction and fantasy’s stratosphere. *The Fifth Season,* the first entry in Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy, takes place in the Stillness, a counterintuitively named continent beset by cataclysm. There, apocalypses are so regular and so devastating that they more than earn their place on the calendar. Magic users known as orogenes can quell the Stillness’ deadly quakes, but that talent is rare, and those who have it are under constant threat of violence. There is a grim majesty to Jemisin’s storytelling throughout the novel, and an extraordinary artistry to how she unwinds its interlocking narratives and explores the systems that constrain its characters. —*Cate Matthews*

# Six of Crows by Leigh Bardugo

# In the bustling city of Ketterdam, a magic-infused version of 17th-century Amsterdam, 17-year-old gang leader Kaz “Dirtyhands” Brekker has made a name for himself as a criminal wunderkind who’s willing to do any job—if the price is right. So when Kaz is offered a shot to pull off the heist of a lifetime (rescuing a scientist imprisoned in the neighboring country of Fjerda’s impenetrable Ice Court) in exchange for a tremendous reward, he must choose his crew carefully. Accompanied by acrobat-spy Inej, sharpshooter Jesper, engineer Wylan, magical healer Nina and former Fjerdan soldier Matthias, Kaz sets out on a deadly mission that could change the course of their world forever. In *Six of Crows*, young adult fiction phenom [Leigh Bardugo](https://time.com/5694837/leigh-bardugo-ninth-house-interview/) returns to the Grishaverse, the expansive setting of her critically acclaimed *Shadow and Bone*trilogy, to launch a new duology. The bestseller infuses fantasy storytelling with social commentary on real-world issues like classism, oppression and human trafficking. —*Megan McCluskey*