

A personal selection of the best books for curious minds.

FICTION

Dodie Smith

I Capture the Castle

Seventeen-year-old Cassandra Mortmain records life in her family's crumbling castle: her writer father who hasn't written a word in years, her glamorous sister, and the arrival of new neighbours who change everything.

Charles Dickens

Oliver Twist

Born in a workhouse, Oliver runs away to London and falls in with Fagin's gang of pickpockets. Dickens's second novel is both a gripping story and a fierce attack on the treatment of the poor.

Charlotte Brontë

Jane Eyre

Orphaned, mistreated, and alone, Jane Eyre becomes governess at Thornfield Hall, where she falls in love with the enigmatic Mr Rochester — but the house conceals a terrible secret.

Harper Lee

To Kill a Mockingbird

In a small Alabama town in the 1930s, lawyer Atticus Finch defends a Black man accused of a crime he did not commit, while his children Scout and Jem learn hard lessons about justice and prejudice.

Louisa May Alcott

Little Women

The four March sisters — Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy — grow up during the American Civil War. Jo, the aspiring writer at the centre of the story, has been inspiring readers since 1868.

R.L. Stevenson

Treasure Island

Young Jim Hawkins discovers a treasure map and sets sail with a crew that includes the charming, dangerous Long John Silver. The novel that defined the pirate adventure for all time.

H.G. Wells

The Time Machine

A Victorian scientist builds a machine that carries him to the year 802,701, where he finds humanity has divided into two races — one living in daylight, the other underground.

Jack London

The Call of the Wild

Buck, a large domestic dog, is stolen from his California home and sold as a sled dog in the Yukon during the Gold Rush. Gradually, he answers the call of the wilderness.

Daniel Defoe

Robinson Crusoe

Shipwrecked and alone on a remote island, Crusoe must learn to survive, build a shelter, grow crops, and endure decades of solitude. One of the earliest English novels, published in 1719.

Susan Hill

The Woman in Black

Young solicitor Arthur Kipps is sent to settle the affairs of a recently deceased client in a remote house on the marshes. What he encounters there is far more disturbing than paperwork.

Henry James

The Turn of the Screw

A governess arrives at a country house to care for two charming children and becomes convinced that the house is haunted. Whether the ghosts are real is the question James never answers.

Mary Shelley

Frankenstein

Victor Frankenstein creates a living creature from dead matter, then abandons it. The creature, intelligent and articulate, is driven to violence by rejection. Written by Shelley when she was just eighteen.

Edgar Allan Poe

Tales of Mystery and Imagination

The Tell-Tale Heart, The Fall of the House of Usher, The Murders in the Rue Morgue, and other stories that invented both the modern horror tale and the detective genre.

Alan Garner

The Owl Service

Three teenagers in a Welsh valley discover a dinner service decorated with owls — and find themselves re-enacting a tragedy from the Mabinogion that has haunted the valley for generations.

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Lord of the Rings

Frodo Baggins must carry the One Ring to Mount Doom and destroy it before the Dark Lord Sauron recovers it. A thousand-page epic of friendship, sacrifice, and the corruption of power.

Ursula K. Le Guin

A Wizard of Earthsea

A young man named Ged, gifted with great power, lets loose a shadow in the world through an act of pride and must pursue it across the ocean to the farthest reaches of Earthsea.

John Wyndham

The Day of the Triffids

Bill Masen wakes in hospital to find most of the world has been blinded by a meteor shower — and the walking, stinging plants called triffids are on the move.

Madeleine L'Engle

A Wrinkle in Time

Meg Murry, her brother Charles Wallace, and their friend Calvin travel through space and time — a "wrinkle" called a tesseract — to rescue Meg's father from an evil intelligence.

Roald Dahl

Kiss Kiss

Eleven short stories for adults, including The Landlady, William and Mary, and The Way Up to Heaven. Dahl's dark imagination and gift for the final twist are at their sharpest in this collection.

Saki

Selected Short Stories

Edwardian drawing rooms, practical jokes, and the occasional wild animal. H.H. Munro, writing as Saki, produced some of the most perfectly crafted short stories in English.

Ray Bradbury

The Illustrated Man

Eighteen science fiction stories framed by the tattoos on a man's body, each of which tells a different story when the lights go out. Bradbury writes about the future with the heart of a poet.

Mark Haddon

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Christopher, a fifteen-year-old with autism, investigates the killing of a neighbour's dog and uncovers truths far closer to home. Written entirely from Christopher's distinctive point of view.

Sue Townsend

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾

Adrian Mole records his daily life — spots, unrequited love, his parents' crumbling marriage, and his conviction that he is an unrecognised intellectual. A comic masterpiece.

Philip Reeve

Here Lies Arthur

Gwyna, a homeless girl, is taken in by Myrddin (Merlin) and helps him construct the legend of Arthur through trickery and propaganda. The Arthurian myth turned inside out.

Philip Pullman

The Ruby in the Smoke

In 1872 London, sixteen-year-old Sally Lockhart asks a question about the East India Company — and a man drops dead in front of her. A Victorian mystery that begins a gripping series.

Willard Price

Amazon Adventure

Hal and Roger Hunt, teenage sons of a famous animal collector, travel to the Amazon to capture rare species for zoos. Full of real zoological detail and dangerous encounters.

Robert Graves

I, Claudius

Tiberius Claudius, stammering and overlooked, survives the murderous reigns of Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula to become emperor of Rome. Narrated by Claudius as a secret autobiography.

Rosemary Sutcliff

The Lantern Bearers

When the Roman legions leave Britain, young Aquila must choose between sailing to safety and staying in a land sliding into chaos. A story of loss, loyalty, and the light that endures in dark times.

Stella Gibbons

Cold Comfort Farm

Sensible Flora Poste descends on her relatives at Cold Comfort Farm, where Aunt Ada Doom saw "something nasty in the woodshed" and nobody has recovered since. Flora sets about putting everyone right.

John Buchan

The Thirty-Nine Steps

Richard Hannay is framed for murder and flees London for the Scottish Highlands, pursued by both the police and a network of German spies. Published in 1915, it set the template for the modern thriller.

William Golding

Lord of the Flies

A group of boys are stranded on an uninhabited island after a plane crash. Without adults, they attempt to govern themselves — but order quickly disintegrates into fear, power struggles, and violence.

Daphne du Maurier

Rebecca

The unnamed narrator marries the wealthy widower Maxim de Winter and moves to Manderley, his grand estate. But the memory of Rebecca, his first wife, dominates the house and everyone in it.

P.G. Wodehouse

Carry On, Jeeves

Bertie Wooster — amiable, well-meaning, and hopelessly dim — lurches from one social catastrophe to another. His valet Jeeves, imperturbable and brilliant, rescues him every time.

Douglas Adams

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Earth is demolished to make way for a hyperspace bypass. Arthur Dent, still in his dressing gown, escapes with his friend Ford Prefect and learns that the answer to the Ultimate Question is 42.

Dorothy L. Sayers

The Nine Tailors

Lord Peter Wimsey investigates a mysterious death in a Fenland village, where the secret lies in the ancient art of church bell-ringing. One of the great English detective novels.

Evelyn Waugh

Scoop

William Boot, a nature columnist who writes about badgers, is mistakenly sent to cover a war in Africa by the Daily Beast. A brilliantly funny satire on Fleet Street journalism.

Geoffrey Willans & Ronald Searle

The Compleat Molesworth

Nigel Molesworth, the self-styled "goriller of 3B" at St Custard's, records school life in gleefully misspelled prose. Searle's illustrations are as anarchic as the text. A comic masterpiece about the horrors and absurdities of English prep school.

POETRY

Homer (tr. Robert Fitzgerald)

The Odyssey

Odysseus's ten-year journey home from Troy — past Cyclops, Circe, the Sirens, and the land of the dead. Fitzgerald's verse translation captures the poem's momentum and music.

Robert Frost

Collected Poems

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, The Road Not Taken, and many more. Frost's poems set in rural New England seem simple on the surface but contain depths that repay a lifetime of rereading.

Mary Oliver

A Thousand Mornings

Poems about the natural world observed with extraordinary attention — light on the harbour, a dog on the beach, the first hour of the day. Oliver's later work is pared back and luminous.

NON-FICTION & NATURE WRITING

Laurie Lee

Cider with Rosie

Lee's memoir of growing up in a Cotswold village in the 1920s, before the arrival of motor cars and electric light. His evocation of the sights, smells, and sounds of rural England is richly sensuous.

Michael Palin

Erebus: The Story of a Ship

Palin traces the history of HMS Erebus from its voyages to Antarctica with James Clark Ross to its role in the doomed Franklin expedition to find the Northwest Passage.

Henry Williamson

Tarka the Otter

The life of an otter on the rivers of North Devon, from birth to death. Williamson spent years observing otters in the wild, and his account of Tarka's world is astonishingly detailed.

BIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Joe Simpson

Touching the Void

Simpson and his climbing partner Simon Yates attempt an unclimbed route in the Peruvian Andes. When Simpson falls and shatters his leg, Yates faces an agonising decision — and Simpson faces a seemingly impossible journey back to camp.

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