

Literary Fiction I Love

There are books you admire and books that rearrange your DNA a little bit. The ones below did that to me.

This isn't some exhaustive "best books ever written" list assembled to impress people at dinner parties. These are novels I got lost in. Books that made me miss subway stops, stay awake until 3 a.m., cry in airports, underline entire pages, and occasionally stare at a wall afterward wondering how another human being managed to tell the truth so well.

A lot of these writers understand loneliness. Girlhood. Class. Shame. Desire. Reinvention. The strange ways families wound each other while still trying to love each other. In other words: my catnip.

You really can't go wrong with any of these.

To Kill a Mockingbird — Harper Lee

People call this a classic so often that it's easy to forget how alive it feels when you actually read it. Scout's voice is one of the great miracles in literature—funny, observant, tender, and smarter than all the adults around her.

But what devastates me every time is the moral clarity of the book. Harper Lee understood that courage is often quiet and lonely and expensive. This novel still matters because human nature hasn't evolved nearly as much as we like to think it has.

Read it for the humanity. Stay for Atticus Finch.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter — Carson McCullers

This book understands isolation better than almost anything I've ever read.

McCullers wrote it when she was incredibly young, which frankly offends me because the emotional intelligence in these pages feels almost supernatural. Every character is aching for connection, and almost all of them fail to reach each other in ways that feel painfully familiar.

It's beautiful and sad and strangely comforting if you've ever felt unseen.

Bastard Out of Carolina — Dorothy Allison

Raw. Fierce. Unsparing.

Dorothy Allison writes about poverty and violence without a molecule of sentimentality, but she also writes with tremendous compassion for the people trapped inside those lives. Bone is one of those characters who climb inside your bloodstream and stay there.

This book has teeth. It tells the truth about class in America in ways many writers are too polite or afraid to touch.

The Bluest Eye — Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison didn't just write novels. She altered the atmosphere.

This book shattered me. The tragedy of Pecola Breedlove is made even more painful because Morrison shows exactly how a culture teaches people to hate themselves. It's psychologically precise in ways that are almost unbearable.

You don't "consume" a Toni Morrison novel. You survive it.

Sula — Toni Morrison

Nobody writes female friendship the way Toni Morrison does.

The relationship between Nel and Sula is complicated, intimate, destructive, loyal, and competitive—in other words, real. Morrison refuses to flatten women into "good" or "bad," and that's part of what makes this novel feel so alive decades later.

It's fearless writing. Sharp as glass in places.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn — Betty Smith

This is one of the most tender novels ever written about poverty and ambition.

Francie Nolan wants more from life—more beauty, more knowledge, more possibility—and Betty Smith understands exactly how hunger of all kinds shapes a person. Emotional hunger. Intellectual hunger. Literal hunger.

I loved this book because it honors resilience without romanticizing struggle.

The Member of the Wedding — Carson McCullers

Carson McCullers understood adolescent loneliness with terrifying precision.

Frankie Addams is awkward and yearning and desperate to belong somewhere, anywhere. The whole novel carries that aching feeling of being on the outside of life looking in.

If you've ever felt too strange, too restless, too much—this book sees you.

She's Come Undone — Wally Lamb

I loved this book with my whole heart.

Dolores Price is messy and funny and self-destructive and wounded and deeply human. Wally Lamb somehow wrote one of the most convincing female interior lives I've ever read, which is no small feat.

If you've ever had to claw your way back to yourself after trauma, this one hits hard.

White Oleander — Janet Fitch

Janet Fitch writes sentences that make me want to quit writing altogether.

This novel is lush and dangerous and hypnotic. Astrid's journey through foster homes and unstable love feels both deeply specific and mythic at the same time. Every woman in this book is complicated in ways women are allowed to be far too rarely.

It's a novel about survival, identity, and becoming your own person when nobody teaches you how.

The Prince of Tides — Pat Conroy

Pat Conroy writes like a man trying to set language on fire.

This book is huge-hearted and operatic and emotionally reckless in the very best ways. The family at the center of it is damaged beyond belief, but Conroy never stops searching for beauty inside the wreckage.

I laughed out loud reading this book. I also ugly-cried.*

*Pat Conroy and I sat on an author's panel in about 2010 and I fan-girled in a way that, upon recall, still makes me cringe. But there he was in all his Irishness and blue-eyed, humor-filled splendor.

Most important, above all-else, Pat Conroy acted like he couldn't wait to talk to me, was thrilled that I attended and insisted I give him a signed copy of my (new then) book, [*Cheep Cabernet: A Friendship*](#), which, of course, I did.

He died not long after that. I'll never forget Pat Conroy and how, for me, he became the human embodiment of the delicious characters so vividly portrayed in his novels.

The Secret Life of Bees — Sue Monk Kidd

There's such warmth in this novel, even while it moves through grief and racism and loss.

Sue Monk Kidd writes beautifully about women saving one another. About chosen family. About the healing power of tenderness when the world has not been particularly tender to you.

And August Boatwright is one of those characters you wish were real so you could call her when your life falls apart.

Beloved — Toni Morrison

Some books are experiences more than stories, and *Beloved* is one of them.

Morrison takes the historical horror of slavery and makes it intimate, haunted, and psychological. The novel asks what trauma does to memory, motherhood, identity, and love.

It's difficult. It should be difficult.

And it's absolutely extraordinary.

The Catcher in the Rye—J. D. Salinger

People either adore Holden Caulfield or want to shake him violently, which honestly is part of the genius of the book.

Underneath all the sarcasm and judgment and teenage swagger is a kid drowning in grief and confusion. Salinger understood how vulnerable people often disguise themselves as difficult people.

I reread this as an adult and felt much sadder for Holden than I did the first time.

The Bell Jar — Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath understood the suffocating performance of trying to seem “fine.”

What makes this novel endure is Esther Greenwood's voice — razor-sharp, darkly funny, observant, and increasingly fractured underneath the surface. Plath captures depression with terrifying accuracy, but she also captures ambition and disappointment and the impossible expectations placed on women.

Still feels startlingly modern.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof — Tennessee Williams

Tennessee Williams writes desire and dysfunction better than almost anyone.

Every person in this play is lying — to each other, to themselves, to God probably — and the tension that creates is electric. Maggie the Cat alone is worth the price of admission.

Williams understood that families are often built on performances so fragile they can collapse with one honest sentence.

Wise Blood — Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor is not for the faint of heart.

Her work is dark and strange and violent and wildly funny in ways people sometimes miss. *Wise Blood* feels almost biblical in its madness — full of spiritual hunger, hypocrisy, delusion, and grotesque humanity.

Nobody skewered self-righteousness quite like O'Connor.

The Color Purple — Alice Walker

This book is a miracle.

Celie's voice begins so quietly and painfully and then grows stronger page by page until it feels like watching someone breathe for the first time. Alice Walker writes about brutality without losing sight of joy, sensuality, humor, and transformation.

Few novels feel this emotionally earned.

The Poisonwood Bible — Barbara Kingsolver

This is one of those immersive novels where you look up after reading and forget what country you're in for a minute.

Kingsolver gives each character such a distinct voice that the entire novel feels alive and moving and breathing. It's about religion, colonialism, family, arrogance, love — all the big subjects — but never loses its emotional intimacy.

A staggering achievement.

The Goldfinch — Donna Tartt

Donna Tartt writes the kind of books you disappear into completely.

Theo Decker's grief and longing pulse through every page of this novel. It's part Dickens, part psychological thriller, part meditation on beauty and loss. Tartt understands how trauma can freeze people in time while life keeps moving around them.

Also: Boris may be one of the great literary side characters ever created.

Empire Falls — Richard Russo

Richard Russo has such compassion for ordinary people trying to survive ordinary disappointments.

This novel understands small-town stagnation, family obligation, and the quiet grief of waking up one day inside a life you never quite meant to build. But it's also deeply funny because Russo knows human beings are absurd even in heartbreak.

Miles Roby is one of those characters you root for almost immediately.

Olive Kitteridge — Elizabeth Strout

Elizabeth Strout has an almost frightening understanding of ordinary human sadness.

Olive is difficult, blunt, lonely, funny, maddening — in other words, real. The brilliance of this book is how much emotional devastation Strout can deliver in the smallest moments and gestures.

This novel made me feel more tenderness toward flawed people, including myself.

Housekeeping — Marilynne Robinson

This book feels like a dream you're not entirely sure how to explain afterward.

Marilynne Robinson writes with astonishing intelligence and beauty, but what stays with me most is the atmosphere of transience and emotional displacement. Everything in this novel feels fluid — identity, family, home, memory.

It's haunting in the truest sense of the word.

The Shipping News — Annie Proulx

Annie Proulx can write a landscape so vividly you feel weathered by it yourself.

Poor Quoye stumbles through this novel carrying humiliation and grief and loneliness like extra luggage, and watching him slowly become more fully himself is unexpectedly moving.

There's something rugged and deeply humane about this book that I absolutely love.

A Prayer for Owen Meany — John Irving

John Irving is gloriously unafraid of big emotions, big characters, and big ideas.

Owen Meany is unforgettable from the first page — strange, funny, brilliant, tragic. This novel somehow manages to be deeply comic and deeply spiritual at the same time, which is harder than it looks.

I finished this book feeling emotionally flattened in the best possible way.

Demon Copperhead — Barbara Kingsolver

This book grabbed me by the throat.

Kingsolver takes Dickens and Appalachia and the opioid crisis and somehow creates something completely alive and original. Demon's voice is extraordinary — smart, wounded, funny, resilient.

It's a furious novel about poverty, neglect, addiction, and survival in modern America. I could not stop reading it.

Anna Karenina — Leo Tolstoy

Every time someone says the Russian novels are "homework," I want to hand them this book.

Tolstoy understood human contradiction better than almost any writer who ever lived. Desire, marriage, jealousy, social performance, loneliness — it's all here, and it all feels shockingly contemporary.

Anna isn't a symbol. She's a woman. That's why the novel still hurts.

