

Lorna's Top 10

Mr. Fox - Helen Oyeyemi

Fairy-tale romances end with a wedding, and the fairy tales don't get complicated. In this book, the celebrated writer Mr. Fox can't stop himself from killing off the heroines of his novels, and neither can his wife, Daphne. It's not until Mary, his muse, comes to life and transforms him from author into subject that his story begins to unfold differently. Mary challenges Mr. Fox to join her in stories of their own devising; and in different times and places, the two of them seek each other, find each other, thwart each other, and try to stay together, even when the roles they inhabit seem to forbid it. Their adventures twist the fairy tale into nine variations, exploding and teasing conventions of genre and romance, and each iteration explores the fears that come with accepting a lifelong bond. Meanwhile, Daphne becomes convinced that her husband is having an affair, and finds her way into Mary and Mr. Fox's game. And so Mr. Fox is offered a choice: Will it be a life with the girl of his dreams, or a life with an all-too-real woman who delights him more than he cares to admit? [Oyeyemi is my current favorite author, but I want to say she's my favorite of all time, and I LOVE this book. My husband says it is really weird, so that's why I added a longer summary.]

Boy, Snow, Bird - Helen Oyeyemi

This retelling of Snow White opens with a motherless girl called Boy, a child-woman who, shortly after we meet her, escapes from her violent father. An inversion is already in place, for Frank Novak is a rat-catcher; but, unlike the Pied Piper of Hamelin, he drives people away rather than casting a spell over them. Boy jumps on the first bus out of New York and finds herself in the little New England town of Flax Hill. From there she begins a new life, it seems. [I don't want to reveal too much about this story for any who haven't read it, as there are some big twists along the way.]

The Robber Bride – Margaret Atwood

Set in present-day [Toronto, Ontario](#), the novel begins with three women (Roz, Charis, and Tony) who meet once a month in a restaurant to share a meal. The novel alternates between the present and [flashbacks](#) featuring the points of view of Tony, Charis, and Roz, respectively. Zenia has given each woman a different version of her biography, tailor-made to insinuate herself into their lives. No one version of Zenia is the truth, and the reader knows no more than the characters. [I also really love *The Blind Assassin*.]

A Room with a View - E. M. Forster

The first part of the novel is set in [Florence](#), Italy, and describes a young English woman's first visit to Florence, at a time when upper middle class English women were starting to lead independent, adventurous lives. Lucy Honeychurch is touring Italy with her overbearing older cousin and [chaperone](#), Charlotte Bartlett. There's romance in the Italian countryside. [I'm a Forster fan, and I like the movie adaptation, partly because it includes lines from *Howard's End* and *Where Angels Fear To Tread*. But in the novel form, Forster doesn't let things end quite so neatly, and George and especially Lucy are more revealed as imperfect humans making imperfect decisions and dealing with the consequences.]

The Golden Bowl - Henry James

Set in England, this complex, intense study of marriage and [adultery](#) explores the tangle of interrelationships between a father and daughter and their respective spouses. The novel focuses deeply and almost exclusively on the [consciousness](#) of the central characters, with sometimes obsessive detail but also with powerful insight. The title is a quotation from [Ecclesiastes](#) 12:6, "...or the golden bowl be broken, ...then shall the dust return to the earth as it was". [I'm also a James fan, and I get flack from all of my husband's colleagues for it – turns out no one likes him, maybe especially English lit majors.]

The King Must Die and The Bull from the Sea - Mary Renault

The King Must Die is a [bildungsroman](#) and [historical novel](#) that traces the early life and adventures of [Theseus](#), a hero in [Greek mythology](#). Naturally, it is set in [Ancient Greece](#): [Troizen](#), [Corinth](#), [Eleusis](#), [Athens](#), [Knossos](#) in [Crete](#), and [Naxos](#). Rather than retelling the myth, Renault constructs an archaeologically and anthropologically plausible story that might have developed into the myth. The sequel, *The Bull from the Sea*, is a retelling of Theseus after his return from the [Minoan](#) palace of [Knossos](#). The novel follows his later quests, his friendship with [Pirithoos](#), and his liaison with [Hippolyta](#) and marriage to [Phaedra](#). [These books are so much fun... violence and a little sex and beautifully written.]

Till We Have Faces - C. S. Lewis

It is a retelling of [Cupid and Psyche](#), based on its telling in a chapter of [The Golden Ass](#) of [Apuleius](#), and is written from the perspective of [Psyche](#)'s older sister Orual, [pronounced *Or'w'ahl*]. It begins as an accusation against the gods. The story is set in the fictive kingdom of Glome, a primitive [city-state](#) whose people have occasional contact with civilized [Hellenistic Greece](#). [This book is really lovely, and earthy, and divine.]

War In Heaven - Charles Williams

Williams gives a contemporary setting to the traditional story of the Search for the Holy Grail. Examining the distinction between magic and religion, *War in Heaven* is an eerily disturbing book, one that graphically portrays a metaphysical journey through the shadowy crevices of the human mind. [I almost chose *All Hallows' Eve*, and for fun here's the Amazon summary: Charles Williams had a genius for choosing strange and exciting themes for his novels and making them believable and profoundly suggestive of spiritual truths. All Hallows' Eve is the story of a man and woman whose love was so great it could bridge the gap of death; of evil so terrible as to be unmentionable, of a vision so beautiful it must be true.]

The City And The City - China Mieville (also Un Lun Dun)

Inspector Tyador Borlú, of the Extreme Crime Squad in the European city-state of Beszel, investigates the murder of Mahalia Geary, a foreign student found dead with her face disfigured in a Beszel street. He soon learns that Geary had been involved in the political and cultural turmoil involving Beszel and its "twin city" of Ul Qoma. His investigations start in his home city of Beszel, lead him to Ul Qoma to assist the Ul Qoman police in their work, and eventually result in an examination of the legend of Orciny, a rumoured third city existing in the

spaces between Beszel and Ul Qoma. [Mieville also has a wonderful young adult fantasy novel, *Un Lun Dun*. It also explores the relationship between cities and their “abcities.” I’ve read it twice to Jack and it delights us every time.]

House of Leaves- Mark Z. Danielewski

The format and structure of this novel is unconventional, with unusual page layout and style. It begins with a [first-person narrative](#) by Johnny Truant who discovers a manuscript that turns out to be an academic study of a [documentary film](#) called *The Navidson Record*, which plunges us into the novel within the novel. – Upon returning from a trip to [Seattle](#), the Navidson family discovers a change in their home. A closet-like space shut behind an undecorated door appears inexplicably where previously there was only a blank wall. A second door appears at the end of the closet, leading to the children's room. As Navidson investigates this phenomenon, he finds that the internal measurements of the [house](#) are somehow larger than external measurements. Navidson, along with his brother Tom and some colleagues, feel compelled to explore, [photograph](#), and [videotape](#) the house's seemingly endless series of passages, eventually driving various characters to [insanity](#), [murder](#), and death. [This book is legit creepy, but even Danielewski says it is not horror, but really a love story.]

The Left Hand of Darkness- Ursula K. LeGuin

The novel follows the story of Genly Ai, a native of [Terra](#), who is sent to the planet of [Gethen](#) as an envoy of the Ekumen, a loose confederation of planets. Ai's mission is to persuade the nations of Gethen to join the Ekumen, but he is stymied by his lack of understanding of Gethenian culture. Individuals on Gethen are "ambisexual", with no fixed gender identity. This fact has a strong influence on the culture of the planet, and creates a large barrier for Ai. [Oh my goodness, this book is so so so good. It took me a few chapters to really get into it, but the story itself is beautiful and well written, but the societal norms it questions, and then the basic human tendencies it exposes...!]