

# SSOP READING ATLAS

AT THE INTERSECTION OF BOOK JOURNALS & TRAVEL DIARIES



STRONG SENSE OF PLACE



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# Hello, fellow readers and travelers!

**T**he world is a vast and wondrous place filled with fascinating people, and one lifetime is too short to visit and get to know them all. That's why our favorite books have a strong sense of place. They help us travel—at least in our imaginations—to destinations all over the globe, to meet people we might never get to know in real life.

Not only is the trip a whole lot of fun, we fervently believe that reading good books increases empathy. Empathy is good for you and good for the world around us. We want more of that.

So we created Strong Sense of Place, a podcast and web site dedicated to literary travel and the books we love.

And we love all kinds of books! Literature, mysteries and thrillers, magical realism, nonfiction, graphic novels, historical fiction, picture books, short story collections, and poetry—so long as they take us somewhere new with a strong sense of place. We want to see the sights, hear the sounds, smell the smells, and taste the food of other places and times, alongside compelling characters and gripping stories.



We also crave literary travel that lets us explore musty old bookshops and libraries with tall ceilings... book festivals that celebrate up-and-comers and museums dedicated to long-dead authors... cafés where you might write your own masterpiece or just settle back with a favorite read and a piece of cake.

Our first project, this Reading Atlas, is all you need to get started on your own international reading adventures, including 14 novels that take you around the world, our favorite book series with a strong sense of place, and audiobooks that bring the characters to life inside your headphones.

*Thank you for joining us on our bookish escapades!*

# AROUND THE WORLD IN 14 Books



**O**n the morning of 21 November 1922, if you were a bit posh and more than a little adventurous, you might have boarded the luxury liner *Laconia* for her inaugural around-the-world cruise. For 130 glorious days, you'd visit some of the world's most exotic destinations—Yokohama and Shanghai, Rangoon and Bombay, Egypt, Naples. You'd even steam through the Suez Canal.

The ship was the pride of the Cunard line, a grand ocean liner with six steam engines, one majestic funnel, and a deck that spanned almost 600 feet. Her itinerary included stops in 22 ports, scheduled with care, *'when the tropical loveliness is twice welcome—for its own sake and as an escape from dreary winter, left behind.'*

During the voyage, you might splash around in two outdoor swimming pools or take part in *'all kinds of*

*sports, including archery'* in a gymnasium on the deck. The ship had modern conveniences like in-room running water and two elevators—fore and aft—as well as a glass-enclosed cafe, writing rooms, smoking rooms, a specially curated library, and decks where you might enjoy an assignation or *'rest undisturbed.'*

Thanks to the *Malaya Tribune* of 30 January 1923, we know that the *Laconia*'s passengers took home reminders of their days abroad: *'Besides the usual quantity of silks and satins, lacquer and china and damascene, pottery and rugs and furniture, the Laconia party left Batavia [Jakarta] with twelve show puppies, six parrots, ten cages, each of which contains from two to six love birds, all manner of song birds, six monkeys, and a pair of Pomeranians...'*

The romance of global adventure isn't out of your reach, even if you don't have an around-the-world cruise on your calendar this year. We've put together a world tour of novels that represent each continent, plus a few extras because our voyage isn't subject to pesky things like geopolitical borders and efficient travel routes.

[Click here](#)



to see a news item from *The New York Times* about the historic voyage.

Our itinerary begins at home, with a guide that will help you develop your own travel philosophy. Then we're off! The trip starts in the South American country of Peru, continues north through the United States and Canada, then crosses the Atlantic to the African nation of Liberia. Next, we'll head north to the U.K., take a brief detour to the snow of Denmark, then continue on a mysterious trek across central and eastern Europe. Next up, it's Moscow, Russia, followed by Syria, India, and Japan, before we take a sharp right turn to Australia before our big finish in Antarctica.

*Bon voyage!*

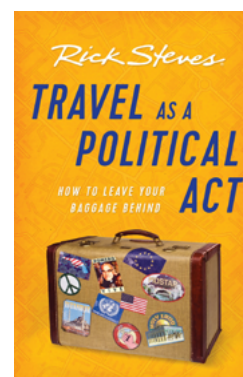
AT HOME

## Travel as a Political Act

Rick Steves

**GENRE:**  
Travel essays

**PUBLISHER:**  
Rick Steves, 2018 | 304 pages



It's no exaggeration to say that without Rick Steves' travel inspiration, we probably wouldn't have moved to Prague from the U.S. in 2017. We're loyal fans of his detailed guidebooks and nerdy-sweet TV show. If you're interested in local culture and getting to know a city beyond the general tourist recommendations, Steves' guides are for you. But this thought-provoking book is something more; it's a manifesto for traveling with compassion and fearlessness, a challenge to be goodwill ambassadors as we explore the world. As Steves educates legions of travelers, he also makes our world an even better place; all royalties from the sales of this book are donated to **Bread for the World**, a non-partisan organization working to end hunger at home and abroad.

*“Rather than accentuate the difference between “us” and “them,” I believe travel should bring us together... [Travel] has humbled me, enriched my life, and tuned me into a rapidly changing world. And for that, I am thankful.”*

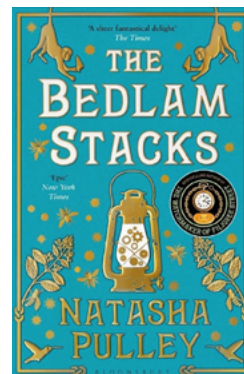
SOUTH AMERICA: PERU

# The Bedlam Stacks

Natasha Pulley

**GENRE:**  
Historical fantasy

**PUBLISHER:**  
Bloomsbury USA, 2017 | 352 pages



This novel takes you high into the Andes mountains of 19th-century Peru and deep into the heart of native lore. It begins as an action story: Merrick Tremayne is wallowing at his family's crumbling estate in Cornwall, England when he's coaxed—via a bottle of bubbly—into accepting a dangerous mission to the Andes. When he arrives in Peru, he meets a band of locals that change everything he understands about himself and his family. The story seamlessly blends swashbuckling action with a moving exploration of friendship, loyalty, and everyday magic. There are gunfights, enchanted statues, cursed forests, living rocks, towers of glass, double-crosses, and redemption. The plot delivers exciting surprises, and the end packs an emotional wallop you won't soon forget.

“

*'So – to be clear... We are being sent to steal a plant whose exact location nobody knows, in territory now defended by quinine barons under the protection of the government, and inhabited by tribal Indians who also hate foreigners and have killed everyone who's got close in the last ten years.'*



UNITED STATES: NEW YORK, HOLLYWOOD

# The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay

Michael Chabon

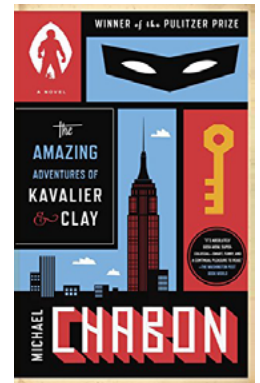
**GENRE:**

Historical fiction and immigrant story

**PUBLISHER:**

Random House, 2000 | 639 pages

Found family, lifelong friendships, heartbreaking betrayal, big adventure, small moments—this lyrical, sweeping story has everything we love in an epic novel. It begins with a thrill: Inspired by the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini, a young Jewish boy in Prague has his little brother bind him in chains and toss him into the cold, dark waters of the Vltava River. It's both a daring act of innocent faith and a metaphor for the darkness that's about to invade his country in the late 1930s. From there, the drama amps up as he escapes the Nazi invasion and is smuggled to New York City to live with his cousin in Brooklyn. Thus begins a life-defining friendship between the two. The story soars through the decades and the boroughs of New York, and the glitter and debauchery of Hollywood, capturing the energy of post-war America and landing gut-punches to our feelings. It's a tale of heroes, real and imagined. As it explores the way our lives take shape as we're living them, it pays tribute to the many kinds of love to be found when we keep our hearts open.



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*'Take care, – there is no force more powerful than that of an unbridled imagination.'*

# The Beautiful Mystery

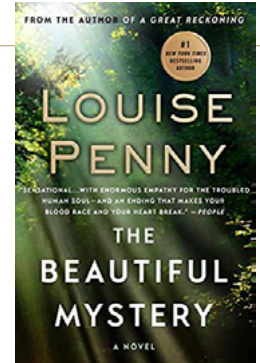
Louise Penny

**GENRE:**  
Murder mystery

**PUBLISHER:**  
Minotaur Books, 2012 | 400 pages

Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the Sûreté du Québec is compassionate and intelligent, measured in his speech, generous with his praise, quick to accept responsibility for cock-ups, and—not for nothing—always smells of sandalwood. Gamache and his friends, family, and assorted villains have starred in 14 books so far. The best-selling novels feature expressive prose, intricate—but not far-fetched—plots, and characters that feel so real, you expect to meet them when you visit Canada. Three Pines, the fictional village where Gamache lives with his adored and adorable wife, is decidedly twee, but the vicious crimes that he investigates there are not. In this eighth book in the series, Gamache and his partner travel to an extraordinary place: the 200-year-old monastery of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups. Tucked away in the wilderness of Quebec, the cloistered monks have taken a vow of silence, but have become world-famous for recordings of their glorious chants. Their home is a sanctuary of beauty and peace—until their choir director is murdered. As Gamache investigates the darkness in the brotherhood, he's forced to confront the shadows in his own life.

*“[T]he Chief Inspector wondered why their monastery had been built so far from civilization. And why it had such thick walls. And locked doors. Was it to keep the sins of the world out? Or to keep something worse in?”*



# She Would Be King

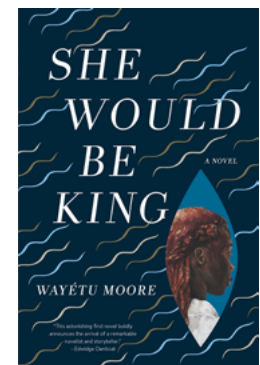
Wayétu Moore

**GENRE:**  
Magical realism

**PUBLISHER:**  
Graywolf Press, 2018 | 312 pages

Historical events can be so dramatic, our understanding of them may become almost devoid of feeling. But this novel, a reimagining of the founding of Liberia, tells a grand story on a very human scale. We meet three remarkable people: a young girl exiled from her West African village, the son of brutalized slaves, and the mixed-race son of a slave in Jamaica and a white British colonizer. All of these characters have special gifts that will drastically impact their lives and the lives of others. All three wrestle with identity as they live between worlds: too strange, too strong, not white enough, not black enough. When they all meet in the African-American settlement of Moravia, on the coast of Liberia, they have a profound impact on history. As they slowly begin to believe in their strengths and their ability to stand up for what's right, we feel it, too. Despite its bleak beginnings in slavery, Moore infuses this novel with hope and light and the belief in the inherent value of each of us.

*“Alike spirits separated at great distances will always be bound to meet, even if only once; kindred souls will always collide; and strings of coincidences are never what they appear to be on the surface, but instead are the mask of God.”*





UK: ENGLAND

# Crooked House

## Agatha Christie

**GENRE:**

Manor house murder mystery

**PUBLISHER:**

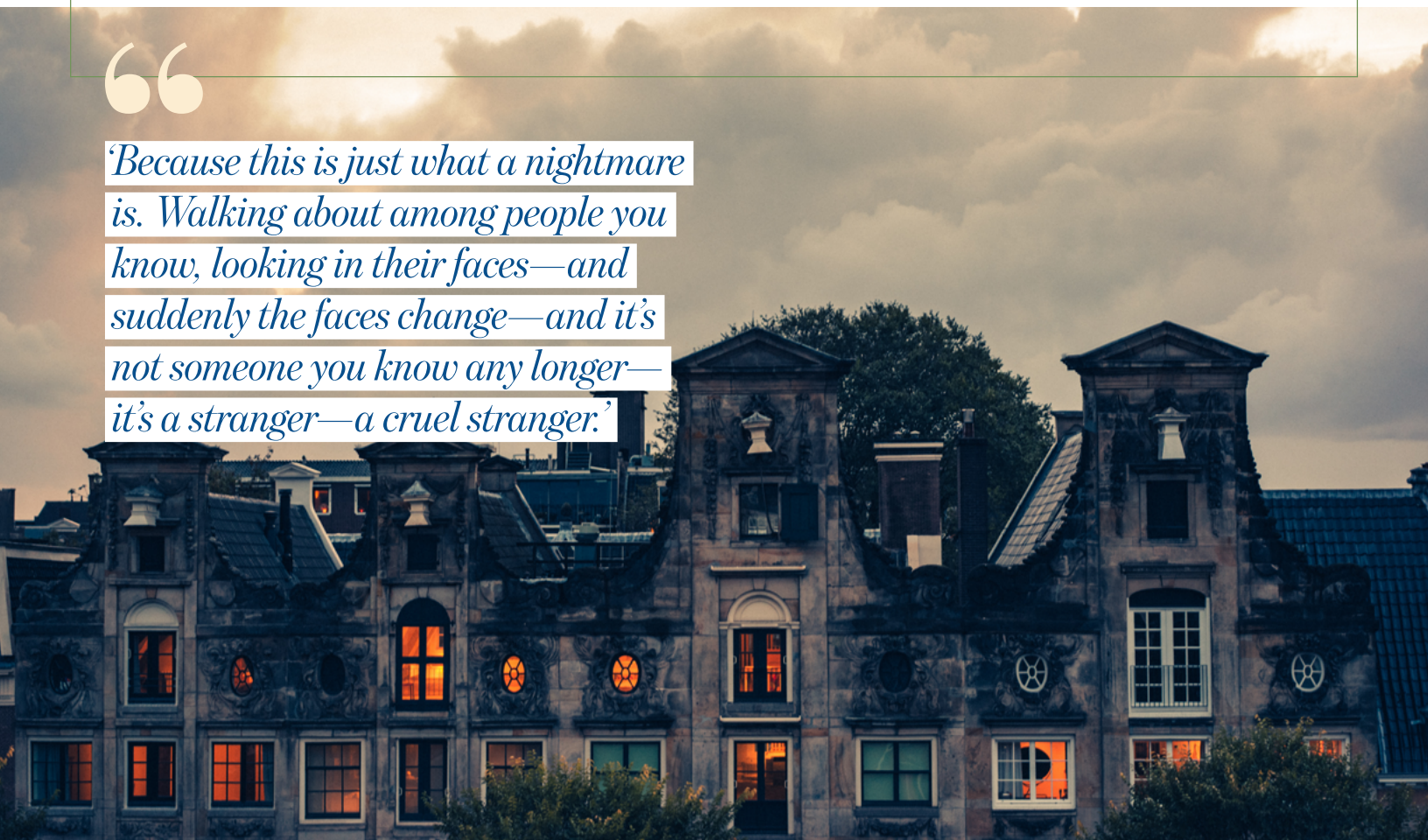
William Morrow & Company, 2016 | 256 pages



It's an embarrassment of riches: Too many iconic authors could represent the UK. We've chosen Agatha Christie because her novels so beautifully encapsulate the contrast between a calm surface and the dark proceedings below. Some of the intellectual puzzles solved by Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are a bit chilly, but this stand-alone novel simmers with passions barely held in check and resentments honed like fine crystal. The pacing is perfect, and the plot has dastardly twists that keep you guessing until the end. When that end comes, the revelation is devastating. First published in 1949, this story is set just after World War II, when the former gentry was grappling with the fact that their old money didn't go quite as far as it used to. When wealthy, manipulative Aristide Leonides is poisoned, his sensuous, much younger wife is the prime suspect. But everyone at Three Gables—the crooked house of the title—has a motive for murder. As our hero Charles investigates, he brings all of the family's dark secrets and personal failings to light. The characters are wildly untrustworthy, while also eliciting our compassion. It's a neat trick that underscores why Christie is still one of the most read authors in the world.

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*'Because this is just what a nightmare is. Walking about among people you know, looking in their faces—and suddenly the faces change—and it's not someone you know any longer—it's a stranger—a cruel stranger.'*



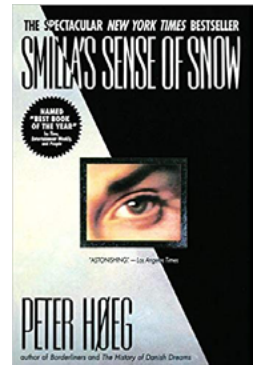
SCANDINAVIA: DENMARK

# Smilla's Sense of Snow

Peter Hoeg, Tiina Nunnally (translator)

**GENRE:**  
Scandinavian noir

**PUBLISHER:**  
Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1993 | 453 pages



Grab a blanket and add a slug of whiskey to your tea. This immigrant story—masquerading as a breathless thriller—is set in the bone-chilling cold of Copenhagen and Greenland. Our Inuit heroine Smilla Jaspersen has a ‘feeling for snow,’ and she’s much more comfortable with mathematics and solitude than she is with people and feelings. But her 6-year-old neighbor has made small cracks in her icy resolve, and when he’s found dead—presumably from a rooftop fall—she’s convinced that something more sinister is going on. Poking around in dangerous places to get to the truth, she’s forced to confront the discrimination against Greenland Inuits, the privileges of Danish society, and her own need for human connection.

*‘Do you know what the mathematical expression is for longing? ... The negative numbers. The formalization of the feeling that you are missing something.’*

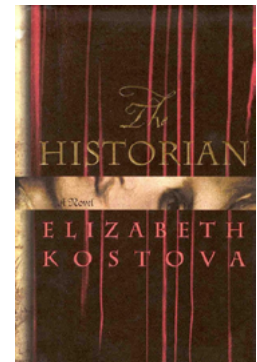
EUROPE: FRANCE, CROATIA, ROMANIA, BULGARIA, TURKEY, HUNGARY

# The Historian

Elizabeth Kostova

**GENRE:**  
Historical fiction

**PUBLISHER:**  
Little, Brown and Company, 2005 | 642 pages



**Vampire librarian.** If those two words have sold you on this novel, feel free to stop reading this document and get your hands on a copy of the book immediately. If you want more, try this: It’s a spine-tingling page-turner and a celebration of the unbreakable bonds we form with people in the unlikeliest of circumstances. Or this: Most of the action takes place in historical libraries, dusty archives, and mountaintop monasteries—or around tables loaded with endless cups of tea and Balkan food. The story begins in 1970s Amsterdam: Late one night, while exploring her father’s library, a teenage girl finds a collection of old letters and a mysterious book that contains only the illustration of a fearsome dragon. She reads the letters and is suddenly more frightened than she’s ever been. When her father disappears, she sets out on a quest to find him and to resolve the secrets of the letters. That decision puts her on a collision course with Vlad Tepes, the 15th-century prince of Wallachia, a.k.a., Vlad the Impaler. Equal parts Gothic thriller, detective story, travelogue, and historical fiction, this epic effortlessly keeps track of a large cast of unforgettable (and fanged) characters as they fight for light in the face of an unspeakable evil.

*‘We would write, we would think of them. Life being long, we would see one another again.’*

RUSSIA: MOSCOW

# A Gentleman in Moscow

## Amor Towles

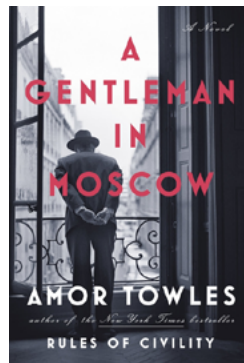
**GENRE:**

Historical fiction

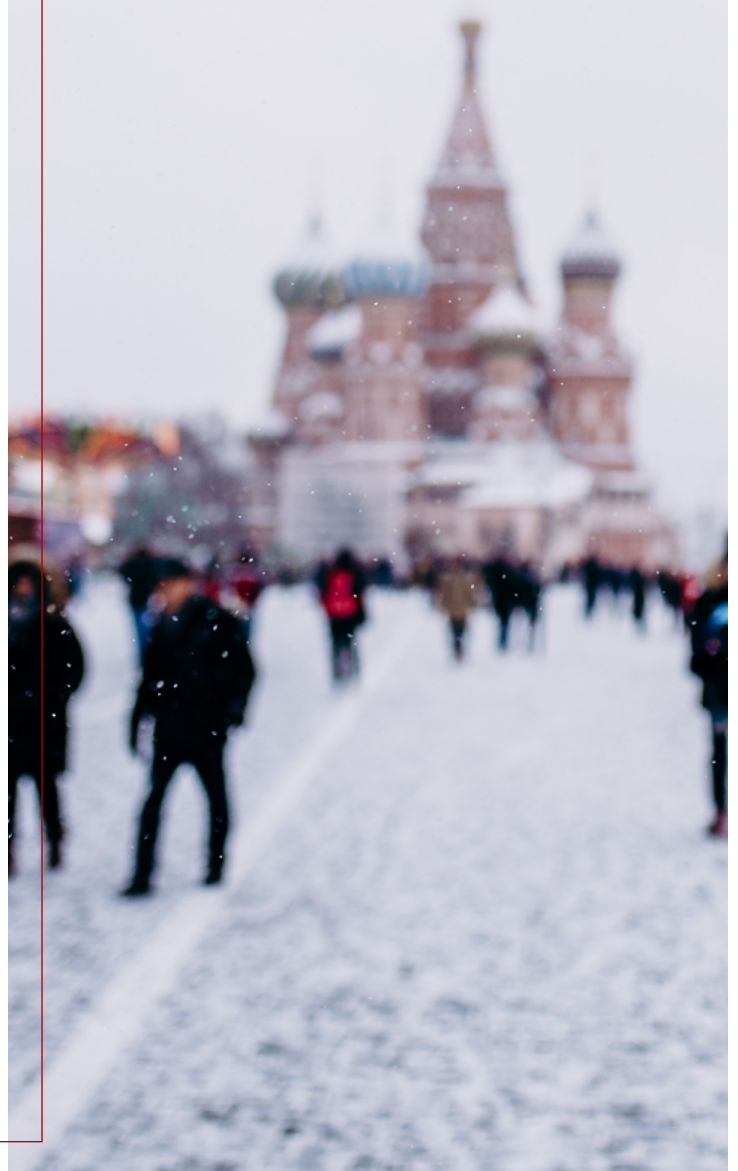
**PUBLISHER:**

Viking, 2016 | 480 pages

We should not like Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov, recipient of the Order of Saint Andrew, member of the Jockey Club, and Master of the Hunt. He's rich, prone to quoting literature, and fussy about wine. But the Count will quickly become someone you wish you could know in real life. Despite his privilege, or perhaps, because of it, he's charming, erudite, articulate, and unexpectedly kind and good. In 1922 Russia, he is also wildly unpopular with the Communists. He's a relic of the past, but for political reasons, he can't be eliminated. So they hide him away in the Metropol Hotel. He's sentenced to house arrest in the epitome of luxury and watches as his world suddenly shrinks to the confines of a small room, and then slowly, surprisingly, expands. The hotel becomes a peculiar community of those who are able to leave, and he, who may not. He forges friendships with the other misfits—a preternaturally self-possessed 9-year-old girl, a taciturn chef, an elegant maitre d'—and all of them are affected in unexpected ways. While the turmoil of the 20th century rages outside the hotel—Bolsheviks and Stalinism and censorship—the Count finds small pleasures inside: a pot of bouillabaisse made from carefully pilfered ingredients, a word game over lunch, a perfect piano sonata. When exterior events finally intrude on the insular world of the Metropol, the Count is forced, once again, to reconsider his definition of home.



*'For what matters in life is not whether we receive a round of applause; what matters is whether we have the courage to venture forth despite the uncertainty of acclaim.'*



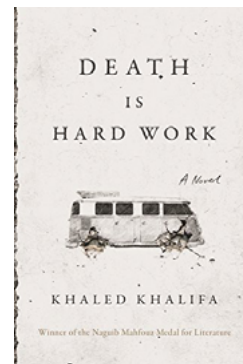
**MIDDLE EAST: SYRIA**

# Death is Hard Work

Khaled Khalifa, Leri Price (translator)

**GENRE:**  
War novel

**PUBLISHER:**  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019 | 192 pages



The dying wish of Abdel Latif—elderly, feisty, Syrian—is to be buried in his ancestral village. His two sons and daughter have grown apart, as adult siblings do, but they pack themselves, along with their father’s body, into a minivan for the road trip from Damascus to his hometown of Anabiya. Aside from the obvious discomfort of sharing the backseat with a corpse, there’s another problem: It’s 2013, and Syria is a war zone. As they endure checkpoints, bombings, and life-threatening stoppages on the open road, they reminisce and wonder if it’s possible to narrow the gaps between them to reclaim their sense of family. Wistful, poetic, frequently sweet, and sometimes painfully bleak, this short novel places us right in the middle of the conflict. We feel the impact of the shells, the pinpoint focus of fear, and the poignant knowledge that the time for choices and chances may be winding down.

*‘When Bolbol met up with his father for the penultimate time, he saw that Abdel Latif was no longer an old man filled with bitterness and loss, just waiting to die; he was an active man whose telephone rang at all hours, who had high hopes of living to see the regime fall, and breathing in the freedom for which he had waited for so long.’*

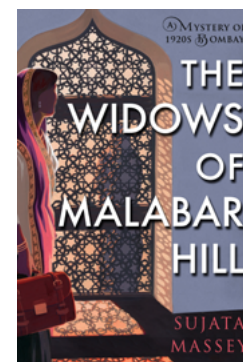
**INDIA: BOMBAY**

# The Widows of Malabar Hill

Sujata Massey

**GENRE:**  
1920s mystery

**PUBLISHER:**  
Soho Crime, 2018 | 400 pages



In any other time and place, men and women alike would laud our heroine Perveen Mistry for her intelligence, grit, mastery of languages, and analytical mind. But in 1921 Bombay, India, she’s an affront to propriety and a pariah at her law school, where she’s bullied every day by boys with half her brains and drive. Happily, her father is a more modern thinker. After a stint at Oxford to earn her degree, she’s soon working on her first case at her father’s law firm: a will in which the beneficiaries are the *three* current wives of the deceased. These widows are Perveen’s polar opposite. They live in strict seclusion, never speaking to men or venturing out into the city. When tensions in the household eventually lead to murder, Perveen is forced to overcome the terrors of her past and to go beyond the gates—and secrets—of the house on Malabar Hill to reveal the culprit. The fictional character of Perveen was inspired by real-life lawyer Cornelia Sorabji, a woman of firsts: first female grad of Bombay University, first woman to study law at Oxford, first woman to practice law in India. This novel deftly combines a murder mystery and flashbacks to Perveen’s own violent past to immerse us in the challenges (and contradictions) of being a woman in early 20th-century India.

*‘Razia, it seems that you are chained to some people and a large old house that you cannot fully enjoy,’ said Perveen. Razia looked warily at Perveen. ‘Is that not the meaning of family?’*

# The Great Passage

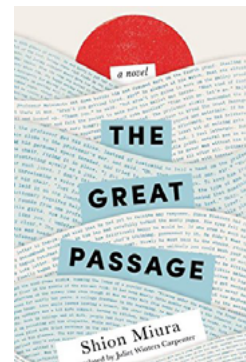
Shion Miura, Juliet Winters Carpenter  
(translator)

**GENRE:**

Coming-of-age novel

**PUBLISHER:**

Amazon Crossing, 2017 | 222 pages



This story speaks lovingly about the power of words and the emotions contained in each particular arrangement of a few letters. Our hero is Mitsuya Majime, a young book collector with a background in linguistics. He's recently been promoted and is now leading the creation of a new dictionary called *The Great Passage*. Not much happens in the plot: an eclectic group works for more than a decade on a new 2900-page dictionary. But **everything** happens: people fall in love, question themselves and others, fight, forgive, break up, succeed, and fail. Majime devotes himself to parsing the true meaning of words: left, right, man, woman, and, the most important of all, love. Just when it seems like it might get too precious, there's enough humor to make the characters feel like real people. They're contradictory, goofy humans who mess things up and find their way to making them right again. The food descriptions will have you craving Japanese cuisine, and the plot humorously turns on one of the most awkward love letters ever written in any language.

“

*'If she even so much as smiled at him, he would be thrilled to death. This was no mere figure of speech: having never gotten much exercise, Majime had little faith in his cardiovascular system and was not sure that his heart could withstand the impact of a Kaguya smile.'*

AUSTRALIA: MELBOURNE

# Cocaine Blues

## Kerry Greenwood

**GENRE:**  
1920s cozy mystery

**PUBLISHER:**  
Poisoned Pen Press, 2006 | 326 pages



Phryne Fisher is a heroine we can believe in. An independent lady-detective in 1920s Australia, she's an equal-opportunity lover and prone to wearing pants (all the easier to shimmy up a drainpipe). Our mettlesome heroine keeps a pearl-handled pistol in her evening bag, and she is not here for your nonsense. Although Phryne is very, very wealthy, the bleeding heart of a socialist beats inside her *haute couture* frame. She can dispatch thugs of all shapes, sizes, and creeds without mussing her perfect chin-length bob. This is the first installment of her 20-novel series, and it's an excellent way to get to know the lady and her hometown of Melbourne. Bored with her posh life in London, Phryne takes a steamer down under and is quickly caught up in a mystery involving a jewel thief, a Russian countess, twin ballet dancers, Turkish baths, the 'King of Snow,' arsenic poisoning, and an illegal abortion racket. Along the way, Phryne begins to collect the misfits and diamonds-in-the-rough that form her found-family and become the heart of the series. And, as usual, she risks her own pretty neck to solve the case in the nick of time.

*'A young man in one's hotel bedroom is capable of being explained, but a corpse is always a hindrance.'*

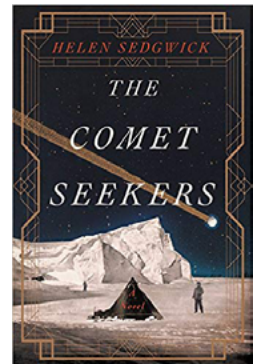
ANTARCTICA

# The Comet Seekers

## Helen Sedgwick

**GENRE:**  
Magical realism

**PUBLISHER:**  
Harper, 2016 | 304 pages



The characters in this novel are haunted—by family, by what might have been, by their desire for something more. The story begins when François and Róisín meet for the first time in 2017. They're both on an astronomy mission in the harshly beautiful, white landscape of Antarctica, waiting for a comet to pass overhead. New to each other, they're also a mystery to us. Short chapters reveal their lives through sharply rendered vignettes, each one punctuated by the citing of a comet in the sky. We see Róisín in her Irish village, burning with a passion for science that eclipsed everything else in her life. We meet François' mother and the ancestral ghosts that share her house in France. As the comets follow their orbits, we learn why François and Róisín were destined to meet in this particular spot at this specific time. Tender and explosive, this novel leaps through time and space, examining the power of fate, making a romance of science, and reminding us to look up in wonder at the night sky.

*'Her hands are held out as if she is trying to catch the stars, as if they will fall to the ground like dancing confetti to rest on her palms and in her hair... and settle in the winter's ice.'*



# Seven Thrilling Book Series

## WITH A STRONG SENSE OF PLACE

One of the great gifts of reading is that we meet people on the page that we might never bump into in real life. With a book series, we get hundreds or thousands of pages to eavesdrop on their private thoughts, become intimately familiar with their friends and family, and keep them company as they ride the crests and troughs of their lives.

A well-written series also invites us inside the locations these characters inhabit: their hometowns and adopted cities, dingy apartments and opulent manor homes, secret hobbies and work desks, either markedly tidy, or strewn with papers and empty coffee cups. Soon the places are as inextricably woven into their personalities as their speech patterns, their favorite foods, or their comfort with commitment.

Here are some of our favorite series with a strong sense of place, characters who feel like real people, and plots that keep you guessing.

# Gabriel Allon Series

Daniel Silva

**SETTING:** Israel, Europe

**GENRE:** Contemporary espionage thrillers

**# IN SERIES:** 19 novels

**READING ORDER:** The connections among Gabriel and his team evolve in each book; for maximum impact, read in order. *The Order*, the latest book in the series, was released in July 2020.



Gabriel Allon is a master spy, a reluctant assassin, and the world's foremost art restorer—his cover and true passion. The work he does for the clandestine Israeli organization known simply as 'the Office' is a responsibility, rarely his desire. He's the spiritual and tactical team leader for a group of often-difficult but supremely talented agents who carry their (mostly) heartbreaking histories with them like broken-in luggage. In each installment, Gabriel and his crew are on the side of the angels as they undertake complex missions to stop terrorists around the globe. When he's away from home, Gabriel longs for Tel Aviv and the Jezreel Valley, and Silva's eye for telling detail will make you yearn for it, too. As the team jet-sets around Europe, you'll be transported directly to the world's most cosmopolitan cities—Paris, Vienna, Moscow, Rome, Amsterdam, London, Venice, Lisbon, Dubai—and the natural beauty of destinations like Corsica, Umbria, and Cornwall. It's always a thrilling ride with plenty of big feelings as the team wrestles with matters of life and death.

## Extraordinary Adventures of the Athena Club

Theodora Goss



**SETTING:** late 19th century London, Europe

**GENRE:** Historical fantasy

**# IN SERIES:** 3 novels

**READING ORDER:** Read these books in order to enjoy the thrilling surprises. The third and final book in the series is *The Sinister Mystery of the Mesmerizing Girl*.

Words like *rollicking*, *escapade*, *revel*, and *caper* exist to describe series like this one. But don't underestimate it. With not one, but **five** plucky heroines, this series is frothy and fun, yes, but Goss has grounded it in a bedrock of genuine feeling and harrowing backstories. In this alternate version of Victorian London, the offspring of classic literary characters are flesh-and-blood girls. First, we meet Mary Jekyll, daughter of Robert Louis Stevenson's famous bipolar villain. We won't give away the fun surprises by divulging the other members of the Athena Club, but you will recognize their names. The girls, all technically monsters in their own way, struggle with their humanity. As they wrestle with what it means to do the right thing, they must make peace with who they are. The first book is a romp through London, and in book two, the action takes off on the Orient Express with stops in Paris, Vienna, and Budapest. There are a lot of exploits, including the danger of poisoning, a traveling circus, potentially evil nuns, the revelation of family secrets, the Alchemical Society, crazed scientists, an escape from an asylum, and so much cake. The narrative has the feel of an old-timey Saturday-afternoon-serial, and each book, appropriately, ends with a cliffhanger. Action, derring-do, literary references, and big feelings abound.



# Bernie Gunther Novels

## Philip Kerr

**SETTING:** WWII Berlin, Europe

**GENRE:** Detective procedurals

**# IN SERIES:** 11 novels

**READING ORDER:** The novels move around in the pre- and post-war decades; Kerr does a brilliant job of orienting the reader in Gunther's life. If you *do* read in order, it's a bit like having Bernie tell you his life story with flashbacks and overlapping timelines—or you can dip into the series with the plot that sounds most interesting to you at the time.

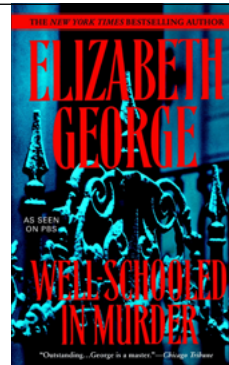
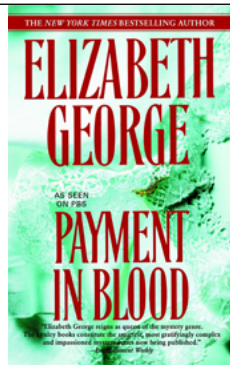
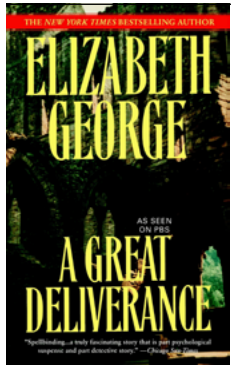


These novels are like a delicately calibrated time machine back to WWII-era Berlin, and our companion is a mostly well-intentioned detective who embodies the contradictions of the time. No one doubts Gunther's abilities: He's an excellent detective with a high close rate. But therein lies the problem. Gunther's internal compass is infallible, and his drive to uncover the truth outweighs his sense of self-preservation. When Nazis and politics and secrets and powerful men are involved, some mysteries are better left unsolved. Kerr's version of Berlin is the blackest noir, and Gunther pines for the Weimar Republic of his younger days. He mourns this new fascist-infested era, even as he averts his gaze from crimes that trouble his conscience. In later novels in the series, Gunther's cases take him further afield—to the eastern front in Russia, to Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, and France—for a glimpse of the war's impact in these lesser-known outposts. The villains are deliciously villainous, and romance is hazardous in Gunther's world. He's a scrappy fighter, an attentive lover, sarcastic in the face of danger, and foolishly brave when he should cut and run. It's a complicated life he leads, and it's a gift to be able to join him for the ride.



# Inspector Lynley Novels

## Elizabeth George



**SETTING:** Contemporary London, English countryside

**GENRE:** British psychological mysteries

**# IN SERIES:** 19 novels

**READING ORDER:** There are dramatic developments in the lives of these characters, and reading them in order can be a tremendously moving experience. One thing to note: We passionately dislike installments 13 and 14, so we always skip those when re-reading the series. Proceed with caution. No word yet on when we can expect the next book in the series.

Detective Inspector Thomas Lynley doesn't fit the stereotype of a Scotland Yard detective. For starters, he's an Earl—the eighth Earl of Asherton—and he's a graduate of Eton, with the intelligence and posh accent to prove it. His partner Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers is his equal in brains, but is working-class all the way, with a Gibraltar-sized chip on her shoulder. They make a compelling and indomitable pair, with his school ties and her crumb-festooned sweaters. They're supported in their investigations by friends and family that are worthy of their own plotlines, and throughout the books, the focus sometimes shifts to these other players. They're complex, contradictory, thoroughly real people, and they add emotional impact to the already dramatic crimes. Lynley and Havers usually work in the bustle of London, and we feel the stark differences between his privileged and her strife-filled life, his comfortable apartment and her lonely bed-sit. The pair also memorably investigate cases in a seaside town in Essex, a manor house in the Scottish highlands, an ancient cottage in Kent, Cambridge University, the island of Guernsey, and more. The crimes always involve a psychological kink, and as the investigators expose the suspects' and victims' dark secrets, they're forced to take a hard look at their own lives, too.



# Phryne Fisher Mysteries

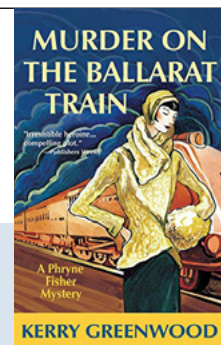
## Kerry Greenwood

**SETTING:** 1920s Melbourne, Australia

**GENRE:** Cozy detective mysteries with modern morals

**# IN SERIES:** 20 novels

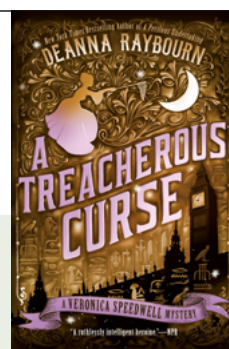
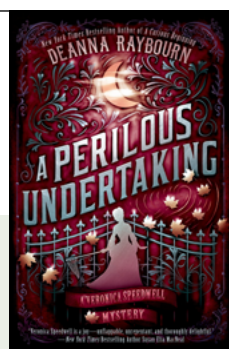
**READING ORDER:** These winsome novels can be read in any order. Our favorites include *Urn Burial* and *Raisins and Almonds*. In 2021, *Death in Daylesford* will be released in the US.



The Phryne Fisher mysteries—both in print and on TV—are a bracing combination of mystery tropes and brazen feminism set in 1920s Melbourne. Phryne is all about women's rights and is firmly anti-discrimination. She's also an equal-opportunity lover, an openness that leads to all kinds of romantic entanglements. Plus, she's a glamour girl with a champagne glass in one hand and a revolver in the other. Phryne's opulent mansion becomes a haven for a collection of outcasts that form her endearing found-family: a couple of socialist wharfies, orphans with sticky fingers but good hearts, housekeepers who are stoic in the face of midnight escapades, and a stray black cat and dog. With a wink to golden-age mysteries, the crimes in these novels tend to be bloodless with twists and turns of plot to keep you guessing. But unlike a traditional cozy, there's plenty of sex, sarcasm, and sass as the lady-detective tackles each caper with aplomb. We get a good look at the political climate and society of her hometown while Phryne goes undercover in delightfully murderous locales: the circus, a burlesque show, in a train or plane or race car, a New Year's Eve or Midsummer ball, a cruise ship, and more. If you've ever wished to be transported to the roaring twenties, these are the books for you.

## Veronica Speedwell Mysteries

### Deanna Raybourn



**SETTING:** 1880s London

**GENRE:** Historical mystery

**# IN SERIES:** 5 novels

**READING ORDER:** We recommend you read these in order to enjoy Veronica's evolution from spunky heroine to even spunkier heroine and to savor the slow smolder of her relationship with Stoker. The next installment *An Unexpected Peril* is scheduled for March 2021.

The heroine of this series—the intrepid Veronica Speedwell—was inspired by real-life lepidopterist Margaret Fontaine. She was a Victorian 'lady explorer' who traveled the world, capturing men and butterflies in her net. The fictional Veronica also eschews convention: She lives for challenges, travels solo, takes paramours as she pleases, and, frequently, sticks her elegant nose into other people's business. Her partner in detection and would-be romance is the brawny, brainy, and surprisingly feminist Stoker, a.k.a., The Honourable Revelstoke Templeton-Vane, son of a viscount and grandson of a Duke. These two! Always bickering and flirting, and, of course, thwarting some kind of criminals while also curating a natural history museum. Together, they take us on a tour of Victorian London while scoffing at the restrictive morality (and dresses without pockets) of the time. Their investigations transport us deep into pure and prurient pastimes: Egyptology, an orgy den, a manor house party on an isolated island, a high-end brothel, the ladies-only Curiosity Club, and the royal family. There are always plenty of romantic sparks, spine-tingling danger, and so much moxie.





# Six Audiobooks

## THAT ARE LIKE THEATER FOR YOUR EARS

**C**ombine your imagination with the right narrator, and an audiobook can bring the story to vivid life. It's like having an entire cast of a stage play perform inside your brain. We are completely enamored of these six novels in print, and the narration of the audiobooks gives a fresh voice to the characters, bringing the whole production to life with sound effects, music, accents, and dynamic acting.

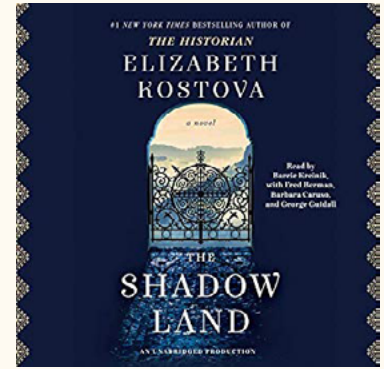
# The Shadow Land

## Elizabeth Kostova

**NARRATED BY:** Barrie Kreinik

**PUBLISHER:** Random House Audio, 2017

**LENGTH:** 18 hours, 36 minutes



When our heroine, twenty-something American Alexandra Boyd, travels to Bulgaria, she's running away from her life, rather than seeking new adventures. But adventure finds her: A chance encounter with a family on the steps of a hotel embroils her in a decades-old mystery that involves music, art, world wars, corruption, and the many forms that love can take. Equal parts travelogue, historical novel, and thriller, this story travels from the capital city of Sophia to the villages in the countryside and mountains of rural Bulgaria as Alexandra tries to unravel the past. For every lovely description of golden landscape or local food, there's a tense conversation or chase scene fraught with legitimate danger. This story explores the overwhelming horrors of life under communism through a very intimate lens. Despite the inherent tragedy, it's ultimately infused with light, celebrating the power of storytelling and the notion that even in loss, there is hope.

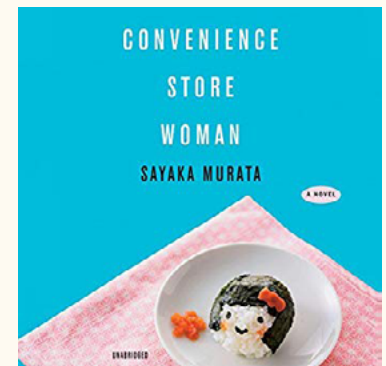
# Convenience Store Woman

## Sayaka Murata

**NARRATED BY:** Nancy Wu

**PUBLISHER:** Blackstone Audio, 2018

**LENGTH:** 3 hours, 21 minutes



Our heroine Keiko is both weird and wonderful. She's 36 years old, has never had a boyfriend, and feels most like herself inside the convenience store where she's worked for the past 18 years. Keiko is quite comfortable in her own skin, but the people around her—a devastatingly normal sister, snarky friends, ambitious co-workers—make her believe that she's broken somehow, perhaps irrevocably. Still, she takes pride in re-stocking the shelves just so and cheerfully greeting each customer with a perfect cadence in her voice. Then, unexpectedly, a new employee invades the store and her life, upsetting her equilibrium in ways she—and we—could never have predicted. As Keiko fights to get a grip on her true identity, we can't help but root for her. The novel is written in the first-person, and Nancy Wu's narration lets Keiko speak for herself, drawing us into her off-kilter view of the world.

# Dracula

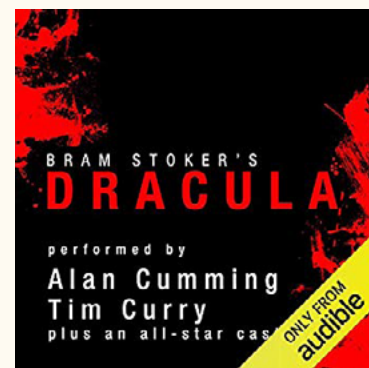
## Bram Stoker

**NARRATED BY:** a cast of 13, including Katy Kellgren, Alan Cumming, and Tim Curry

**PUBLISHER:** Audible Studios, 2012

**LENGTH:** 15 hours, 28 minutes

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the OG vampire. He's intelligent, cunning, polished, and entirely terrifying—the perfect foil for the pure-hearted team hell-bent on his demise: Jonathan and Mina Harker, Dr. Seward, and Van Helsing. This ensemble of heroes and heroines take turns narrating the novel through letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, and a ship's log, all of which lend themselves beautifully to the full cast of voice talent in this recording. *Dracula* is part of our cultural consciousness, and if you've never read (or listened to) the novel that started it all, we emphatically urge you to rectify that situation immediately. Even if you think you know the story, it's supremely suspenseful and surprisingly modern. The Gothic plot moves at an action-movie pace. It almost seems like Stoker wrote some of the scenes—the hazardous flight from Dracula's castle, the ghostly shipwreck off the coast of Whitby—with film in mind. But it's not all frantic carriage rides, harrowing escapes, and stakes through the heart. There are many moments of palpable emotion, and by the end, you realize this story about a monster was a tale of devoted friendship all along.



# Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore

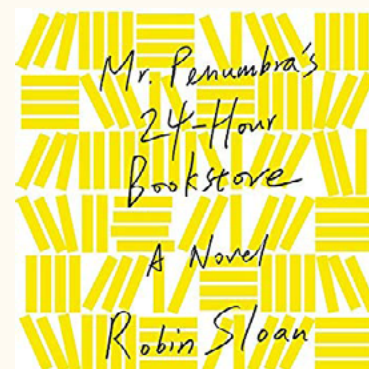
## Robin Sloan

**NARRATED BY:** Ari Fliakos

**PUBLISHER:** Macmillan Audio, 2012

**LENGTH:** 7 hours, 41 minutes

Let's begin with the obvious: Can someone please create a 24/7 bookstore? An enchanted bookshop that **never closes** would be the best thing ever. Less enamored of this idea, but in dire financial straits, is our hero Clay. He's a victim of San Francisco's tech implosion and has taken a job in the title bookstore to lick his career wounds. It's not long before he realizes there's something unusual going on in the stacks of the shop. Kindly Mr. Penumbra has been keeping some troubling and potentially dangerous secrets. When Penumbra disappears, it's up to Clay to figure out just what the devil is going on. He's joined in his quest by snappy sidekicks and aided by new scanning technology at Google (when it still felt like magic). Author Robin Sloan's prose captures the energy of both San Francisco and New York City, as well as the allure of the offbeat bookshop. This novel is an ode to the power of reading, friends and loyalty, and the legacy we leave behind when we write our own stories.



# A Room with a View

## E.M. Forster

**NARRATED BY:** Rebecca Hall

**PUBLISHER:** Audible Studios, 2018

**LENGTH:** 7 hours, 32 minutes



This classic novel of Edwardian England opens with a scene in Florence, Italy, at the Pension Bertolini, an inn with views of the Arno River. Our heroine Miss Lucy Honeychurch is on her trip abroad for finishing with her prudish cousin Charlotte. The uptight chaperone has deemed both the accommodations and the other guests ‘unfortunate,’ especially the uninhibited Mr. Emerson and his fanciful son George. Despite young Lucy’s best intentions to be good—that is, to be quiet, humble, respectable—she is almost always in a muddle. She longs to fight against the constraints of her class. But nothing—not a scrape with death, nor a stolen kiss in a field of wildflowers—gives Lucy the courage she needs to defy convention. She returns to the cool, well-understood drawing room of her family home in Surrey. But, as we all know, books are powerful things, and the chance reading of a scandalous novel jolts Lucy out of her muddle. What she does next beautifully unbalances Lucy and everyone around her in the best way possible. This comedy of manners is brimming with glorious descriptions of both Italy and England that will make you yearn for your own travels abroad.

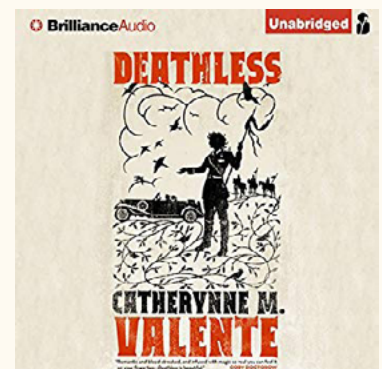
# Deathless

## Catherynne M. Valente

**NARRATED BY:** Kim de Blecourt

**PUBLISHER:** Brilliance Audio, 2011

**LENGTH:** 11 hours, 21 minutes



Just as European fairytales have wicked witches and evil giants, Russian folklore has Koschei the Deathless, an immortal man, as charming as he is evil, who woos and destroys young women. This imaginative retelling of the legend sets the tale against the dramatic events of the 20th-century: the Russian Revolution, Stalinism, the siege of Leningrad, and the rise of modern Communism. But that very real history is sprinkled liberally with magic dust. As we grow to care about our heroine Marya, we also meet bewitched birds that turn into men, house gnomes known as *domovoy*, a guardian of the forest named Leshi, and Baba Yaga herself. In this world, Tsars and Tsarinas rule the seven aspects of reality: life, death, salt, night, water, birds, and the length of an hour. Desperate for a life filled with romance, Marya trades the life she knows for the promise of Koschei’s kiss and pays a very high price. The whimsy and poetry of the prose are offset by the often dark events of the tale. As Baba Yaga reminds us, *Tscha!* Life is like that.’



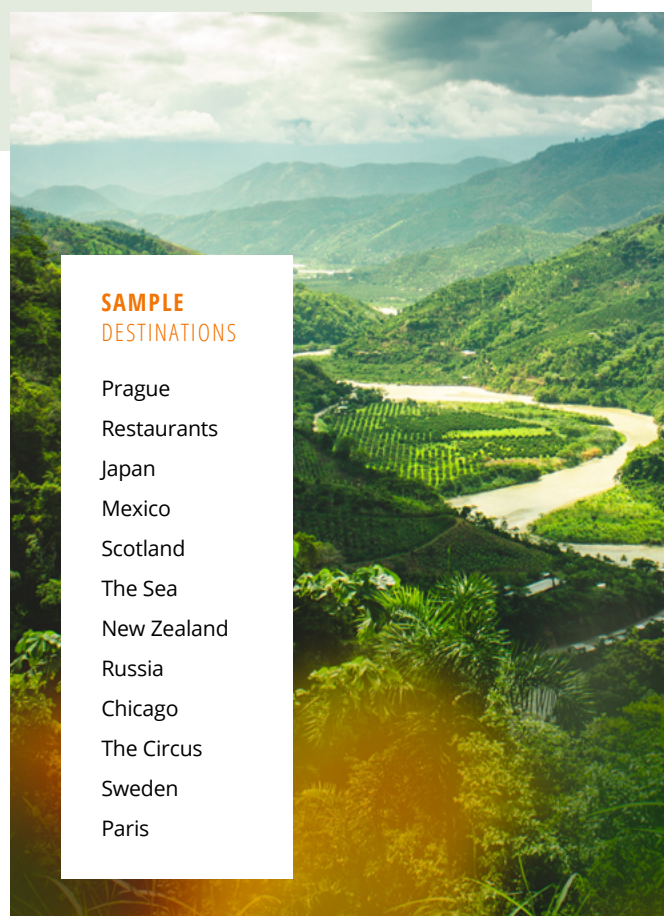
# THE Strong Sense of Place PODCAST

In each episode of our bi-weekly podcast, we get curious about one destination and recommend five books that transported us there on the page. The titles we discuss span genres—fiction, memoir, graphic novels, thrillers, YA, and more—to give you a sense of the culture, the landmarks, and the feel of the place.

For each season, we choose destinations from every continent, as well as fun places you can travel to see, like the circus or the sea. Then we carefully select and read books with a strong sense of that place so we can tell you all about them in the podcast. The show is a celebration of reading, of travel, and of the endlessly fascinating people that populate our planet.

We sometimes talk to an expert from the destination to get the behind-the-scenes scoop on their favorite landmarks, historical libraries, must-visit bookshops, literary cafes, and bookish museums.

Along with every episode, we publish destination-related content on our web site to give you even more travel inspiration to explore.



## SAMPLE DESTINATIONS

Prague  
Restaurants  
Japan  
Mexico  
Scotland  
The Sea  
New Zealand  
Russia  
Chicago  
The Circus  
Sweden  
Paris



# WE'RE David & Melissa

THE CREATIVE TEAM BEHIND  
STRONG SENSE OF PLACE.

We've been a couple since 1992, and one of our favorite things to do together is explore new places—and then to sit quietly and read. We're two introverts who crave adventures, as long as we get to choose the time and place. We've visited 25 countries and 33 U.S. states... so far. It's our mission to share the things we see, learn, and read with you.

In 2017, we sold almost all of our stuff and moved from the U.S. to Prague, in the Czech Republic, with our laptops and our cat Smudge. It's a fantastic, magical, liveable city—and it's an excellent home base for other travel.

Convention dictates that we now tell you about our work experience and college degrees, but we think you'll get a better idea of who we are if we share our favorite books. Obligatory business-y bios follow.





## DAVID HUMPHREYS: FIVE BOOKS I LOVE

### ***The Great Gatsby*** by F. Scott Fitzgerald

I read this as a teen, and then again as an adult. It was so much more vibrant to me when I was older that it made me want to re-read all the books I passed over in high school. I ended up revisiting about two dozen books, many of which I appreciate more now. (I'm looking at you, ***Moby Dick***.) 'Gatsby' is about the vacuum of longing and consumerism, but, hey, wasn't that a great party?

### ***Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*** by Scott McCloud

I love the way Scott McCloud breaks down the form of comic. He explains how and why this type of visual communications works so well, and he introduces an entire world of creators. Ultimately, this book changed my life; see 'Center for Cartoon Studies' below.

### ***Snow Crash*** by Neal Stephenson.

This is, perhaps, just a bit dated now, but it introduced me to Neal Stephenson, and that relationship has only gotten better over time. 'Snow Crash' is a light dystopian fantasy with pizza delivery and language viruses: 'All information looks like noise until you break the code.'

### ***Middlesex*** by Jeffrey Eugenides

This novel is the story of a person who 'was born twice: first, as a baby girl...and then again as a teenage boy.' I have a deep affection for this book about change and families and love and grace. I'll forever be grateful to Eugenides for writing the passage that describes stacking complex emotions into a single sensational chord. I'd heard the idea before, but never saw it expressed so clearly.

### ***The Works: Anatomy of a City*** by Kate Ascher

The author unpacks how each layer of the urban infrastructure of New York City combines to make a living, breathing city. The story of how electricity works was unbelievable to me; did you know there's an auction every day for the lowest cost provider? Don't even get me started on the crazy tugboat situation. The mysteries of the city unwrap in a graphics-heavy format that makes for breezy reading.

## DAVID'S OBLIGATORY BUSINESS BIO:

David was introduced to the joy of books by his mom, a librarian, and his dad, 'the best-educated cab driver in Cincinnati.' David holds a master's degree in cartooning from the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vermont, and a B.F.A in Film from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. His photographs and illustrations have appeared in the best-selling ***Well Fed*** cookbook series, as well as the *New York Times* best-seller *It Starts with Food*. He has also worked as an independent book-seller, a sales clerk at a comics shop, and as a Director of Engineering at an agency for large-scale web projects.



## MELISSA JOULWAN: FIVE BOOKS I LOVE

### ***Jane Eyre*** by Charlotte Brontë

I revisit this remarkable classic every year and always find something new in its pages. Jane is the intrepid heroine we need. Her steadfast belief in her inherent value and her unwavering loyalty to her friends—without excusing lousy behavior—is the standard to which we can all aspire. And, not for nothing, her romance with Rochester is one for the ages. Dream date: tea with Charlotte and Jane.

### ***Less: A Novel*** by Andrew Sean Greer

I love that Arthur Less, the hero of this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, decided to travel the world to find his way home. It's a sweet story with plenty going on below the surface, and I'm not too proud to say that both times I've read it, I've ugly cried through the last 10 pages.

### ***The Edge*** by Dick Francis

Every Francis mystery features a reliable, clever hero who's willing to take a beating, emotionally and physically, to do the right thing. Francis has a keen eye for detail and places his stories in vivid settings, usually in the world of horse racing. This one takes place on a train ride through the Canadian Rockies, and when I visit Banff myself one day, it will be because of this taut thriller.

### ***The Historian*** by Elizabeth Kostova

Gothic tropes, vampires, and libraries are always 100% yes for me. This epic story has everything I look for in novels for Strong Sense of Place: romantic settings in foreign lands, characters I'd be so happy to know, diabolical villains, high-stakes decisions, sweeping adventure, and big, big feelings. I am entirely spellbound every time I read it.

### ***Cryptonomicon*** by Neal Stephenson

This is the book that opened my heart to sci-fi and 1000-page novels. A mashup of techno-thriller and historical fiction, it plants Big Ideas inside an action-adventure plot. And it's populated with characters you'd want at your back: idealistic, flawed, funny, and 100% human. With a sweet romance and a cameo by Alan Turing, it introduced me to the art of cryptography and elegance of hard science, while I rode along on the story.

## MELISSA'S OBLIGATORY BUSINESS BIO:

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Formerly known as 'that weird girl that rollerskates to the library,' Melissa earned an advertising degree from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. She has worked as a PR professional and Creative Director for advertising agencies large and small, online and off. She was a founding member of the Texas Rollergirls and literally wrote the book on the flat-track roller derby phenomenon ***Rollergirl: Totally True Tales From The Track***. She is the author of the best-selling ***Well Fed*** cookbook series and ***Paleo for Dummies***.

# Connect With Us

We love talking about books and reading about books and writing about books and traveling for books—and the more bookish friends we have, the happier we are. Please sign up for our newsletter and join us on social media so we can geek out together about books and literary travel.

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