

DISCLAIMER: I read mostly relatively new stuff! So the vast majority of the books on this list are from the 21st century, most of them less than 10 years old. I also generally don't read: romances, anything that involves tracing some family's history over several generations or whatever (aka super serious family/relationship dramas), biographies, anything that even vaguely smacks of "woman goes to foreign country to discover herself," or YA fiction. I *do* read a lot of speculative fiction (sci-fi, dystopias, and sci-fi dystopias), genre fiction (horror and fantasy), and contemporary fiction that doesn't fall into the categories above. Nonfiction is a grab-bag.

FICTION

Sci-fi/dystopias:

- *American War* by Omar El Akkad
 - An alternate-history story in which the Civil War ends in a tie and everything is awful because there's also been a climate apocalypse. It's awesome. Super compelling main character, although it does get pretty grim.
- *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy (*The Three-Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest*, and *Death's End*) by Liu Cixin
 - That one series that Lindy and I can't shut up about. Super hard sci-fi sent during the Cultural Revolution! Incredibly detailed descriptions of astrophysics! Weird trippy plot twists that will blow your mind! It's awesome, everyone should read this stuff because Chinese sci-fi is where it's happening.
- *The Fireman* by Joe Hill
 - Kind of a sci-fi/dystopia/horror/thriller. It's super long but it reads really quickly and moves fast. Think of it as a zombie apocalypse story but without the zombies and people spontaneously combusting instead. Hell yeah.
- *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel
 - A gentle dystopia! Featuring Shakespeare, theatre, music, and a genuinely horrifying scene set in an airport, but it's generally pretty chill and dreamlike, you know, for a dystopia.
- *All the Birds in the Sky* by Charlie Jane Anders
 - Ok this one is kind of niche but I really liked it? A sci-fi/fantasy mashup featuring talking birds, the San Francisco tech industry, literal witches, and some kid low-key causing the Singularity. It's a little twee occasionally but the writing is actually sometimes genuinely brilliant.
- *Version Control* by Dexter Palmer
 - Super good realistic time-travel sci-fi? Don't read *Dark Matter* because that one is terribly written, read this instead. Kind of a family drama, but

with hard sci-fi elements. Also the author is from Princeton and the book is set in New Jersey around this area, ha.

- *The Windup Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi
 - Biopunk Bangkok! Let's call this one an environmental treatise wrapped inside some super cool speculation on what agriculture, climate change, and bioengineering might look like in 100 years.
- *World War Z* by Max Brooks
 - LMAO LET ME EXPLAIN MYSELF. Way more intelligently done than the movie, with a super cool premise; it's written as a series of diaries/interviews/journal entries/memoirs recorded by survivors of the zombie apocalypse, looking back on the apocalypse years. It's actually really well done, and jumps between a bunch of different (and super interesting) characters and scenarios without being annoying or overly self-indulgent. Better than his previous book, *The Zombie Survival Guide*, and full of genuinely memorable moments (the church scene, the Himalayan mountain pass scene, the submarine scene, the Paris catacombs scene, the whole section about the Redecker plan and the apartheid-as-zombie-outbreak metaphor...)
- *The Forever War* by Joe Haldeman
 - A classic, and for good damn reason. Can you believe this book was written in 1974?? Good God. It's not only a Vietnam War allegory that hits like a slap across the face, it's also startlingly fresh and relevant and will probably remain so until, you know, we actually go to space and immediately get in a fistfight with the first intelligent species we make contact with. More thoughtful, imaginative, and well-crafted than a lot of the sci-fi being churned out now, and written by a Vietnam vet who did not come to play.
- *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi
 - Bacigalupi strikes again! I liked this one slightly less than *The Windup Girl*, but it felt way closer to home. Again, his worldbuilding is excellent. Basic premise: climate change apocalypse ravages the United States and the southwestern states are dying of drought. Super, super interesting take on the collapse (or lack thereof) of the U.S. in the near future, what federalism, globalism, statehood and rule of law look like as everything's going to hell, and what happens to a society where water is currency. Tbh some of it goes a bit overboard for my taste and it kind of starts off slow, but the second half picks up like nobody's business. I'd recommend *Windup Girl* first, but if you liked that one definitely pick this one up too.

Fantasy:

- The *Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemison (*The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*)

- SUPER SUPER GOOD, especially if you like fantasy (???) and are sick of medieval-Europe-sword-and-dragon fantasies. The worldbuilding is fascinating, the characters are excellently written and it's just super unique and refreshing overall.
- *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu
 - Full confession – I used to really dislike reading short story collections but this is the book that straight-up converted me. Fantasy, history, social commentary, and really excellent writing and worldbuilding all in one! Come for the Nebula *and* Hugo Award-winning title story (which is perfectly nice), stay for the one about the Nanjing Massacre and the man who travels back in time to record memory, which *destroyed me*.
- *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo
 - Genuinely the only YA novel I've read in the past 5-6 years that I've actually liked (well, I accidentally picked it up and started reading it before I realized it was YA, and by then it was too late for me). If you can get over how everyone's like, 17 (LMAOOOO WHY) it's a super-entertaining heist novel full of juicy tropes like: assembling a team of specially-skilled individuals! Ambushes on the docks! Infiltrating a super-secure location in order to steal something very important! Secrets! PG-13 sexual tension! Takes place within the world of Bardugo's Grisha Trilogy but you don't need to have read those in order to understand this, although it helps (the worldbuilding is pretty cool but the previous trilogy isn't as well-written or interesting as this book, which can stand alone). A guilty pleasure that won't make you feel disgusted with yourself after you're done, haha.

Mystery:

- Anything by Tana French, but in particular the Dublin Murder Squad series (*Into the Woods*, *The Likeness*, *The Secret Place*, *Broken Harbor*, *The Trespasser*, and another one which ends in "Place"—I think it might be *Faithful Place?*)
 - Idk man these are just really solid detective novels if you're feeling that. French is really good at creating a sense of place, and her novels do this super interesting progression where a minor character from one novel becomes the focus character of the next one, so it always feels fresh. The pacing is good, and they're grounded enough that they rarely (or never) feel cheesy or sensational.

Literary fiction:

- *The Orphan Master's Son* by Adam Johnson
 - SO GOOD. Also it won the Pulitzer so you know it's extra good. Set in (and about) North Korea, kind of magic-realism-y and bleak, but in a good way. Like being punched in the face repeatedly by *awesome writing*.
- *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

- Also won a Pulitzer, ha. About as trippy and cerebral as *The Orphan Master's Son*, but it's narrated by a Vietnamese double agent in the days before the fall of Saigon. It's satirical and just super intelligently constructed.
- *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead
 - Won the National Book Award, and by this point I'm just name-dropping awards lmao. But worth the hype! Call it dystopia/historical fiction/thriller. Not set in the future, but in an alternate historical past where the Underground Railroad is, y'know, a literal railroad. It's super good.
- *The Association of Small Bombs* by Karan Mahajan
 - Lmao another semi-war story. It's about a terrorist bombing in Pakistan, and its aftermath. It's an easy read, but it has the potential to really mess you up. The use of perspective is super good here.
- *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan
 - Just a really, really excellent war story. Depressing, but super evocative. Also a WWII prisoner-of-war story that's not from an American perspective (Flanagan is Australian) and not set in either the European or Pacific theaters? Hell yeah.
- *Chemistry* by Weike Wang
 - Really good? Also the only book in this section without any violence in it haha. The character voice is so strong in this, plus the author has a super interesting background and you get the sense that it's coming from a very personal place. A little absurd, really funny, super heartfelt, and also a really quick read.
- *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid
 - Worth the hype. I put off reading this because I read the premise and was like "meh," but it's totally worth it. A magical realism-y modern refugee love story, super evocative and lyrically written. It's pretty short and goes down super easy but I've been thinking about it for ages. I also thought it was pretty bold, and it's very straightforward in one sense but deceptive in others.
- *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang
 - Super short, but will stay with you. Eerie magical realism, verges on horror at times in a good way. The translation is really excellent – Kang has a style all her own and the writing is minimal but super rich in tone. Would also recommend *Human Acts*, her follow-up (which is less creepy and arguably less memorable but more personal and emotionally devastating).

NONFICTION

- *The Opposite of Loneliness* by Marina Keegan

- A collection of essays by Keegan, who was killed in a car accident only a few days after she graduated from Yale. A quick read, but not necessarily an easy one.
- *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi
 - Ugh read this one. A short memoir by a neurosurgeon who contracted cancer in the last year of his residency. It's beautifully done and will absolutely destroy you. The equivalent of an emotional H-bomb right in the feelings ☹️
- *Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are* by Seth Stephens-Davidowitz
 - Eh it's fun! Not super super illuminating, but his examples are cool and the writing is clear. Strikes a good balance between being scientific and being accessible.
- *Life in Code: A Personal History of Technology* by Ellen Ullman
 - Picked this up randomly but really liked it! Super cool author who has a lot of very pointed things to say about the evolution of the tech industry, and San Francisco in particular. Also a different perspective from the traditional 70's wunderkind dudebro tech narrative.
- *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America* by Jill Leovy
 - Ugh this one is so good. Nonfiction but reads like a crime thriller. The reporting is superb and the characterization is amazing. Feels effortless even in the heaviest sections.
- *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* by William Deresiewicz
 - Lmao I'd be interested to hear someone else's thoughts on this book, but I thought it was really well done? It's here if only because I found it much more meaningful recently than the first time I read his famous essay (which is an excerpt from the book itself).
- *The Lost City of the Monkey God* by Douglas Preston
 - Indiana Jones, if a) Indiana Jones were, you know, real and b) if Indian Jones were an actual archeologist instead of a bounty hunter who destroys every artifact he gets his grubby hands on. Super interesting and engaging, one of those stories you can't believe actually happened. Basically a classic old-fashioned Rudyard Kipling-style jungle adventure story, but with way less racism, way less creepy romanticism of colonialism, and way more science. Hell yeah.
- *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find The Good Death* by Caitlin Doughty
 - This one came out of nowhere and just blew me out of the water. Caitlin Doughty, celebrity mortician (first of all, *what???*) spends like a year just gallivanting around the world going on morbid adventures, and the result is: 1) *hilarious*, 2) heartfelt (aka this book made me feel a Real Emotion), and 3) actually fascinating. Like, I guarantee that you will learn something

from this book that you'll remember a month or a year later, probably *many* somethings.

- *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, and Other Lessons from the Crematorium* by Caitlin Doughty
 - Ok so after reading *From Here to Eternity* I felt super compelled to hunt this one down and read it too, and it's also a blast! Would equally recommend, although it's a bit different. This one (her first book) is very much a memoir about Doughty's life and career development, so it's much more personal in nature than her second book (although equally hilarious and informative—I guarantee you'll learn a lot about the American death industry). Anyway: she's fantastic, I love her stuff, would absolutely recommend.
- *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* by Timothy Snyder
 - Under the no-longer implausible premise that we see at least one liberal Western democracy descend into the hell that is fascism within the next twenty or thirty years: they will come for Timothy Snyder first. That's pretty much the greatest praise I can give this book. Bonus: it's super short and to the point. Wholeheartedly endorsed for practicality and the zero-BS approach.
- *Priestdaddy: A Memoir* by Patricia Lockwood
 - ONE OF THE FUNNIEST BOOKS I HAVE EVER READ. Lockwood is a treasure and a gem, I hope she writes more prose but if her poetry (she's originally a poet) is also as hilarious as this book is then I'll read it all in a heartbeat. It's about her family and especially her dad, who is a Catholic priest, who apparently aren't supposed to get married and have kids (don't look at me, I ain't Catholic) but somehow found a loophole in the rules (???) and...got married and had kids I guess. It's disarmingly heartfelt—the first half is a straight-up laugh riot and then the second half kind of sneaks up on you and sucker punches you in the gut. Anyway, PLEASE READ THIS, but maybe not if you're a hardcore Catholic I guess (don't say I didn't warn you).

BLACKLIST

(aka "Thanks! I hated it!")

Warning for incoherent ranting, and also spoilers I guess. Spoilers for **BADNESS**.

- *The Genius Plague* by David Walton
 - WOW WAS THIS BOOK A PILE OF HOT STEAMING GARBAGE. Even worse, it's a pile of hot steaming garbage with an okay, even semi-absorbing prologue that introduces you to two sympathetic characters, ONE OF WHOM IS PROMPTLY KILLED OFFHANDLEDLY AND THE

OTHER OF WHOM BECOMES THE MIND-CONTROLLED MUSHROOM OVERLORD, aka the DARTH VADER FIGURE OF THE REST OF THE BOOK. Oh, yeah, did I mention that this book is about MIND-CONTROL MUSHROOMS??? Oh yeah, did I also mention that a good third of this book is just INEXPLICABLE N.S.A. PROPOGANDA??? Oh yeah, and did I somehow forget to mention that the protagonist is a SUPER SPECIAL INEXPLICABLE "MATH GENIUS" WHO FAILED OUT OF COLLEGE BECAUSE OF HIS ~REBELLIOUS STREAK~ WHO IS ALSO IMMUNE TO MUSHROOM MIND CONTROL??? I can't believe I finished this book, I think it made me at least 10% stupider.

- Uh, pros and cons. Pros: I think the author worked at the NSA at one point (*of course he did*) so maybe the whole extended NSA interview sequence at the beginning of the book is semi-true to life? Although I refuse to believe that the NSA would hire you if you a) *don't know how to operate a computer* ("I didn't know it was unplugged!!!" my ass, this is the twenty-first century you incompetent human turd) and b) can only do crypto in your head/on paper and can't actually program a codebreaking program, meaning you have to do the math...*by hand*. Okay, maybe there are no pros.
- Cons: Everything else. Do yourself a favor and play *The Last of Us* instead, it's the same concept in video game form only with less B.S. and higher production value.
- *The Woman in the Window* by A.J. Finn
 - OH HOO BOY HERE WE GO. So I had high expectations for this book because it got praised as a *Girl in the Train* spiritual successor, only actually better-written (because let's be real, *Girl in the Train* was...not a great book). Also the author (who is male, by the way) is an actual HarperCollins fiction editor who wrote this in his spare time I guess and then...submitted it to his own publishing house under a pseudonym and it got picked up by someone else, which I have to admit is pretty impressive. Although things probably got a little awkward in the office for a while. ANYWAY, the whole point is that there was a lot of hype around this and I was hoping it'd be competently plotted and written, barring some genre-acceptable cheesiness.
 - Spoilers in advance: IT WAS NOT OKAY.
 - Pretty bad: The stupid twist at the end, which is not foreshadowed at all. Okay, I get that the whole point is that the kid's a psychopath and he's excellent at manipulating people, lying, faking emotion, and hiding his true intentions. Fine. I get that everything else was a red herring. Fine! I still thought it was stupid and poorly delivered.
 - But not as stupid as...THE PROTAGONIST OF THIS BOOK, OH LORD. Let's talk about her for a hot second. So I get that *Girl on the Train* popularized the whole "sad alcoholic single woman" thriller protagonist

figure because, I guess, the main character has to be drunk all the damn time because it's more interesting if she's impaired somehow? Because any sober person with half a brain would not do half the stupid B.S. that goes down in these books, like impulsively stalking people or whatever? Okay, FINE. So Rachel, the main character in *Girl on the Train* is an alcoholic, and her whole thing is that she sometimes drinks so much that she has blackouts where she can't remember what happened over some period of time. Fine. She's kind of annoying because she's drunk all the damn time, but whatever. Fine. It's her shtick. I've moved on. I've accepted this. Anyway, despite being a sad drunk, Rachel from *Girl on the Train* still manages to get on the train and go to work every day to do her job, because she needs to earn money to live. Plus she lives in a crappy apartment with an annoying roommate, and spends her time fantasizing about living a better life where she's not lonely and kind of poor. That's great! It makes her somewhat more sympathetic, which means you're more willing to forgive her when she goes off and does stupid stuff because she's drunk all the time. FINE.

- NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT ANNA FOX, the titular "woman in the window." Like Rachel, she's a skinny, attractive white woman who likes creeping on other people's lives and fantasizing about them, and she's also an embarrassing drunk. HOWEVER, unlike Rachel, she is: 1) a former child psychologist who insists on being called "Dr. Fox" like a real asshole even though she hasn't been practicing for 10 months, 2) suffering from agoraphobia, meaning she hasn't been able to leave her house for 10 months, 3) a genuine creeper who watches all of her neighbors through a telephoto camera lens from her bedroom window, like, *every day* (like, is this supposed to make her sympathetic???) 4) living in a super-nice NYC *house* (not just an apartment, a straight-up *house*) BY HERSELF while having NO JOB or discernable source of income, consuming VAST QUANTITIES OF RED WINE (oh, excuse me, "nice Merlot," which she buys in *bulk* because she acknowledges she has an alcohol problem but just "needs the feeling of wine in her veins" or whatever) and having weekly visits with BOTH A THERAPIST AND A PHYSICAL THERAPIST, who COMES TO HER HOUSE FOR WEEKLY SESSIONS, 5) only watches black-and-white movies *over and over and over* because she's not only an insufferable, self-pitying privileged whiny snot, she's also a *~film snob~*, 6) has blackouts and panic attacks all over the damn place, all of which are her own damn fault, 7) and oh yeah, did I mention, *was having an affair with her coworker*, over which she and her husband messily separated on Christmas Eve, and she accidentally *drove the car containing herself and her family over a cliff—on Christmas Eve—and killed her husband and her daughter, whose voices/presence she has been hallucinating for the past ten months because she's in denial that*

they're dead and she has a straight-up hysterical meltdown in front of two police officers and like three of her neighbors when someone straight-up tells her that they're dead.

- ...Jesus, this shit makes me feel like *I* need a drink. Again, this woman was a PRACTICING PSYCHOLOGIST. Yet she can't even walk around her own damn house without spilling wine all over herself, helplessly flailing around and feeling sorry for herself all the damn time, hallucinating phone calls with her dead husband and daughter, overdosing on her psychiatric drugs and taking them with alcohol, drinking 3+ bottles of wine a day, taking creepy stalker photos of her neighbors (one of whom is a fifteen-year-old boy), complaining about how she has no friends, and blowing off her therapist. WHILE LIVING IN A FANCY-ASS HOUSE— WITH A SKYLIGHT AND ROOF GARDEN—IN *NEW YORK CITY* WITH ONE TENANT PAYING MINIMAL RENT, ON NO DISCERNABLE SOURCE OF INCOME. God, if she's living off her dead husband and daughter's insurance money, *you better tell us*, because otherwise this all seems like some delusional fantasy where this useless, delusional, hysterical, wine-swigging rich lady can live alone in New York on Daddy's money, *forever*, and GET VINDICATED BY THE NARRATIVE FOR ALL OF HER SHITTY, CREEPY, SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR.
- I have ranted for two pages. I'm going to stop now.