

TIMES ONLINE

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October 9, 2009

Times Onli SEARCH

The best 60 books of the past 60 years

As voted for by Times readers in our recent Novellist poll, to mark the 60th anniversary of the Cheltenham Literary Festival

John Sutherland and Stefanie Marsh

10 COMMENTS | RECOMMEND? (5)

John Sutherland on the winner - To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee

How many British admirers of Harper Lee's novel have seen a mockingbird? Scarcely more, I suspect, than have seen a dodo. Why does this novel, published in 1960, set in the rural Deep South of the United States of America, speak to us, worlds away, so powerfully? Why, put another way, do we love it?

The easy answer, because it is so widely prescribed in schools, explains some of the novel's popularity, but not all of it.

Ask a different question and you get a different answer. To Kill a Mockingbird is not, in these voters' judgment, the best novel of the past six decades. It's their favourite. Is Harper Lee as good as Philip Roth? I'm not sure that I would vote yes on that — but some might.

My guess is that those Cheltenhamites who voted Lee top of the list did so in the belief that novels matter and that they relate, in important ways, to things that matter outside the world of fiction. The thing that mattered most in the early 1960s was human equality. It was given its finest and most authoritative expression in the 1964 American Civil Rights Act.

That society-changing legislation decreed that there should be no more "second-class citizens", but one race — the human race, as the 1960s slogan put it. Resistance to civil rights found its fiercest home in the South. Lee's own father (to whom she dedicated the book) was a lawyer who faced down a Ku Klux Klan mob. What To Kill a Mockingbird asserts, in the character of Atticus Finch, is that in its heart even the American South, which had fought to preserve slavery, was "good".

Is it the best novel of our time? In purely literary terms, it might be a hard case to make. It's not Proust, it's not Virginia Woolf. But, as Henry James said, the house of fiction has many rooms. One important room is reserved for fiction that expresses the basic ideals of its time: such as Oliver Twist, or The Grapes of Wrath. To Kill a Mockingbird will always have a high place in that company.

John Sutherland is Emeritus Professor of English at University College London

Numbers 2 to 20

2 The Pillars of the Earth by Ken Follett
This historical novel, set in 12th-century Kingsbridge, went stratospheric when it was chosen for Oprah's book club. Two Pillars of the Earth board games were subsequently launched.

3 Catch-22 by Joseph Heller
Heller conceived of Yossarian. the focus of this dark.

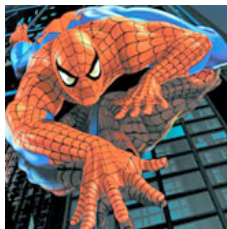
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TIMES RECOMMENDS

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- > How to Be a Movie Star by William J Mann
- > The Blaze of Obscurity by Clive James

COMICS SPECIAL

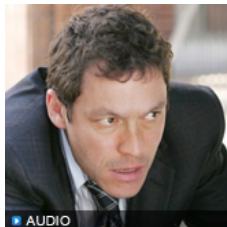


70 facts you didn't know about Marvel

Jacko tried to buy Spidey? Nixon was a super-villain? To celebrate Marvel's 70th anniversary we have dug up 70 nuggets

- > Mr Marvel: the secret origin of Stan Lee
- > John Romita Jr: does whatever a spider can

BOOKS



Podcast: The Wire

David Simon reads from his new book on the TV smash

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TODAY

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W. H. Auden regarded this epic high fantasy novel as a masterpiece, saying that in parts it outshone Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

5 *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger

A frustrated, directionless, sarcastic teen comes of age on the American East Coast. Inevitably the F-word crops up in the process, partly why it became the most censored book in American high schools and libraries between 1961 and 1982.

6 *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell

Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on Jura while critically ill with tuberculosis. It's not clear why he chose the title. Originally it was *The Last Man in Europe*.

7 *The Time Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger

Love story about a man with a genetic disorder that causes him to disappear on unexpected time-travelling jaunts, leaving his wife struggling to cope with his frequent absences and dangerous experiences. Written as a metaphor for the author's failed relationships.

8 *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J. K. Rowling

Such a favourite among adults that they no longer feel ashamed to read in public what started life as a children's book.

9 *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt

Tartt's first and most successful novel concerns the murder of a classics student at a small New England university.

10 *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks

Faulks dreamed of being a cab driver until, at 15, he read George Orwell and decided to become a novelist instead. *Birdsong*, part of a trilogy that includes *The Girl at the Lion D'Or* and *Charlotte Gray*, put Faulks on the map — though it took him only three months to write.

11 *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth

The hardback version numbers 1,349 pages, but despite being one of the longest novels yet published in a single volume in English, readers advise that getting through it is worth the arm-ache.

12 *Atonement* by Ian McEwan

Regarded as one of McEwan's most complex and accomplished novels, it covers themes of war, childhood, class, guilt and forgiveness in a tightly controlled plot. Said to be an attempt by McEwan to insert his name retrospectively into the pantheon of British novelists of the 1930s and 1940s.

13 *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov

Utterly original, though opinion is still divided as to whether what Nabokov called "my most difficult book" elevates the "nymphet" theme to high art.

14 *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles

Fowles, an admirer of Thomas Hardy, thought of this novel as the book Victorian novelists had failed to write. Thrillingly it has three different endings and the characters seem to jump off the page.

15 *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez

Lovesickness is an illness in the author's fourth novel, apparently based on the love affair of his parents. "The only difference is [my parents] married," he said.

16 *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

Post-apocalyptic, characteristically brutal tale of a journey taken by a father and his young son across ravaged terrain. McCarthy sets himself up as an Old Testament prophet predicting the slow death of

FESTIVAL

Video highlights from The Times Cheltenham Literature Festival

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EUREKA



Wellcome: Where Science meets Art

These are not the science books you were expecting

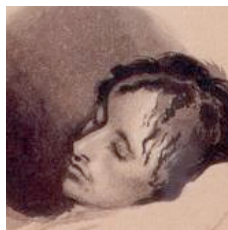
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ARCHIVE BLOG



Died, at Rome ... Keats's death notice

civilisation after the lights go out.

17 One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez

The bestselling book in Spanish in modern history after *Don Quixote* documents approximately 100 years in the life of the mythical village of Macondo.

18 A Prayer for Owen Meany by John Irving
Owen Meany is a dwarfish boy with a strange voice who accidentally kills his best friend's mother with a baseball. Many of Irving's usual themes are here: New England, incestuous desires, prostitutes, a deadly accident, and an absent parent among them.

19 The Leopard by Giuseppe Di Lampedusa
Published posthumously in 1958, *The Leopard* chronicles the changes in Sicilian life and society during the Risorgimento. Most famous line: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

20 Dr Zhivago by Boris Pasternak
One man torn apart by forces beyond his control (mainly women and war), against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Russian Civil War.

And the rest...

Lord of the Flies by William Golding
British schoolboys stranded on a deserted island try to govern themselves with catastrophic results.

Slaughterhouse Five by Kurt Vonnegut
Billy Pilgrim is abducted by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. Like the author, Pilgrim has been traumatised by his experience as an American prisoner of war who witnesses the firebombing of Dresden.

Watership Down by Richard Adams
Heroic fantasy novel about a group of anthropomorphised rabbits. Feminist critics have scolded Adams for the patronising attitude of his "male chauvinist rabbits" towards the does.

World without End by Ken Follet
The day after Halloween, in the year 1327, four children slip away from the cathedral city of ... Kingsbridge. Sequel to *Pillars of the Earth*.

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini
Follow-up to *The Kite Runner* reached number two in the Amazon charts even before it was published. Concerns the lives of two Afghan women in the second half of the twentieth century.

Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie
Post-colonial magical realism from the man who coined "Naughty But Nice".

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood
Feminist dystopia, brilliantly observed, creepy and impossible to forget.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis
Children's fantasy novel avidly read and well-regarded by adults. Best known of the Narnia chronicles.

Get Shorty by Elmore Leonard
Leo Devoe has scammed an airline out of \$300,000 in life insurance by faking his own death. Now a small-time Miami-based loanshark is on his tale. Leonard wrote Westerns before turning to crime. "Your prose makes Raymond Chandler look clumsy," Martin Amis once told him.

Smiley's People by John le Carre
David Cornwell aka Le Carre worked for MI5 and MI6 before turning to full time writing. *Smiley's People* was

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT



Oxford English

Is the new Oxford Companion to English Literature better or worse than its predecessors?

Margaret Thatcher's German war

Newly released documents reveal the British Prime Minister's fear of a reunited Germany

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Gillian Bowditch: Why we all miss the kind, ...
...and moderation. Like perfecting the polka or understanding how to use logarithms, there is no call for...
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Sandra Bullock on *The Proposal*
...edge when she needs it: she was quietly disputatious as Harper Lee in *Infamous*, hysterically so as...
July 16, 2009 | Times Online

Lord Mandelson's friendships

See full profile:
Harper Lee
To Kill a Mockingbird
Ku Klux Klan
Atticus Finch
Patrick Bateman

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his ninth novel but not one of his best, he claimed in an interview, preferring *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*; *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *The Tailor of Panama* and *The Constant Gardener*

American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis Fast-paced, witty though often gory thriller narrated by megalomaniacal serial killer and successful Manhattan yuppie businessman, Patrick Bateman. The book is sold with an 18 certificate in many countries.

Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt
The original misery memoir won the Pulitzer for autobiography, though some residents of Limerick City have questioned the accuracy of McCourt's childhood memories.

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry
Changes in Indian society from independence in 1947 to the Emergency declared by Ghandi.

On the Road by Jack Kerouac
Semi-autobiographical beat classic still as fresh as ever.

Disgrace by J.M. Coetzee
The often shocking and profoundly bleak story of the personal failures of a South African professor.

Dune by Frank Herbert
Critically acclaimed sci-fi that went on to become the best-selling book in the genre.

Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell
Exhilarating, powerful and complex third novel inspired by Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*.

Northern Lights by Philip Pullman
First of His Dark Materials trilogy has attracted criticism from evangelists who claim it is anti-religion. Pullman received a third in English at Oxford but his main inspiration as a writer came when he discovered the illustrations of William Blake.

My Name is Red by Orhan Pamuk
Murder and art in 16th Century Istanbul won the Impac prize in 2003. Pamuk became a Nobel Laureate in 2006 shortly after charges against him by ultra-nationalists in Turkey were dropped: Pamuk had stated in an interview, "Thirty thousand Kurds have been killed here, and a million Armenians. And almost nobody dares to mention that. So I do."

Lucky Jim by Kingsley Amis
Academic satire and Amis's first published novel.

The Godfather by Mario Puzo
Puzo was a pulp journalist before he wrote his first novel, *The Dark Arena*, in the hope of earning money to feed his five children. He finally hit the jackpot with *The Godfather* in 1969, It was his sixth book and introduced words such as *Omerta* to a new audience.

The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing
Mental and societal breakdown, classic Lessing territory, with an anti-war message. The book was praised for its complexity and for "feminist self-consciousness in its raw state."

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
Farmers in California were horrified by the book's depiction of California farmers' attitudes and conduct toward the migrants, denouncing it as a 'pack of lies' and labelled it 'communist propaganda'. Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize twenty-three years after its publication, in 1962.

The House of Spirits by Isabel Allende
Allende's debut novel, conceived by the author when

she heard her grandfather was dying, began writing him a letter that became the starting manuscript.

The Magus by John Fowles

Gripping, dark and cultish novel set in Greece which tapped into the preoccupations of mysticism and psychoanalysis that were prevalent in the 1960s. Film adaptation unfortunately bungled.

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov

Satire on Soviet bureaucracy in which the Devil pays a visit to the atheistic Soviet Union. Has several English translations.

The Name of the Rose by Umberto Eco

Italian post-modern historical whodunit set (mainly) in a 14th Century monastery.

We need to talk about Kevin by Lionel Shriver

Why did Kevin go off the rails? His mother obsessively trawls his past for clues.

Trainspotting by Irvine Welsh

Seminal Scottish junkie novel.

Possession by Antonia Byatt

Two academics attempt to uncover the truth about the relationship between a pair of Victorian poets before it is discovered by rival colleagues.

Ragtime by E.L. Doctorow

Historical fiction set in 1900s New York traces the lives of three families.

Restoration by Rose Tremain

The physician Robert Merivel is appointed surgeon to all of Charles II dogs with debauched results.

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates

Yates's first novel follows the marriage of Frank and April Wheeler, confident Connecticut suburbanites who look down on their fellow suburbanites. "If my work has a theme," said Yates. "I suspect it is a simple one: that most human beings are inescapably alone, and therein lies their tragedy."

Shadow of the Wind by Carlos Ruiz Zafon

"In Zafon's hands, every scene seems to come from an early Orson Wells movie," said Stephen King of this detective/coming-of-age novel set in post-war Barcelona.

Immortality by Milan Kundera

Robert Musil, unhappy marriages, strange encounters on underground platforms, death and, of course, sex preside in this overtly fictionalised heavily philosophical novel.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy by John le Carre

Le Carre fictionally recreates from personal experience the revelations of the 1950s and 60s that exposed the Cambridge Five.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey

Kesey worked the graveyard shift as an orderly in a mental health facility and took psychoactive drugs which made him more sympathetic to the patients. He claimed that he wrote the first three pages high on peyote.

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess

Burgess dismissed Clockwork Orange as one of his lesser novels and hated Kubrick's adaptation.

A House for Mr. Biswas by V.S. Naipaul

Groundbreaking and tragi-comic, it's as fresh today as when it came out in 1961.

A Scanner Darkly by Philip K. Dick

Drug culture and undercover police officers in Orange County, California. Partly autobiographical. Dick's

wife, Tessa, "participated to a great extent in writing the outline and novel A Scanner Darkly with me," he stated in a contract, "and I owe her one half of all income derived from it."

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YOUR COMMENTS

10 Comments (Displaying 1-10)

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F Scott Wilson wrote:

You forgot The Untouchable by John Banville.

October 16, 2009 6:46 PM BST

 RECOMMEND?

Oliver Sellen wrote:

I don't understand. This was written on the ninth, the list was to be published at 10:00am on the tenth. Is this a guess or is this it? NovelList Google News and you get nothing. I still don't understand.

October 12, 2009 10:13 PM BST

 RECOMMEND?

K Hamilton wrote:

@ Philip Edwards,

If you look at Smileys People by Le Carre, you'll see that it also mentions American Psycho by Brett Easton Ellis, they've forgotten to give it its own line break. But it's there.

October 12, 2009 10:06 AM BST

 RECOMMEND?

Phillip Edwards wrote:

Much as I revere The Grapes of Wrath, how did it get on this list seeing as it was published 71 years ago? And, is it me, or are there only 59 books listed above?

October 10, 2009 2:52 AM BST

 RECOMMEND?

Kim Righetti wrote:

Dear Sebastian, I thought about that after I typed in the comment. Oh well, what is 13 yrs. in the overall scheme of things? It's still the best book.

October 10, 2009 1:13 AM BST

 RECOMMEND? (2)

Simon Dykins wrote:

"Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" by Robert M. Persig. Required reading, back in the day when I was a student.

October 9, 2009 5:32 PM BST

 RECOMMEND? (1)

Siobhan Woodrow wrote:

Nights at the Circus or Wise Children by Angela Carter. Know lists can't please all but amazing novels.

October 9, 2009 4:54 PM BST

 RECOMMEND? (1)

NICK SELWOC wrote:

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

now where's my towel - i'm off

October 9, 2009 4:30 PM BST

 RECOMMEND? (4)

Sebastian M wrote:

Kim, this is a list of books from the past 60 years, Gone with the Wind was published 73 years ago.

October 9, 2009 3:36 PM BST

 RECOMMEND? (6)

Kim Righetti wrote:

You forgot "Gone With The Wind" by Margaret Mitchell. It has "Lord of The Rings" beat by a mile.

October 9, 2009 2:10 PM BST

 RECOMMEND? (3)

HAVE YOUR SAY

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