

Nancy's Top 10

Michael Malone – *Foolscape*, many more

Professor Theo Ryan lives a quiet life teaching drama at Cavendish University in North Carolina, but everything gets turned upside down when he meets Ford Rexford—America's best-known playwright. Ford is the most talented and the most impossible man Theo has ever met. And Ford's genius, his reckless romanticism, and his fearless love of life profoundly influence the reticent scholar.

When Ford discovers that Theo has written a play, a madcap journey begins that pushes the young recluse out of the wings onto the bright, bustling stages of life and love. There he finds himself playing roles he never would have thought possible. In his most hilarious book since *Handling Sin*, Michael Malone has created a story as wildly funny as it is profoundly wise.

Richard Russo – *Straight Man*, many more

In this uproarious new novel, Richard Russo performs his characteristic high-wire walk between hilarity and heartbreak. Russo's protagonist is William Henry Devereaux, Jr., the reluctant chairman of the English department of a badly underfunded college in the Pennsylvania rust belt. Devereaux's reluctance is partly rooted in his character—he is a born anarchist—and partly in the fact that his department is more savagely divided than the Balkans.

In the course of a single week, Devereaux will have his nose mangled by an angry colleague, imagine his wife is having an affair with his dean, wonder if a curvaceous adjunct is trying to seduce him with peach pits, and threaten to execute a goose on local television. All this while coming to terms with his philandering father, the dereliction of his youthful promise, and the ominous failure of certain vital body functions. In short, **Straight Man** is classic Russo—side-splitting and true-to-life, witty, compassionate, and impossible to put down.

Gail Godwin – *Father Melancholy's Daughter* and *Evensong*

Father Melancholy's Daughter, is widely recognized as one of the author's most poignant and accomplished novels -- a bittersweet and ultimately transcendent story of a young girl's devotion to her father, the rector of a small Virginia church, and of the hope, dreams, and love that sustain them both in the wake of the betrayal and tragedy that diminished their family.

Marilynne Robinson – *Gilead*, *Home*

From the first page of her second novel, the voice of Rev. John Ames mesmerizes with his account of his life—and that of his father and grandfather. Ames is 77 years old in 1956, in failing health, with a much younger wife and six-year-old son; as a preacher in the small Iowa town where he spent his entire life, he has produced volumes and volumes of sermons and prayers, "[t]rying to say what was true." But it is in this mesmerizing account—in the form of a letter to his young son, who he imagines reading it when he is grown—that his meditations on creation and existence are fully illumined. Ames details the often harsh conditions of perishing Midwestern prairie towns, the Spanish influenza and two world wars. He relates the death of his first wife and child, and his long years alone attempting to live up to the legacy of his fiery grandfather, a man who saw visions of Christ and became a controversial figure in the Kansas abolitionist movement, and his own father's embittered pacifism. During the course of Ames's

writing, he is confronted with one of his most difficult and long-simmering crises of personal resentment when John Ames Boughton (his namesake and son of his best friend) returns to his hometown, trailing with him the actions of a callous past and precarious future. In attempting to find a way to comprehend and forgive, Ames finds that he must face a final comprehension of self—as well as the worth of his life's reflections. Robinson's prose is beautiful, shimmering and precise; the revelations are subtle but never muted when they come, and the careful telling carries the breath of suspense. There is no simple redemption here; despite the meditations on faith, even readers with no religious inclinations will be captivated. Many writers try to capture life's universals of strength, struggle, joy and forgiveness—but Robinson truly succeeds in what is destined to become her second classic.

Clyde Edgerton – *Walking Across Egypt*, many more

Seventy-eight year old Mattie Riggsbee, spunky and determined, has one regret: she has no grandchildren, as her son and daughter inconveniently remain unmarried. The story gathers momentum after a slightly sluggish start, when Wesley Benfield, wayward teenager and orphan, comes into Mattie's life. Their need for each other is apparent, and their attempts to get together, despite the disapproval of Mattie's family and neighbors, are the focus of the story. Wesley is captivated by Mattie's good cooking and grandmotherly attention, and when he escapes from a house of detention, he heads straight to Mattie. There is a hilarious scene in church, where the fleeing Wesley and the pursuing deputy sheriff, both disguised as choir members, sit beside each other in full view of the congregation. Edgerton infuses all of his characters with reality, and provides a balanced perspective on age and youth. His understanding of teenagers is nowhere more evident than in the contrast between the reality of Wesley's situation and the humor of his exaggerated fantasies.

Ferrol Sams – *Run with the Horseman*, *Whisper of the River*

Porter Osborne Jr. is a precocious, sensitive, and rambunctious boy trying to make it through adolescence during the depression years. On a red-clay farm in Georgia he learns all there is to know about cotton chopping, hog killing, watermelon thumping, and mule handling. School provides a quick course in practical joking, schoolboy crushes, athletic glory, and clandestine sex. But it is Porter's family - his genteel, patient mother, his swarm of cousins, his snuff-dipping grandmother, and, most of all, his beloved though flawed father - who teach Porter the painful truths about growing up strong enough to run with the horsemen.

Ruth Reichl – *Tender at the Bone*

At an early age, Ruth Reichl discovered that "food could be a way of making sense of the world. . . . If you watched people as they ate, you could find out who they were." Her deliciously crafted memoir, **Tender at the Bone**, is the story of a life determined, enhanced, and defined in equal measure by a passion for food, unforgettable people, and the love of tales well told. Beginning with Reichl's mother, the notorious food-poisoner known as the Queen of Mold, Reichl introduces us to the fascinating characters who shaped her world and her tastes, from the gourmand Monsieur du Croix, who served Reichl her first soufflé, to those at her politically correct table in Berkeley who championed the organic food revolution in the 1970s. Spiced with Reichl's infectious humor and sprinkled with her favorite recipes, **Tender at the Bone** is a witty and compelling chronicle of a culinary sensualist's coming-of-age.

Nick Hornby – *A Long Way Down*, many more

Four different people find themselves on the same roof on New Year's Eve, but they have one thing in common—they're all there to jump to their deaths. A scandal-plagued talk-show host, a single mom of a disabled young man, a troubled teen, and an aging American musician soon unite in a common cause, to find out why Jess (the teen) can't get her ex-boyfriend to return her calls. Down the stairs they go, and thoughts of suicide gradually subside. It all sounds so high concept, but each strand of the plot draws readers into Hornby's web. The novel is so simply written that its depths don't come to full view until well into the reading. Each character takes a turn telling the story in a distinctive voice. Tough questions are asked—why do you want to kill yourself, and why didn't you do it? Are adults any smarter than adolescents? What defines friends and family? Characters are alternately sympathetic and utterly despicable, talk-show-host Martin, particularly. The narrators are occasionally unreliable, with the truth coming from the observers instead. Obviously, a book about suicide is a dark read, but this one is darkly humorous.

Elinor Lipman – *Then She Found Me*, many more

April Epner teaches high school Latin, wears flannel jumpers, and is used to having her evenings free. Bernice Graverman brandishes designer labels, favors toad-sized earrings, and hosts her own tacky TV talk show: *Bernice G!*

But behind the glitz and glam, Bernice has followed the life of the daughter she gave up for adoption thirty-six years ago. Now that she's got her act together, she's aiming to be a mom like she always knew she could. And she's hurtling straight for April's quiet little life....

Ivan Doig – *English Creek*, 1st of a trilogy and many more

In this prize-winning portrait of a time and place—Montana in the 1930s—that at once inspires and fulfills a longing for an explicable past, Ivan Doig has created one of the most captivating families in American fiction, the McCaskills.

The witty and haunting narration, a masterpiece of vernacular in the tradition of Twain, follows the events of the Two Medicine country's summer: the tide of sheep moving into the high country, the capering Fourth of July rodeo and community dance, and an end-of-August forest fire high in the Rockies that brings the book, as well as the McCaskill family's struggle within itself, to a stunning climax. It is a season of escapade as well as drama, during which fourteen-year-old Jick comes of age. Through his eyes we see those nearest and dearest to him at a turning point—“where all four of our lives made their bend”—and discover along with him his own connection to the land, to history, and to the deep-fathomed mysteries of one's kin and one's self.

Richard Wagamese – *Medicine Walk*

Growing up in the care of the “old man” he was entrusted to at birth, Franklin Starlight has never really known his biological father, Eldon. The fleeting moments he shared with the alcoholic man have only ended in disasters that haunt the boy. But when father, coming to the end of his alcohol-ruined life, reaches out to sixteen-year-old son their first and last journey together begins. Hesitantly, Franklin obliges his dying father's wish — to be buried as a warrior

— and together they hazard the rugged and dangerous beauty of the backcountry to find an appropriate burial site.

Through the fog of pain, Eldon relates to his son the desolate moments in his life, as well as the times of hope — the family history Franklin has never known. As Father tells the tale, the Son, and the reader, live for the stories, in the hope that they will shed light on the mysteries of a tortured past.