

Must-Read Debut Novels @ San Rafael Public Library

Taken BY Scott Bergstrom meets *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *The Bourne Identity* in this action-packed debut thriller (optioned for film by Jerry Bruckheimer) about a girl who must train as an assassin to deal with the gangsters who have kidnapped her father.

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe: “Things Fall Apart—the first volume of Chinua Achebe’s masterpiece *The African Trilogy*—tells two intertwining stories, both centering on Okonkwo, a “strong man” of an Igbo village in Nigeria. The first, a powerful fable of the immemorial conflict between the individual and society, traces Okonkwo’s fall from grace in his world. The second, as modern as the first is ancient, concerns the clash of cultures and the destruction of that world when European missionaries arrive in his village.”

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: “Fifteen-year-old Kambili and her older brother Jaja lead a privileged life in Enugu, Nigeria. They live in beautiful house, with a caring family, and attend an exclusive missionary school. They’re completely shielded from the troubles of the world. Yet, as Kambili reveals in her tender-voiced account, things are less perfect than they appear.”

The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende: “One of the most important novels of the twentieth century, *The House of the Spirits* is an enthralling epic that spans decades and lives, weaving the personal and the political into a universal story of love, magic, and fate.”

Bastard Out of Carolina by Dorothy Allison: “At the heart of this story is Ruth Anne Boatwright, known simply as Bone, a bastard child who observes the world around her with a mercilessly keen perspective. When her stepfather Daddy Glen, “cold as death, mean as a snake,” becomes increasingly more vicious toward her, Bone finds herself caught in a family triangle that tests the loyalty of her mother, Anney—and leads to a final, harrowing encounter from which there can be no turning back.”

The Story of a Brief Marriage by Anuk Arudpragasam: “Anuk Arudpragasam’s *The Story of a Brief Marriage* is a feat of extraordinary sensitivity and imagination, a meditation on the fundamental elements of human existence—eating, sleeping, washing, touching, speaking—that give us direction and purpose, even as the world around us collapses. Set over the course of a single day and night, this unflinching debut confronts marriage and war, life and death, bestowing on its subjects the highest dignity, however briefly.”

Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen: “A work of romantic fiction, better known as a comedy of manners, *Sense and Sensibility* is set in southwest England, London and Kent between 1792 and 1797, and portrays the life and loves of the Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne. The novel follows the young ladies to their new home, a meagre cottage on a distant relative’s property, where they experience love, romance and heartbreak.”

A Man Called Ove by Fredrik Backman: “Meet Ove. He’s a curmudgeon—the kind of man who points at people he dislikes as if they were burglars caught outside his bedroom window. He has staunch principles, strict routines, and a short fuse. People call him “the bitter neighbor from hell.” But must Ove be bitter just because he doesn’t walk around with a smile plastered to his face all the time?”

Go Tell It on the Mountain by James Baldwin: “With lyrical precision, psychological directness, resonating symbolic power, and a rage that is at once unrelenting and compassionate, Baldwin chronicles a fourteen-year-old boy’s discovery of the terms of his identity as the stepson of the minister of a storefront Pentecostal church in Harlem one Saturday in March of 1935.”

The Mothers by Britt Bennett: “In entrancing, lyrical prose, *The Mothers* asks whether a “what if” can be more powerful than an experience itself. If, as time passes, we must always live in servitude to the decisions of our younger selves, to the communities that have parented us, and to the decisions we make that shape our lives forever.”

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë: “A novel of intense power and intrigue, *Jane Eyre* has dazzled generations of readers with its depiction of a woman’s quest for freedom. Having grown up an orphan in the home of her cruel aunt and at a harsh charity school, *Jane Eyre* becomes an independent and spirited survivor—qualities that serve her well as governess at Thornfield Hall.”

We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo: “Darling is only ten years old, and yet she must navigate a fragile and violent world. In Zimbabwe, Darling and her friends steal guavas, try to get the baby out of young Chipso’s belly, and grasp at memories of Before. Before their homes were destroyed by paramilitary policemen, before the school closed, before the fathers left for dangerous jobs abroad.”

Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat: “In her stunning literary debut, Danticat evokes the wonder, terror, and heartache of her native Haiti—and the enduring strength of Haiti’s women—with vibrant imagery and narrative grace that bear witness to her people’s suffering and courage.”

Here Comes the Sun by Nicole Dennis-Benn: “Capturing the distinct rhythms of Jamaican life and dialect, Nicole Dennis-Benn pens a tender hymn to a world hidden among pristine beaches and the wide expanse of turquoise seas. At an opulent resort in Montego Bay, Margot hustles to send her younger sister, Thandi, to school. Taught as a girl to trade her sexuality for survival, Margot is ruthlessly determined to shield Thandi from the same fate.”

Grace by Natasha Deón: “Deftly weaving together the stories of Josey and Naomi—who narrates the entire novel unable to leave her daughter alone in the land of the living—*Grace* is a sweeping, intergenerational saga featuring a group of outcast women during one of the most compelling eras in American history. It is a universal story of freedom, love, and motherhood, told in a dazzling and original voice set against a rich and transporting historical backdrop.”

The Last Samurai by Helen DeWitt: “Sibylla, an American-at-Oxford turned loose on London, finds herself trapped as a single mother after a misguided one-night stand. High-minded principles of child-rearing work disastrously well. J. S. Mill (taught Greek at three) and Yo Yo Ma (Bach at two) claimed the methods would work with any child; when these succeed with the boy Ludo, he causes havoc at school and is home again in a month.”

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz: “Encapsulating Dominican-American history, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* opens our eyes to an astonishing vision of the contemporary American experience and explores the endless human capacity to persevere—and risk it all—in the name of love.”

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison: “The nameless narrator of the novel describes growing up in a black community in the South, attending a Negro college from which he is expelled, moving to New York and becoming the chief spokesman of the Harlem branch of “the Brotherhood”, and retreating amid violence and confusion to the basement lair of the Invisible Man he imagines himself to be.”

Love Medicine by Louise Erdrich: “Set on and around a North Dakota Ojibwe reservation, Love Medicine—the first novel by bestselling, National Book Award-winning author Louise Erdrich—is **the epic story about the intertwined fates of two families: the Kashpaws and the Lamartines.**”

The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides: “In a quiet suburb of Detroit, the five Lisbon sisters—beautiful, eccentric, and obsessively watched by the neighborhood boys—commit suicide one by one over the course of a single year. As the boys observe them from afar, transfixed, they piece together the mystery of the family’s fatal melancholy, in this hypnotic and unforgettable novel of adolescent **love, disquiet, and death.**”

Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me by Richard Fariña: “Richard Fariña evokes the Sixties as precisely, wittily, and poignantly as F. Scott Fitzgerald captured the Jazz Age. The hero, Gnostus Pappadopoulos, weaves his way through the psychedelic landscape, encountering—among other things—mescaline, women, art, gluttony, falsehood, science, prayer, and, occasionally, truth.”

White Oleander by Janet Fitch: “Everywhere hailed as a novel of rare beauty and power, White Oleander tells the unforgettable story of Ingrid, a brilliant poet imprisoned for murder, and her daughter, Astrid, whose odyssey through a series of Los Angeles foster homes—each its own universe, with its own laws, its own dangers, its own hard lessons to be learned—becomes a redeeming and surprising journey of self-discovery.”

Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk by Ben Fountain: “Three minutes and forty-three seconds of intensive warfare with Iraqi insurgents—caught on tape by an embedded Fox News crew—has transformed the eight surviving men of Bravo Squad into America’s most sought-after heroes. Now they’re on a media-intensive nationwide tour to reinvigorate public support for the war. On this rainy Thanksgiving Day, the Bravos are guests of a Dallas football team, slated to be part of the halftime show.”

The Fair Fight by Anna Freeman: “A gripping, page-turning story about people struggling to transcend the circumstances into which they were born and fighting for their own places in society, The Fair Fight is a raucous, intoxicating tale of courage, reinvention, and fighting one’s way to the top.”

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez: “One Hundred Years of Solitude tells the story of the rise and fall, birth and death of the mythical town of Macondo through the history of the Buendia family. Inventive, amusing, magnetic, sad, and alive with unforgettable men and women—brimming with truth, compassion, and a lyrical magic that strikes the soul—this novel is a masterpiece in the art of fiction.”

All the Ugly and Wonderful Things by Bryn Greenwood: “By the time Wavy is a teenager; her relationship with Kellen is the only tender thing in a brutal world of addicts and debauchery. When tragedy rips Wavy’s family apart, a well-meaning aunt steps in, and what is beautiful to Wavy looks

ugly under the scrutiny of the outside world. A powerful novel you won't soon forget, Bryn Greenwood's *All the Ugly and Wonderful Things* challenges all we know and believe about love."

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi: "Written with tremendous sweep and power, *Homegoing* traces the generations of family who follow, as their destinies lead them through two continents and three hundred years of history, each life indelibly drawn, as the legacy of slavery is fully revealed in light of the present day."

Guapa by Saleem Haddad: "As Rasa confronts the simultaneous collapse of political hope and his closest personal relationships, he is forced to discover the roots of his alienation and try to re-emerge into a society that may never accept him."

Catch-22 by Joseph Heller: "Set in Italy during World War II, this is the story of the incomparable, malingering bombardier, Yossarian, a hero who is furious because thousands of people he has never met are trying to kill him. But his real problem is not the enemy—it is his own army, which keeps increasing the number of missions the men must fly to complete their service."

The Dog Stars by Peter Heller: "Hig somehow survived the flu pandemic that killed everyone he knows. Now his wife is gone, his friends are dead, and he lives in the hangar of a small abandoned airport with his dog, Jasper, and a mercurial, gun-toting misanthrope named Bangley."

Fourth of July Creek by Smith Henderson: "After trying to help Benjamin Pearl, an undernourished, nearly feral eleven-year-old boy living in the Montana wilderness, social worker Pete Snow comes face to face with the boy's profoundly disturbed father, Jeremiah. With courage and caution, Pete slowly earns a measure of trust from this paranoid survivalist itching for a final conflict that will signal the coming End Times."

The Nix by Nathan Hill: "From the suburban Midwest to New York City to the 1968 riots that rocked Chicago and beyond, *The Nix* explores—with sharp humor and a fierce tenderness—the resilience of love and home, even in times of radical change."

A High Wind in Jamaica by Richard Hughes: "A tale of seduction and betrayal, of accommodation and manipulation, of weird humor and unforeseen violence, this classic of twentieth-century literature is above all an extraordinary reckoning with the secret reasons and otherworldly realities of childhood."

The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing by Mira Jacob: "With depth, heart, and agility, debut novelist Mira Jacob takes us on a deftly plotted journey that ranges from 1970s India to suburban 1980s New Mexico to Seattle during the dot.com boom. *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing* is an epic, irreverent testimony to the bonds of love, the pull of hope, and the power of making peace with life's uncertainties."

The Known World by Edward P. Jones: "The *Known World* tells the story of Henry Townsend, a black farmer and former slave who falls under the tutelage of William Robbins, the most powerful man in Manchester County, Virginia. Making certain he never circumvents the law, Townsend runs his affairs with unusual discipline. But when death takes him unexpectedly, his widow, Caldonia, can't uphold the estate's order, and chaos ensues."

Mudbound by Hillary Jordan: “It is 1946, and city-bred Laura McAllan is trying to raise her children on her husband’s Mississippi Delta farm – a place she finds foreign and frightening. In the midst of the family’s struggles, two young men return from the war to work the land.”

The Unquiet Dead by Ausma Zehanat Khan: “In her spellbinding debut *The Unquiet Dead*, Ausma Zehanat Khan has written a complex and provocative story of loss, redemption, and the cost of justice that will linger with readers long after turning the final page.”

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri: “With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves.”

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee: “Compassionate, dramatic, and deeply moving, *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes readers to the roots of human behavior – to innocence and experience, kindness and cruelty, love and hatred, humor and pathos.”

Leaving the Atocha Station by Ben Lerner: “In prose that veers between the comic and tragic, the self-contemptuous and the inspired, *Leaving the Atocha Station* is a portrait of the artist as a young man in an age of Google searches, pharmaceuticals, and spectacle.”

Einstein’s Dreams by Alan Lightman: “A modern classic, *Einstein’s Dreams* is a fictional collage of stories dreamed by Albert Einstein in 1905, about time, relativity and physics. As the defiant but sensitive young genius is creating his theory of relativity, a new conception of time, he imagines many possible worlds.”

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena by Anthony Marra: “In a small rural village in Chechnya, eight-year-old Havaa watches from the woods as Russian soldiers abduct her father in the middle of the night and then set fire to her home. When their lifelong neighbor Akhmed finds Havaa hiding in the forest with a strange blue suitcase, he makes a decision that will forever change their lives.”

Behold the Dreamers by Imbolo Mbue: “Jende Jonga, a Cameroonian immigrant living in Harlem, has come to the United States to provide a better life for himself, his wife, Neni, and their six-year-old son. In the fall of 2007, Jende can hardly believe his luck when he lands a job as a chauffeur for Clark Edwards, a senior executive at Lehman Brothers.”

The Giant’s House by Elizabeth McCracken: “Two misfits whose lonely paths cross at the circulation desk, Peggy and James are odd candidates for friendship, but nevertheless they soon find their lives entwined in ways that neither one could have predicted. In James, Peggy discovers the one person who’s ever really understood her, and as he grows—six foot five at age twelve, then seven feet, then eight—so does her heart and their most singular romance.”

The Son by Philipp Meyer: “Part epic of Texas, part classic coming-of-age story, part unflinching examination of the bloody price of power, *The Son* is a gripping and utterly transporting novel that maps the legacy of violence in the American west with rare emotional acuity, even as it presents an intimate portrait of one family across two centuries.”

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller: “A tale of gods, kings, immortal fame, and the human heart, *The Song of Achilles* is a dazzling literary feat that brilliantly reimagines Homer’s enduring masterwork, *The Iliad*.”

Ghostwritten by David Mitchell: “A gallery attendant at the Hermitage. A young jazz buff in Tokyo. A crooked British lawyer in Hong Kong. A disc jockey in Manhattan. A physicist in Ireland. An elderly woman running a tea shack in rural China. A cult-controlled terrorist in Okinawa. A musician in London. A transmigrating spirit in Mongolia. What is the common thread of coincidence or destiny that connects the lives of these nine souls in nine far-flung countries, stretching across the globe from east to west? What pattern do their linked fates form through time and space?”

Anne of Green Gables by L.M. Montgomery: “It recounts the adventures of Anne Shirley, an 11-year-old orphan girl who is mistakenly sent to Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert, a middle-aged brother and sister who had intended to adopt a boy to help them on their farm in Prince Edward Island.”

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison: “A powerful examination of our obsession with beauty and conformity, Toni Morrison’s virtuosic first novel asks powerful questions about race, class, and gender with the subtlety and grace that have always characterized her writing.”

Sweetgirl by Travis Mulhauser: “With the heart, daring, and evocative atmosphere of *Winter’s Bone* and *True Grit*, and driven by the raw, whip-smart voice of Percy James, a blistering debut about a fearless sixteen-year old girl whose search for her missing mother leads to an unexpected discovery, and a life or death struggle in the harsh frozen landscape of the Upper Midwest.”

Valiant Gentlemen by Sabina Murray: “In prose that is darkly humorous and alive with detail, *Valiant Gentlemen* reimagines the lives and intimate friendships of humanitarian and Irish patriot Roger Casement; his closest friend, Herbert Ward; and Ward’s extraordinary wife, the Argentinian-American heiress Sarita Sanford.”

Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng: “A profoundly moving story of family, secrets, and longing, *Everything I Never Told You* is both a gripping page-turner and a sensitive family portrait, uncovering the ways in which mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives struggle, all their lives, to understand one another.”

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen: “The narrator, a communist double agent, is a “man of two minds,” a half-French, half-Vietnamese army captain who arranges to come to America after the Fall of Saigon, and while building a new life with other Vietnamese refugees in Los Angeles is secretly reporting back to his communist superiors in Vietnam.”

The Time-Traveler’s Wife by Audrey Niffenegger: “A most untraditional love story, this is the celebrated tale of Henry DeTamble, a dashing, adventuresome librarian who inadvertently travels through time, and Clare Abshire, an artist whose life takes a natural sequential course. Henry and Clare’s passionate affair endures across a sea of time and captures them in an impossibly romantic trap that tests the strength of fate and basks in the bonds of love.”

Girl at War by Sara Nović: “Moving back and forth through time, *Girl at War* is an honest, generous, brilliantly written novel that illuminates how history shapes the individual. Sara Nović fearlessly shows the impact of war on one young girl—and its legacy on all of us. It’s a debut by a writer who has stared into recent history to find a story that continues to resonate today.”

The Fishermen by Chigozie Obioma: “Told by nine-year-old Benjamin, the youngest of four brothers, *The Fisherman* is the Cain and Abel-esque story of a childhood in Nigeria, in the small town of Akure. When their father has to travel to a distant city for work, the brothers take advantage of his absence to skip school and go fishing. At the forbidden nearby river, they meet a madman who persuades the oldest of the boys that he is destined to be killed by one of his siblings.”

Under the Udala Trees by Chinelo Okparanta: “Ijeoma comes of age as her nation does; born before independence, she is eleven when civil war breaks out in the young republic of Nigeria. Sent away to safety, she meets another displaced child and they, star-crossed, fall in love. They are from different ethnic communities. They are also both girls.”

After the Parade by Lori Ostlund: “After Aaron’s father died in the town parade, it was the larger-than-life misfits of his childhood who helped Aaron find his place in a world hostile to difference. But Aaron’s sense of rejection runs deep: when Aaron was seventeen, Dolores—his loving yet selfish and enigmatic mother—vanished one night. And when, all these years later, a new friend in San Francisco offers Aaron a way to locate his mother, his past and present collide, forcing Aaron to rethink his place in the world.”

Bull Mountain by Brian Panowich: “In a sweeping narrative spanning decades and told from alternating points of view, the novel brilliantly evokes the atmosphere of the mountain and its inhabitants: forbidding, loyal, gritty, and ruthless. A story of family—the lengths men will go to protect it, honor it, or in some cases destroy it—*Bull Mountain* is an incredibly assured debut that heralds a major new talent in fiction.”

Housekeeping by Marilynne Robinson: “A modern classic, *Housekeeping* is the story of Ruth and her younger sister, Lucille, who grow up haphazardly, first under the care of their competent grandmother, then of two comically bumbling great-aunts, and finally of Sylvie, their eccentric and remote aunt.”

Oreo by Fran Ross: “Oreo, our young hero, navigates the labyrinth of sound studios and brothels and subway tunnels in Manhattan, seeking to claim her birthright while unwittingly experiencing and triggering a mythic journey of self-discovery like no other.”

Lincoln in the Bardo by George Saunders: “The long-awaited first novel from the author of *Tenth of December*: a moving and original father-son story featuring none other than Abraham Lincoln, as well as an unforgettable cast of supporting characters, living and dead, historical and invented.”

The Thirteenth Tale by Diane Setterfield: “Reclusive author Vida Winter, famous for her collection of twelve enchanting stories, has spent the past six decades penning a series of alternate lives for herself. Now old and ailing, she is ready to reveal the truth about her extraordinary existence and the violent and tragic past she has kept secret for so long.”

White Teeth by Zadie Smith: “Set against London’s racial and cultural tapestry, venturing across the former empire and into the past as it barrels toward the future, *White Teeth* revels in the ecstatic hodgepodge of modern life, flirting with disaster, confounding expectations, and embracing the comedy of daily existence.”

The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan: “With wit and sensitivity, Amy Tan examines the sometimes painful, often tender, and always deep connection between mothers and daughters. As each woman reveals her secrets, trying to unravel the truth about her life, the strings become more tangled, more entwined.”

Only Love Can Break Your Heart by Ed Tarkington: “Welcome to Spencerville, Virginia, 1977. Eight-year-old Rocky worships his older brother, Paul. Sixteen and full of rebel cool, Paul spends his days cruising in his Chevy Nova blasting Neil Young, cigarette dangling from his lips, arm slung around his beautiful, troubled girlfriend. Paul is happy to have his younger brother as his sidekick. Then one day, in an act of vengeance against their father, Paul picks up Rocky from school and nearly abandons him in the woods. Afterward, Paul disappears.”

The Secret History by Donna Tartt: “Under the influence of their charismatic classics professor, a group of clever, eccentric misfits at an elite New England college discover a way of thinking and living that is a world away from the humdrum existence of their contemporaries. But when they go beyond the boundaries of normal morality their lives are changed profoundly and forever, and they discover how hard it can be to truly live and how easy it is to kill.”

A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy Toole: “John Kennedy Toole’s hero, one Ignatius J. Reilly, is “huge, obese, fractious, fastidious, a latter-day Gargantua, a Don Quixote of the French Quarter. His story bursts with wholly original characters, denizens of New Orleans’ lower depths, incredibly true-to-life dialogue, and the zaniest series of high and low comic adventures.” – Henry Kisor, *Chicago Sun-Times*”

Easter Island by Jennifer Vanderbes: “A series of brilliant revelations brings to life the parallel quests of these two intrepid young women as they delve into the centuries-old mysteries of Easter Island. Slowly unearthing the island’s haunting past, they are forced to confront turbulent discoveries about themselves and the people they love, changing their lives forever.”

Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese: “Moving from Addis Ababa to New York City and back again, *Cutting for Stone* is an unforgettable story of love and betrayal, medicine and ordinary miracles—and two brothers whose fates are forever intertwined.”

The Animators by Kayle Rae Whitaker: “A funny, heartbreaking novel of friendship, art, and trauma, *The Animators* is about the secrets we keep and the burdens we shed on the road to adulthood.”

Shelter by Jung Yun: “Tensions quickly mount as Kyung’s proximity to his parents forces old feelings of guilt and anger to the surface, along with a terrible and persistent question: how can he ever be a good husband, father, and son when he never knew affection as a child?”