

Books About Books and Reading

If you are a person who loves to read, chances are that you may love books that are actually ABOUT books and reading, whether they are related to a library, a bookstore, or set in some other appropriate venue. There are a lot of them out there; here are a few I have discovered that I particularly enjoyed...

BUTLAND, STEPHANIE: *Lost for Words*

Loveday Cardew has worked in Lost for Words, the secondhand bookshop in York, for 10 years, since she was 15 years old. Its proprietor, Archie, is probably her only friend, other than the books that mean so much to her that she has tattoos of their first lines on her body. Loveday's is a dark past that has engendered zero trust in her fellow human beings, but that begins to change when she finds and advertises a lost book, and poet Nathan Avebury comes into the bookstore to retrieve it. Both the book and Loveday herself are wry, funny, poignant, painful, and difficult. Her story unfolds slowly, but is meticulously rendered.

CAINE, RACHEL: *The Great Library series*

The first book is *Ink and Bone*, and there are (to date) five books in the series. This series is based on one idea: What if the Great Library at Alexandria had never burned down? And what if, over the centuries, its influence had grown until it had become (much like the Catholic Church) a presence in every major city, governing the flow of knowledge to the masses? The *contents* of great works of history are instantly accessible to everyone...but it is illegal to own a book, and many books are kept back by the library for various reasons of censorship. The main character is the son of black market book dealers, who is sent by his family to become a Librarian and act as a spy for the family business. Other characters become postulants each for their own reasons, but none realizes, until they are in the thick of their training, how secretive, corrupt, and all-powerful the Library has become. The series raises questions about the power of knowledge, who can access it, who controls it, and the consequences of control. It's also full of action, intrigue, and mystery and (because it is written for teens) a little angsty love.

CALLANAN, LIAM: *Paris by the Book*

Eccentric novelist Robert Eady disappears abruptly from his home in Wisconsin. His wife, Leah, finds hidden plane tickets to Paris and, hoping these are a clue to his whereabouts, packs up her two daughters and goes to France. There, she discovers an unfinished manuscript that her husband had written and set in Paris, and follows its clues to a floundering English-language bookstore whose proprietor is happy to sell it to her. The family settles into their new Parisian life as booksellers, while Leah continues to try to solve the mystery of her missing husband. The story is beautifully written, evocative of both the Paris life and the bookstore life, and has an

interesting perspective and credible characters. (The writer of this book lives in Wisconsin, with his wife and daughters; if I were his wife and I read this manuscript, I'd be a little nervous!)

COLGAN, JENNY: *The Bookshop on the Corner*

Nina the librarian is being put out of her job by the consolidation of her library system. The small branches are being closed, the big one is being turned into a "media center," and there are only two jobs available for about 30 employees. Nina knew she was doomed when, in her interview for one of those jobs, she was asked what she thought was the most important priority for a modern library; but she answered honestly anyway: "To meet and anticipate the needs of our readers." The interviewers looked at her pityingly and hired someone else. So what does Nina do? She musters up her courage, buys a great big "van" (like a bread truck), stocks it with the thousands of books she bought on discount from the closing libraries, and drives it around to farmers' market days in a string of remote villages in Scotland, selling books to those desperately in need of a good read. I adored Nina's determination to solve the puzzle of finding a book for the most difficult and taciturn of customers. I also loved the lyrical descriptions of the countryside of Scotland: the ever-changing sky, the fields of rapeseed, the long summer days and white nights, the mist on the hills. I wasn't quite as enamored of the romantic involvements, but I forgave the author because the book contained some of my fondest fantasies brought to life! There is a sequel, called *The Bookshop on the Shore*, with a new protagonist but with these characters as secondary.

FFORDE, JASPER: *The Thursday Next series*

The first book is *The Eyre Affair*, and there are currently seven books in the series. It begins in 1985 in an alternate Great Britain, where time travel is routine, cloning is a reality, and literature is taken very seriously. Arch-villain Actaeon Hades steals the original manuscript of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and kills a minor character, who then disappears from every volume of the novel ever printed. But Special Ops agent Thursday Next, a renowned literary detective, springs into action to protect other, more important figures (Jane Eyre) from literary homicide. Fforde makes you consider such situations as: If the book is written in first person and the narrator isn't present in the scene, the other characters who also don't appear in the scene can get up to whatever they want, without the reader noticing. It's a ridiculously silly but also insanely clever romp through classic literature and beyond.

GEORGE, NINA: *The Little Paris Bookshop*

Monsieur Jean Perdu has a book barge on the Seine in Paris, where he uses his intuition to select just the right book to deal with whichever emotion—small or large—is afflicting his customers. While he can recommend books for others, he cannot alleviate his own grief over the departure of the love of his life (21 years ago!). When he discovers a letter to him from this woman, hidden in a drawer, and realizes that her reasons for leaving were not at all what he had assumed, he is galvanized into action. He and Max, a young novelist suffering from writer's block, decide to sail the book barge through the canals to the south of France, where his love, Manon, presumably still lives with her husband. There is lyrical language, there is humor, there is sex and profanity. This is a polarizing novel: Half the people on Goodreads rave and give it

five stars, while the other half disparage it as cheesy, sexist, and fat-shaming, and give it a one. You will have to decide.

HARMS, KELLY: *The Overdue Life of Amy Byler*

Amy Byler is a school librarian and single mom with two kids, ages 12 and 15. Her husband up and left them three years previously, with no explanation. It has been a struggle to make things work, but Amy has made a good life for her family even though she is worn out from her efforts. Suddenly Amy's husband reappears and wants a summer of re-bonding time with the kids, which eventually results in Amy getting a "mom-springa" vacation in New York City. A slightly silly wish-fulfillment piece of fiction that has its thought-provoking moments, as well as humor and great dialogue.

MOYES, JOJO: *The Giver of Stars*

A book about the Depression-era Pack Horse Library Project, which sent young women on horseback into the Appalachian mountains to deliver reading materials to the impoverished hill people. Alice feels stifled by her genteel marriage and signs up to have an adventure; Margery is a free spirit who wants to depend on no man for her living. Others are driven by the need to educate their people by providing them with books. All are passionately dedicated to their calling as traveling librarians. Excellent character development and interesting historical details. A snapshot of the camaraderie of a group of women with various motivations, in a particular and unique situation.

RICHARDSON, KIM MICHELE: *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*

This book is also set in the Depression era, with the Pack Horse Library Project of Kentucky as its theme. But it is actually a (fictional) biography of sorts, of a person who is representing the last of her "race" (the Blue People), and how she copes with the ignorance and hatred all around her while lifting herself up by participating in an historically significant activity. The Pack Horse Librarian Project was populated by many worthy and determined women, but Cussy Mary Carter had to be a unique example of just how many hardships one woman could sustain and still keep going on her mission! Lyrical (though occasionally awkward) language, wonderful scene-setting, and the most appealing mule (Junia) in any book ever.

SULLIVAN, MATTHEW J.: *Midnight at the Bright Ideas Bookstore*

Lydia Smith is a clerk at the Bright Ideas bookstore, where she hides amongst the stacks of her beloved books. When Joey Molina, a young homeless man who hung out in the store, commits suicide there, he leaves his meager belongings to Lydia, and they bring up a traumatic event from Lydia's past, forcing her to confront some people and events she had successfully banished to her subconscious for a couple of decades, all while trying to understand Joey's suicide. Dark and mysterious, with lovely writing and good character development.

WALTON, JO: *Among Others*

This book takes the unhappy-child-at boarding-school trope and turns it in a new direction, as well as giving insight into class consciousness, British cooking, inter-library loan, the existence, behavior, and meaning of fairies, the existence and use of magic...there's a lot to be found

here! I don't wonder that it won the Hugo and Nebula awards...but it's not a book for everyone. First of all, if you are not a voracious reader of science fiction, and if you don't enjoy a story that is a paean to other people's writing, then don't bother. But...the language is exquisite, and the thoughts expressed are carefully crafted to convey exactly the meaning that's wanted. So you might try it out.

WAXMAN, ABBI: *The Bookish Life of Nina Hill*

Only child: check

Likes books better than people: check

Likes cats better than most people: check

Enjoys her work putting together readers with books: check

Likes her routine and doesn't want to be dynamited out of it: check

Nina discovers that the father she never knew has called her out to receive something in his will, thereby putting her in touch with a raft of previously unsuspected brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, aunts and cousins...which is in one way kind of a dream come true for a wistful only child who has previously been an observer but not a participant in family life...and in another way kind of a nightmare for a self-sufficient, slightly anxious introvert. You can guess how things play out from fairly early on in the book (obvious portents), but you're so caught up you don't really care. The ultimate feel-good book for the bookish *and* the romantic.