

Less | Less Is Lost

Andrew Sean Greer

Novel - Fiction

Sweet, Sad, Unique Narration

Less is such a unique character and narrator.

The flow of these stories is at times disjointed and anxious, but always sweet and well-meaning, just like the main character, Arthur Less. Similar to our main character in *Lessons in Chemistry*, *Less* and *Less is Lost* read like how you would imagine Arthur's diary or actual conversations would sound. Follow this middle-aged gay man down his trail of romantic memories and through his present winding adventures across the United States.

Be sure to read these books in order. First, *Less*. Then, *Less Is Lost*.

Song of Achilles

Madeline Miller

Historical Fiction

Multilayered Escape, Retelling

You know Achilles, but do you remember Patroclus?

It's possible you learned about Achilles, and Helen, and the Trojan War and Horse in school. Maybe you've seen *Troy*. This book turns all that on its head, with a retelling of the story outlined in Homer's *Iliad* told from the perspective of Patroclus, Achilles' lover. Read about their childhood bond and the erotic evolution of their relationship through time. A little spicy, sweet, sad, and magical—this book will suck you into the world of Greek mythology in a whole new way.

I haven't read Miller's follow-up book *Circe* yet, though I have heard mixed reviews. Have you read it? What are your thoughts?

Win Me Something

Kyle Lucia Wu

Bildungsroman

Heartfelt, Reflective, Sweet , Sad

What's it like to be a nanny in New York?

Ever heard of a Bildungsroman? Yeah...me neither...until I was putting this book on the list. Apparently it is a German word that means “novel of education” or “novel of formation”, and that’s exactly what this story is. Meet Willa Chen, a biracial Chinese American girl who doesn’t really speak Chinese—to the polite shock of the family whose daughter she nannies. If you want to follow a story of a young woman navigating her identity and healing the hurt from her family against the backdrop of New York City, this is the book for you. Also, a beautiful cover filled with flowers.

I love reading books that describe someone’s biracial or bicultural experience, since that is also my experience. Have any good recs?

The Hazel Wood

Melissa Albert

Fairytale Fiction

Multilayered Escape, Cold, Misty

I love books that are reworkings of classic fairy tales.

I read this book in one sitting on a cold, blustery morning in October. I was visiting a friend who lived in this beautiful hundred-year-old house in Norfolk, Virginia, right on the Chesapeake bay. It was October, and I honestly couldn't have picked a better ambiance for reading this story about a young woman who comes from a royal family...let's just say, far away. After being tracked down by some mysterious characters, she embarks on a dark journey that only continues to twist and turn right till the end. Want dark family intrigue? Forbidden fairytale lands? Enchantments and curses? Snuggle up with this book by a roaring fire when it's cold, and you won't be disappointed.

Know of any other fairytale fiction? Let me know!

The Lady of the Rivers

Philippa Gregory

Historical Fiction

Retelling, Magical

Philippa Gregory is a fan favorite, and a deep pull from my high school bookshelf.

Philippa Gregory is a pivotal author for me. She is my bildungsroman. I discovered her books during the winter before I turned sixteen, after my family moved to the suburbs of Chicago from Puerto Rico. It was the coldest winter Chicago had in nearly thirty years, so all we did was go to the library and Anderson's Bookshop. The first time we went to Anderson's was when I discovered historical fiction through *The Romanov Bride* by Robert Alexander. I had had a thing for the Romanovs since I was little—*Anastasia* being my all-time favorite movie for years. I. Was. Hooked. I immediately went down a rabbit hole of historical fiction and quickly found Philippa Gregory. Game. Over. I hadn't read another one of her books since last year, when I came across *The Lady of the Rivers*, and what a homecoming that was. Want to learn about Joan of Arc? The French and British conflicts leading up to the War of the Roses? Witchcraft and womanhood? With a love story that inspired me to grow more into the woman and partner I want to be, I will be forever touched and changed by Philippa Gregory. Need I say more? Already a fan of Philippa? Let me know your favorites.

Frankenstein

Mary Shelley

Gothic Fiction

Cold, Misty, Dark

A school-assigned book that is 1000000% actually worth reading.

The first thing I have to say is—why did I wait so long to read this book? The second thing I have to say is—because you tried to homeschool yourself into reading that book when you were fifteen. Nearly fifteen years later, I found an incomparable copy at my local bookstore Union Ave Books in Knoxville. The cover is a close-up caricature of Frankenstein in neon pink, blue, and green. It's a hardback book with a squishy cover—so confusing, so enticing. It was part of the store's Halloween display, and I was immediately sold. Prepare to deeply reflect on humanity, agency, violence, justice, and the madness of the mind. Told from the perspective of an otherwise unknown character, this story introduced me to the possibility of writing a book about the story of a character, shared with a character, and narrated from that character's correspondence with the otherwise unknown character. It sounds confusing, but it is executed flawlessly. Read it in the fall or winter, or whenever/wherever it's cold and blustery outside. Make sure you get a copy of the book that has an introduction written by Mary Shelley, and actually read the introduction—it adds such an interesting layer of depth and context.

IFC Films made a movie about Mary Shelley's life starring Elle Fanning. I give it an A+.

The Left Hand of Darkness

Ursula K. Le Guin

Science Fiction

Mind-bending, Cold, Misty

I can't wait to read even more Ursula K. Le Guin.

At one of my previous jobs, I wanted to make friends and step out of my comfort zone. My solution? Join the Science Fiction Book Club! What a worthwhile decision, if for no other reason than I discovered Ursula K. Le Guin and a whole new world of stories—science fiction. This book is thought-provoking on matters of sex, gender, and reproduction; it is thrilling in its icy adventure; and thoughtful in its exploration of loyalty and the pursuit of truth and justice. 10/10 would recommend to anyone interested in dipping their toe into some OG Sci-Fi fiction.

I've already purchased *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the first in her *Earthsea* series, and *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, a collection of short stories. I'll review these too once I've read them. Ursula K. Le Guin was an extremely prolific writer and ahead of her time in many ways. She very recently passed away in 2018 in Portland, OR.

Doomsday Book

Connie Willis

Science Fiction

Mind-bending, Retelling

I still don't know how my work book club decided to read this book during lockdown, but I do remember being a strong advocate for it.

I'm a glutton for punishment, I guess. This is an awesome time-traveling, historical fiction, futuristic, yet realistic story about a doctoral student who travels back in time to the Middle Ages. Twist One: A pandemic breaks out in her present while she's gone. Twist Two: Did they get the calculations right when they sent her back? This is another wonderful, incredibly unique example of a historical retelling—this time, in the Middle Ages. It is incredibly unique, and eerily similar to what we all just experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic (the book was written in 1992).

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The Awakening

Kate Chopin

Bildungsroman

Sweet, Sad, Heartfelt , Reflective

This is a true bildungsroman, a woman's heartfelt and heartbreaking story of love and loss through the years.

You know when you read a book and it gives you an essence, leaves behind a mist of emotions, an ambiance? That's what this classic novel does for me. When I think back on reading it, I feel more than I remember. It's like a cozy shawl that I wrap around myself, dappled in sunshine, with the roar of waves in my ear. All I do remember is a sweet and sad story of a woman in love, but the way it was written and the pathos it evoked have stayed with me ever since.

I get the sense that this book may still be provocative, for no other reason than many people were assigned to read it in school, and therefore, maybe, did not like it...Even if you did read it when you were younger, I encourage you to read it again.

Might I suggest looking for a copy with a cover that speaks to you, in the event you do end up wanting to keep it after it's been read.

Girl In Hyacinth Blue

Susan Vreeland,

Historical Fiction

Art, Mystery, Happy, Light

Two subgenres I have created in my mind and am ceaselessly searching for are fiction about fairy tales and fiction about paintings.

Not only do you get to learn about history and historical figures (in this case, famous Dutch painter Vermeer) but you also get to follow a winding journey of a mysterious painting. Paintings evoke so much emotion and carry so much history. When authors, like Susan Vreeland in this book, are able to bring paintings to life and give them stories as if they were characters—it is truly captivating. If you want another famous “Painting Fiction” book, check out *Girl With A Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier.

Please, let me know of any other “Painting Fiction” books you know of or have read about! Like, I said, I am always on the hunt.

Girl With A Pearl Earring (the movie) is also very good and stars a baby Scarlett Johanson.

Hex

Rebecca Dinerstein Knight

Bildungsroman

Dark

If you're feeling naughty and curious about poison, this book is for you.

Another Bildungsroman in a completely unique form. A young woman attempting to pursue her PhD in Biological Science inadvertently murders her classmate and best friend...or does she? Follow Nell as she yearns through unrequited love with her advisor, mourns the loss of her friend, and plunges further into the darkness of plants and their poisons.

This is a book I gave away and regret doing so. I would love to read it again and have the gorgeous, gory cover back in my possession.

Moriarty

Anthony Horowitz

Detective Novel

Retelling, Cold, Misty

There are only a handful of books that so strongly and specifically evoke a period of time in my life...

This book is definitely one of them. I have a strong memory of going to Broken Shaker—a tucked away bar in a hostel in River North (Chicago) on a Monday in early November with my boyfriend for a drink and a read. It was 2019, before my sister got married; before the pandemic; before I left Chicago and moved to Knoxville, Tennessee after living there for thirteen years—the longest I had ever lived in one place. This book is a wonderful retelling of Sherlock Holmes, diving into the relationship and final meeting with his arch nemesis—Moriarty. Plus, it's sanctioned by the Conan Doyle Estate. Need I say more?

The 7 ½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle

Stuart Turton

Murder Mystery

Multilayered Escape, Mind-bending

There are only a handful of books that so strongly and specifically evoke a period of time in my life...

This book is definitely one of them. Before the pandemic, I had an amazing job at a non-profit for religion and theology librarians, practitioners, and scholars. Still living in downtown Chicago, I insisted on walking to and from work every day. Even though this meant walking past blustery Lake Michigan and across the icy Chicago River on my 45-minute commute, it also meant stopping at *Il Porcellino*, a delicious Italian restaurant, nearly every day on my way home. My driver's license had expired, but I had no car, so instead, I used my passport everywhere I went. At *Il Porcellino*, I became known as "Passport Girl". At least three times a week, I would walk up to the beautiful, wood bar, pile my stack of winter outerwear on the stool, flash my passport, order my Happy Hour Negroni (or two) and meatball sub, and read. When I think of that time, the only book I can recall is this one. If you want a dark, complex, twisted murder mystery that will leave you guessing until the actual end, read this book. It is a masterpiece. Consider reading this in the winter, while drinking a Negroni. Don't drink? Try St. Agrestis' Phony Negroni—it's delicious.

This is a book I gave away to a friend and have already re-purchased because I love it, and its cover, so dang much.

Cold Comfort Farm

Stella Gibbons

Comic Novel

Funny, Unique Narration, Nature

There are only a handful of books that so strongly and specifically evoke a period of time in my life...

This book is definitely one of them. After I moved to Knoxville, I worked at a start-up for just a few months before it was bought out by a huge company based in Luxembourg. Seeking comfort and escape, that whole winter, I took baths and read. This book reminds me of that time—of walking to Union Ave Books and snuggling up in my warm bath tub and reading. You know when you read a book that's written in a different style than what you're used to and you wonder for a moment if you forgot how to read, or if you became dumb? I experienced that with this book—which makes sense, given that it was written nearly 100 years ago, and the story and characters are so nonsensical. It's very funny, very weird, and weirdly, I guess, comforting. This book left me with such a cozy impression that after selling my copy, I immediately regretted it and have since procured a gorgeous green hardbound copy complete with box casing.

I see now there is a follow-up, *Christmas At Cold Comfort Farm* that I will definitely be procuring.

I also saw there was a movie made in 1995 starring Kate Beckinsale and Rufus Sewell (gulp). I will be seriously considering watching this movie before I do—I can't have my images shattered like they were at the premiere of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when I was eight.

Sea of Tranquility

Emily St. John Mandel

Science Fiction

Mind-bending, Unique Narration

The alternating timeline of this book is intoxicating.

I picked this book up at the beginning of last summer at my sister's local bookstore, *Burlington By The Book*, shout-out to Chris, the owner. This book was captivating and left me guessing until the very end. Trippy timelines, vivid landscape descriptions, and lingering wisps of mystery carry you through this book. It is a discordant ending, but I feel that is in keeping with the plot, and perhaps even the genre...

What are your thoughts on this? Do you feel that a lot of SciFi has discordant or untied endings?

Beautiful cover that made me want to read more fiction about Vancouver.

The Blue Castle

L.M. Montgomery

Bildungsroman

Nature, Sweet, Sad, Heartfelt, Reflective

If you want a genuine, sweet coming-of-age romance for the ages, this is it.

Very few authors are able to capture the experiences of girlhood and womanhood, and the transition between, like L.M. Montgomery. Right after reading *Sea of Tranquility*, I was on the hunt for other books that took place in remote Canada from the 19th/20th century. I serendipitously discovered *The Blue Castle* when I decided on a whim to check out the Young Adult section at my local bookstore, Union Ave Books. Even more serendipitous—the main character, Valancy Stirling, is a fresh twenty-nine when the book begins, as was I when I discovered it. This book is a beautiful story of a woman defying people's expectations, being bold, and breaking free to live the life she wants with the love she wants—all set against the beautiful, backwoods, waterfront backdrop of fictional Deerwood, Ontario.

What is your favorite L.M. Montgomery?

Fun fact—this book is almost one hundred years old. It was published in 1926, but it truly is evergreen—a remarkable feat for Lucy Maud Montgomery.

The Extremely Inconvenient Adventures of Bronte Mettlestone

Jaclyn Moriarty

Young Adult

Magical, Adventure, Heartfelt, Reflective

This is one of my favorite books ever.

A young girl named Brontë is now an orphan, though she never knew her parents. She is posthumously tasked with a series of adventures seemingly too grand for a girl her age. Get ready for whimsy, humor, love, and loss. I really am nearly at a loss for words—that's how uniquely beautiful this story is. If you want a story to warm your heart and touch your soul, this is it.

I think this book gives a similar experience to *A Wrinkle in Time*. What do you think?

Sex and Vanity

Kevin Kwan

Bildungsroman

Sexual

Sweet, Sad, Funny

This story captivated me with its romance, humor, and perspective.

Kevin Kwan is adept at capturing the transition from naive girlhood to formed womanhood. The complexity he gives to the main character's inner world—desires, emotions, fears, and all—is remarkable. I still have such vivid imagery in my memory from this book, even after reading it at least four years ago. I donated my hardcover copy, and I regret it and will be securing another. It's too beautiful—inside and out—to not have on the shelf.

I'm going to procure a box set of his *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy, and I will report back on each once I've read them.

Kafka on the Shore

Haruki Murakami

Art Mystery

Sexual, Sweet, Sad, Multilayered Escape

Haruki Murakami is my long-standing favorite author, and this book is one of my favorites. Have you ever had a book infiltrate your psyche so deeply, that you start recalling, reminiscing, and imagining things only to later realize they are from something you've read? This book is one of those for me. It has a very weird plot—as most Murakami's do—filled with strange sex, creepy mystery, and odd characters. That is the magic. I feel like I get the chance to learn more about the psyche of Japanese culture, on multiple levels, when I read his books. I'm defining this one as "Art Mystery" because a painting plays a central role. Fall down the rabbit hole with this one—you won't be disappointed.

What's your favorite book by Haruki Murakami?

A Diamond as Big as the Ritz

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Fairy Tale

Sexual, Magical, Nature

I consider this novella to be fantasy, at the very least, fantastical—a fairy tale. This was the first novella I ever read and one of my favorite stories of all time. I found my skinny grey copy at 57th Street Books in Hyde Park when I was in college. I had entered into my era of wanting small books to easily carry around like Rory Gilmore. Once I saw that F. Scott Fitzgerald was the author, I was immediately intrigued. Do not read a description of this book before you read it. Just buy it and read it—you will be captivated, entranced, and shocked into the sublime.

Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom

Sylvia Plath

Horror Fiction

Mind-bending, Heartfelt, Reflective

A young woman and an old woman meet on a train. Panic. Terror. Salvation?

Want another short story to read on the train? Pick up a copy of *May Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom*. A young woman is on a train to where? She has a stop in mind, but will that be the stop she gets off on? With the guidance of an older woman seated next to year, she journeys through a dark maze to end up in... You'll have to read it to find out.

The Virgin Suicides

Jeffrey Eugenides

Bildungsroman

Sensual, Sweet, Sad, Unique Narration, Dark Humor, Dark, Funny, Heartbreaking, Terrifying

This story is one of the most complete books I have ever read. It is not missing a single thing. It is completely tragic (see the title), but it is told in such a way that the tragedy is disconnected, dissociated. Told through the opinions, emotions, and experiences of a group of young boys, you are able to learn the story almost as if it were a scientific experiment.

The movie version made with a baby Kirsten Dunst and directed by Sofia Coppola is absolutely incredible. Go watch it.

Want yet another *livre de poche* or pocket sized book? Buy the Picador Modern Classic version covered in pink roses. Trust me, it's gorgeous.

Bowlaway

Elizabeth McCracken

Historical Fiction

Multilayered Escape, Magical

This book is a tricky one for me because I loved 80% of it.

As I've mentioned, I love historical fiction (especially when it's multigenerational) because I love to learn about new topics or time periods through a character-driven narrative. This book will teach you a lot about the history of bowling as a pastime, a business, and a sport—through the life of a quirky, mysterious, and magical woman named Bertha, her associates, and her family. I was in a bowling club in high school, so seeing a book about bowling had me immediately intrigued. My main disappointment with this story comes later in the book. There is a break in the storytelling that feels discordant. I won't say anymore, so as not to give it away. Definitely give this book a try. It still lingers in my memory and in my soul.

Let me know what you think of it. Was there any point where the spell was broken for you too?

The Family Chao

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I'm Glad My Mom Died

Jennette McCurdy

Memoir

Multilayered Escape, Magical

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