

LITERARY FICTION

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PRIZEWINNING LITERARY FICTION

Literary fiction can be harder to define than other genres because it can really be about anything and often overlaps with other genres. There are literary mysteries and Westerns and thrillers, for example. What really distinguishes literary fiction from other genres, however, is its complexity. Literary fiction emphasizes complex characters and themes over plot and features lyrical and even poetic language. That's particularly true of the authors highlighted here who have won major literary fiction prizes, such as the American Pulitzer Prize, British Man Booker Award, or international Nobel Prize for Literature. Literary fiction can be quite dark and often is experimental and leisurely paced. These books are intended to make you think.

Barbara Kingsolver:

In her work, Kingsolver is noted for her fascinating, complex characters, thought-provoking themes, and touches of humor. A former professional science writer, Kingsolver has a graduate degree in ecology and biology, and her interest in nature and the environment resonates throughout her work, whether it's set in her native Appalachia, the American Southwest, or the Congo. Start with her Pulitzer winner *Demon Copperhead*, which transplants Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* to modern Virginia, or her Pulitzer-nominated *The Poisonwood Bible*, which follows a missionary family to the Congo in the early 1960s.

If you like Barbara Kingsolver:

- Annie Dillard
- Ann Patchett
- Margaret Atwood
- Anne Tyler
- Jane Smiley
- Amy Tan
- Jane Hamilton
- Annie Proulx
- Abraham Verghese
- Amy Bloom
- Elizabeth Strout
- Sandra Dallas
- Billie Letts
- Joanna Trollope
- J. Courtney Sullivan
- Richard Russo
- Lorna Landvik
- Rachel Carson

Anne Tyler

Tyler's character-driven work is especially interested in families and marriages and exploring the complexities of those relationships. Populated with unusual but relatable characters and frequently set in Baltimore suburbs, these reflective, thoughtful books have a lighter tone than many of the other books mentioned here. Start with Pulitzer-winning *The Accidental Tourist* about a travel writer who hates to travel and is grappling with his life unraveling.

If you like Anne Tyler:

- Eudora Welty
- Richard Russo
- Anna Quindlen
- Ann Patchett
- Pat Conroy
- Elizabeth Strout
- Elizabeth Berg
- Kim Edwards
- Amy Bloom
- Jonathan Franzen
- Sarah Pekkanen
- Alice Hoffman

Louise Erdrich

Erdrich draws heavily on her Ojibwe heritage for her lyrical multigenerational family sagas set primarily in North Dakota. She is especially noted for her large casts of engaging characters, her use of experimental narrative technique, and her dashes of magical realism. Her work can deal with heavy issues, but they also have a keen sense of darkly ironic humor. Start with her Pulitzer-winning *The Night Watchman* about a tribe's efforts to fight their reservation closing in the 1950s.

If you like Louise Erdrich:

- Tommy Orange
- Toni Morrison
- Peter Hoeg
- William Faulkner
- Annie Dillard
- Isabel Allende
- Barbara Kingsolver
- Ann Patchett
- Richard Russo
- Annie Proulx

Ann Patchett

Patchett crafts immensely complicated characters, whom she writes about sympathetically but astutely, and she is especially interested in the complex ways in which they interact with each other. Her elegantly written novels are thought-provoking and feature a wide variety of settings. Start with PEN/Faulkner Award-winning *Bel Canto*, set during a hostage crisis at an opera performance, or Pulitzer finalist *The Dutch House*, a family saga centered around an ill-fated mansion in postwar Philadelphia.

If you like Ann Patchett:

- Anne Tyler
- Barbara Kingsolver
- Elizabeth Strout
- Julia Glass
- Richard Russo
- Kate Atkinson
- Louise Erdrich
- Abraham Verghese
- Kent Haruf
- Celeste Ng

Margaret Atwood

Atwood's often dystopian, science fiction-tinged, feminist work combines layered, interesting characters with thought-provoking themes. The books often have a sharp, dark humor to them, though they can be quite bleak tonally overall, and feature elegant prose and layered meanings with plenty to unpack. Start with her classic Man Booker Prize finalist *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Man Booker Prize winning sequel *The Testaments* about the nightmarishly dystopic Republic of Gilead.

If you like Margaret Atwood:

- Ian McEwan
- Emily St. John Mandel
- Octavia E. Butler
- George Orwell
- Ray Bradbury
- Sherri S. Tepper
- Penelope Lively
- Joanne Harris
- Kazuo Ishiguro
- Kate Atkinson
- Cormac McCarthy

Blast from the Past

The late Toni Morrison's work defined literary fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, and her Nobel Prize-winning work remains an important and challenging voice in American literature. Her heartrending books often feature evocative historical settings that depict the vivid cruelty of slavery. She is especially known for her lyrical prose and her experimental narratives. Start with her Pulitzer-winning classic *Beloved*, which follows Sethe, who escaped slavery years earlier but remains haunted by her past.

Already like Morrison's work?

- Colson Whitehead
- Alice Walker
- James Baldwin
- Richard Wright
- Maya Angelou
- Ralph Ellison
- William Faulkner
- Isabel Allende
- Louise Erdrich

Kazuo Ishiguro is also a Nobel Prize winner. His work is set in both his native Asia and his adopted home of England. His introspective, complex novels span a range of genres, from historical to dystopian, but they all feature nuanced characters and a lot left unsaid under the surface of his elegant prose. Start with Man Booker Prize winner *Remains of the Day*, which unravels the complicated memories of a rigid, aging butler.

Already like Ishiguro's work?

- Ian McEwan
- John Banville
- Julian Barnes
- Margaret Atwood
- David Mitchell
- Michael Ondaatje
- Henry James
- Virginia Woolf

Branching out from Prizewinning Literary Fiction

Enjoy this genre but looking to try another one with similarities to it?

- Classic literature (William Faulkner, Kurt Vonnegut, John Updike)
- Popular literary fiction (Chris Bohjalian, Wally Lamb)
- Magical realist literary fiction (Isabel Allende, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alice Hoffman)
- Literary historical fiction (Hilary Mantel, Michael Shaara, Sharon Kay Penman, Mary Doria Russell)
- Literary Westerns (Larry McMurtry, Ivan Doig)
- Literary mysteries (Kate Atkinson, P.D. James)
- Literary women's fiction (Jodi Picoult, Anita Shreve, Jacquelyn Mitchard)
- Literary science fiction (Neal Stephanson, Ursula LeGuin)
- Literary fantasy (Jasper Fforde)
- Literary suspense (Donna Tartt)
- Literary nonfiction (Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Jon Krakauer)

Looking for More Prizewinners?

The nominees and winners of several prestigious literary awards are announced every year and can be a great place to find new literary fiction. You can look them up yourself online or we can help you find them.

- Man Booker Prize (British and British Commonwealth literature)
- National Book Awards for Fiction (American literature)
- Nobel Prize (International, awarded for a body of work rather than a specific title)
- Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (American literature)

POPULAR LITERARY FICTION

The name popular fiction isn't meant to imply that the authors listed previously are not popular. Instead, this name reflects how the authors in this section tend to write a more accessible form of literary fiction. These books also make you think but not quite as abstractly. They maintain the literary fiction focus on complex characters and themes and exquisite prose but don't use experimental forms of fiction and can have a faster pace, though it is still measured compared to other genres. The content also isn't always as dark, though it also isn't necessarily lighthearted.

Chris Bohjalian

Bohjalian specializes in haunting, character-driven stories that have an innate sense of dread and suspense interwoven with thought-provoking and thoughtful storylines and interesting characters. Few writers have used the sheer variety of settings that Bohjalian has incorporated into his work over the years, both contemporary and historical. His books transport readers from contemporary New England to 1960s African safaris to WWII-era East Prussia to Civil War-era Virginia to WWI-era Syria to Puritan Boston and more. Start with *Midwives*, about a tricky ethical dilemma for a medical professional, if you prefer contemporary settings and *The Sandcastle Girls*, set partially during the Armenian Genocide, if you prefer historical ones.

If you like Chris Bohjalian:

- Joseph Kanon
- Ruth Ware
- Donna Tartt
- Diane Chamberlain
- David Guterson
- Kate Quinn
- Anna Quindlen
- Jodi Picoult
- Elizabeth Strout
- Jennifer Haigh
- Laura Lippman
- Anita Shreve

Charles Martin

Martin writes character-driven inspirational/Christian literary fiction that is more hopeful in tone than other books listed here but still can grapple with heavy issues, like human trafficking and trauma. He is noted for his lovely, evocative writing style, as well as his complex characters and vivid contemporary settings, usually but not always in the South. Start with *When Crickets Cry*, which follows two grieving souls who become friends, or *The Mountain Between Us*, a romance/survival story.

If you like Charles Martin:

- Lisa Wingate
- Francine Rivers
- Fredrick Backman
- Wally Lamb
- Chris Fabry

Wally Lamb

Lamb's work takes his readers to very dark places, as he writes about everything from mental illness to the psychological toll of being a victim of crime, but his books ultimately have a strong theme of the possibility of redemption, though his books are not Christian fiction. His books also feature a strong sense of humor, eloquent prose, and memorable, compelling characters whom Lamb writes with considerable compassion. Start with *She's Come Undone*, which follows a vibrant teenager who struggles with overeating.

If you like Wally Lamb:

- Jane Hamilton
- Elizabeth Strout
- Anita Shreve
- Anna Quindlen
- Chris Bohjalian
- Jacquelyn Mitchard
- Lisa Genova
- Stewart O'Nan
- Akhil Sharma
- Dan Chaon

Fredrik Backman

Backman's novels are far more whimsical than most other literary fiction on this list, but their ultimately heartwarming tones and ample humor don't mean they shy away from tough topics, like personal loss. His charming, thoughtful, empathetic, emotionally resonant work focuses on quirky, likeable, interesting characters who are sustained through difficult experiences by strong family and community ties. Start with *A Man Called Ove*, the story of a curmudgeonly old man and his new neighbors.

If you like Fredrik Backman:

- Gabrielle Zevin
- Gail Honeyman
- Phaedra Patrick
- Elizabeth Berg
- Amor Towles
- Celeste Ng
- Kristin Hannah
- Jojo Moyes
- Liane Moriarty
- Ann Napolitano
- Hilma Wolitzer
- Jonas Jonasson
- Laurie Frankel
- Michelle Adelman
- Brooke Fossey
- J. Ryan Stradal

Blast from the Past

In the 1970s and 1980s, the late Pat Conroy was a publishing powerhouse. His novels were critically acclaimed bestsellers and were adapted into star-studded, Oscar-nominated movies, and they remain compelling reads. Conroy's character-driven books are usually coming-of-age novels that grapple with the characters' loss of innocence amidst vivid settings, usually in South Carolina's Low Country. His eloquently written and languidly paced books thoughtfully touch on societal issues, like racism and classism, and navigate complicated family dynamics. Start with *The Prince of Tides*, which follows a coach's attempt to help both his sister and himself overcome their troubled and disturbing childhood.

Already like Conroy's work?

- Larry McMurtry
- Anne Tyler
- Muriel Barbery
- Anne Rivers Siddons
- Richard Russo
- Olive Ann Burns
- Anna Quindlen
- Fannie Flagg
- Dorothy Allison

Branching out from Popular Literary Fiction

Like popular literary fiction but interested in trying other genres?

- Prizewinning literary fiction (Anne Tyler, Ann Patchett, Louise Erdrich, Barbara Kingsolver)
- Magical realist literary fiction (Alice Hoffman, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez)
- Literary thrillers (John Le Carré)
- Literary suspense (Donna Tartt, Ruth Rendell)
- Literary mysteries (Martin Cruz Smith, P.D. James, James Lee Burke, William Kent Krueger)
- Literary women's fiction (Jodi Picoult, Liane Moriarty, Anita Shreve, Jacquelyn Mitchard)
- Literary nonfiction (Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Jon Krakauer)

MAGICAL REALIST LITERARY FICTION

Literary fiction often has a strictly realistic setting, whether it is contemporary or historical. Magical realist literary fiction, however, still has real-world settings and the complexity and depth of the genre but pairs it with magical and supernatural elements. Magical realism is heavily associated with Latin American authors and literature, though it is also written by authors from around the world.

Alice Hoffman

Hoffman's blend of magical realism and literary fiction often focuses on women and families dealing with realistic and substantial problems, with magic and/or the supernatural as an ordinary aspect of their world. Her books feature lyrical language, complex characters, well-drawn character dynamics, and atmospheric New England settings, as well as a sense of whimsy often absent in literary fiction. Start with *Practical Magic*, which follows the consequences and repercussions of a lengthy legacy of magic in a Massachusetts family.

If you like Alice Hoffman:

- Sarah Addison Allen
- Ann Patchett
- Anne Tyler
- Sandra Dallas
- Laura Esquivel
- Joanne Harris
- Alice McDermott
- Charles de Lint

Isabel Allende

Allende's rich, character-driven family sagas are usually set against a backdrop of South American history. Her vivid settings, strong female characters, and evocative prose combine with strong magical realism elements. Her thoughtful, reflective books often explore the complications of relationships amidst tumultuous historical events. Start with *The House of the Spirits*, a family saga spanning four generations inspired by Chilean history.

If you like Isabel Allende:

- Gabriel García Márquez
- Carlos Ruiz Zafón
- Julia Alvarez
- Laura Esquivel
- Kiran Desai
- Reyna Grande
- Helen Oyeyemi
- Lisa See
- Sandra Cisneros
- Toni Morrison
- Tea Obreht
- Barbara Kingsolver
- Roberto Bolaño
- Louis de Bernières

Blast from the Past

Gabriel García Márquez's Nobel Prize-winning work significantly popularized magical realism in literature. His novels feature a strong sense of place in which magic and reality intertwine seamlessly in memorable stories about intriguing characters. His work also features a melancholy, haunting tone and lyrical prose. Like Allende, who was influenced by him, García Márquez is interested in crafting tales with universal themes in settings heavily inspired by Latin American history, including that of his native Colombia. Start with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a family saga that chronicles the history of a town through seven generations of the same family, or *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a poignant tale of enduring unrequited love.

Already like García Márquez's work?

- José Saramago
- Laura Esquivel
- Isabel Allende
- Salman Rushdie
- Carlos Ruiz Zafón
- Eowyn Ivey
- Namwali Serpell
- Carlos Fuentes
- Mikhail Bulgakov
- Louis de Bernières
- Mario Vargas Llosa

Branching out from Magical Realist Literary Fiction

Enjoy this genre but looking to try another one with similarities to it?

- Prizewinning literary fiction with magical realist elements (Louise Erdrich, Ann Patchett, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison)
- Literary fantasy (Charles De Lint, Silvia Moreno Garcia)
- Literary science fiction (Neal Stephanson, Ursula LeGuin)
- Literary historical fiction family sagas (Colleen McCullough, James Michener, Min Jin Lee, Lisa See)
- Literary horror (Shirley Jackson, Peter Straub, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Mark Z. Danielewski, Dan Simmons)

Looking for more suggestions on what to read?

- Fill out our online Berryville Library's What Should I Read Next? form.
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf7VfQV7xaYIoTACTX7kX_TdTPHwQ1i9UnqBwVDS3gGrYcpcg/viewform?usp=sharing&oid=116325047873771509704
- Request a reader's advisory consultation at the library. You can call, email, or stop by the library to learn more.



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