



# Classic Novels

## Updated for the Modern Age

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In our January/February 2015 issue, we highlighted some fiction inspired by Jane Austen—books that have adapted, reimagined, and—gasp!—even stolen from her original works. That’s nothing new in the literary world; *Don Quixote* influenced *Madame Bovary*, and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* inspired *Finnegan’s Wake* (and here you thought James Joyce was an original). For centuries, authors have provided ongoing sources of inspiration for newer writers, with those more recent writers adapting familiar story structures and characters for contemporary settings. Although classic novels often put their modern-day renditions to shame, many of these updated “companion pieces” are worthy in their own right. We’ve selected a few novels inspired by older classics that take place, more or less, in present times. Since we’ve featured books about Greek mythology, Shakespeare, and Austen in previous issues, we’ve kept those categories to a minimum.

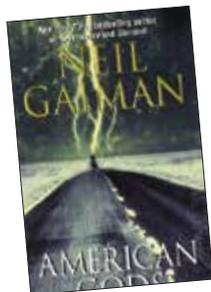
### Ancient Mythology

#### American Gods

By Neil Gaiman (2001)

- ◆ HUGO AWARD
- ◆ NEBULA AWARD

Gaiman, who originally gained acclaim for *The Sandman* graphic novels, blends fantasy, Americana, and various



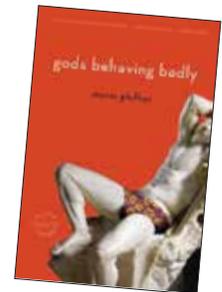
webs of ancient and modern mythology in his fourth novel. When Shadow Moon, 32, is released from prison early after his wife is killed, he befriends Wednesday—an old (disguised) god who immigrated to North America and is now preparing for a battle against the newer gods of American consumerism and technology. Wednesday employs Shadow as his errand boy, of sorts, and Shadow soon finds himself enmeshed in the tricky goings-on of old gods, from Egyptian deities to those of Norse and Russian legend alike, who came to North America thousands of years ago. But as Shadow becomes ever more involved in this strange world, he must reevaluate his own values as the final battle nears. Sequel (of sorts): *Anansi Boys* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2005)

#### Gods Behaving Badly

By Marie Phillips (2007)

Stuffed into a dilapidated mansion in an unfashionable London neighborhood, a dozen of the old familiar Greek gods are facing hard times these days—and, unimaginably, their possible demise. Desperate to retrieve their old powers, the gods have been forced to take “real world” jobs:

Aphrodite has become a phone-sex worker; Artemis, goddess of the hunt, is reduced to walking dogs for a living; and Dionysus works nights as a DJ. Into this madcap household, a perplexed cleaning lady (mortal) and her Scrabble-obsessed, comic book-collector boyfriend arrive—only to face the challenge of negotiating peace



among the battling gods, restoring them to their former glory, and perhaps even saving humankind in the process. The heavens, clearly, were never like this. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2008)

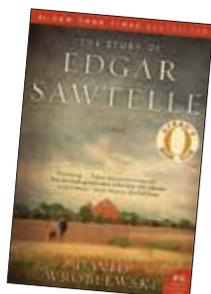
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## Elizabethan England

### The Story of Edgar Sawtelle

By David Wroblewski (2008)

In this riff on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599–1602), the Sawtelle family breeds a (fictional) variety of dog in the woods of Wisconsin. Remarkably intuitive and clever, these dogs make the perfect companions for the young, mute Edgar Sawtelle, who communicates through sign language. Life on the farm becomes complicated, however, with the arrival of Claude, Edgar's estranged uncle. Though at first charming, Claude soon shows unmistakable signs of malice. When his brother (Edgar's father) dies under mysterious circumstances and Claude begins to woo Edgar's beloved mother, it becomes evident that something is rotten in the state of Wisconsin. Before the novel is over, 14-year-old Edgar faces ghosts, revenge, and the joys and sorrows of caring for humankind's best friend. (★★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2008)

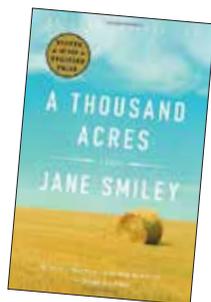


### A Thousand Acres

By Jane Smiley (1991)

- ◆ PULITZER PRIZE
- ◆ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD

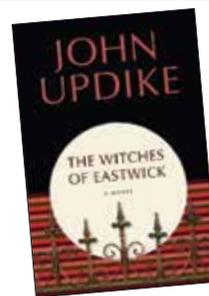
Yes, it's Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1607) in a . . . cornfield. Ginny Cook, the eldest of three daughters and a farmer's wife, looks back on the time when her father, Larry Cook (*King Lear*), decided to hand over his large Iowa farm to his three daughters and their partners. When the youngest daughter, Caroline, a lawyer, expresses her doubts, Larry removes her from the inheritance, citing filial betrayal. This action sets in motion a chain of events that reveals dark, terrible secrets of sexual abuse by Larry, sibling rivalry, betrayal, and the guilt that all families harbor. This American, 20th-century version of *King Lear* is just as dark and complicated as Shakespeare's original, and it has a different, but equally tragic, ending.



### The Witches of Eastwick

By John Updike (1984)

The sinister witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1599–1606) make an appearance as three witches living in the fictional town of Eastwick, Rhode Island, in the 1960s. Each acquired magical powers following their divorces: one can fly, another can turn milk into cream, and the last can create thunderstorms. Then, the women find themselves under the satanic spell of a new man in town who seduces each of them and encourages them to create scandals in the town—but his marriage to another friend sets up the trio for revenge. The sequel: *The Widows of Eastwick* (★★★ Jan/Feb 2008).



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## The Jacobean Era

### His Dark Materials

By Philip Pullman (1995–2000)

In this award-winning, epic fantasy trilogy (*The Golden Compass* [1995], *The Subtle Knife* [1997], and *The Amber Spyglass* [2000]), Pullman retells and inverts John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), about Adam and Eve's fall from grace and their original sin. Pullman chronicles the coming-of-age of two children, Lyra Belacqua and Will Parry, who wander through parallel worlds—worlds resembling England's Victorian era, a sort of present day, and a haunted seaside town called Cittàgazze—as they search for a magical knife and Dust, which can dissolve universes. The novel also draws on quantum physics, theology, and philosophy (the nature of evil, redemption, free choice, and so on) and does a phenomenal job of creating complex, exquisite characters who navigate alternative worlds. The series has drawn criticism, however, for its critical look at Christianity, and religion in general.



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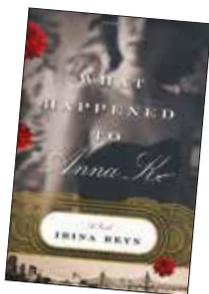
## Nineteenth-Century Russian Classics

### What Happened to Anna K.

By Irina Reyn (2008)

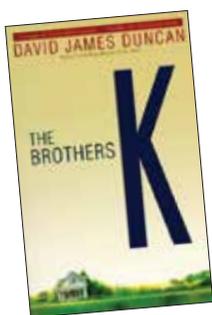
Russian literature's most tragic heroine converts to Judaism and emigrates from her home country to the boroughs of New York City in this modern take on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877). A great deal of the fun in this sort of reimagining is seeing how Reyn, who emigrated from Moscow to the United States as a child, converts staid, old elements into rowdy, new 21st-century ones, so mum's the word on

specific plot points. But for those who have never read the original: Anna, a young woman married to a wealthy aristocrat, feels stifled. She has material happiness but little else. Then she meets The Other Man (less rich and more intellectual) and falls desperately in love with him. Reyn's version, which features the Russian-Jewish immigrant community in Manhattan and Rego Park, follows along these same rails (a train metaphor—ironists, take note) and ultimately ends up at the same station. But getting there in the 21st century is half the fun. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2008)



## The Brothers K

By David James Duncan (1992)  
In his acclaimed *The River Why* (1983), David James Duncan explored, through the art of fly fishing, the natural and spiritual world. In his comic second novel, which pays homage to Dostoevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov* [1880]) and baseball, the brothers of the title are the Chance boys—the sons of a former minor league pitcher who lives with his fanatical Seventh Day Adventist wife in the mill town of Camas, Washington. Kincaid, the youngest son in his family of four boys and twin girls, narrates their lives and the issues they all face: the Vietnam antiwar movement; the pressure of athletics; mental illness; spiritual growth; politics; and, of course, family tensions. But just like Dostoevsky's Karamazov brothers, God shows them the way.

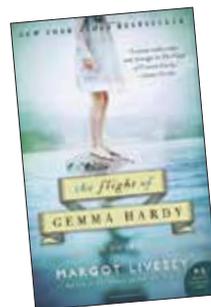


Baz's video installation, *Cathode Narcissus*—and the object of Henry's hypnotic, corruptive influence. While the era differs from Wilde's original, *Self* transposes the locations, characters, and plot from the 1890s chapter by chapter as paints a bittersweet portrait of gay life in the shadow of AIDS in the late 20th century.

## The Flight of Gemma Hardy

By Margot Livesey (2012)

This modern-day retelling of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) takes place in 1958. Ten-year-old orphan Gemma Hardy is mourning the loss of her beloved Uncle Charles, who after the death of her parents seven years earlier, fetched her from her native Iceland to raise as his own in Scotland. Gemma's cruel, conceited Aunt Louise soon sends her to Claypoole, a boarding school where Gemma must endure backbreaking labor in exchange for her education. At 18, Gemma takes a job as a nanny in remote, windswept Orkney, where she meets the brooding, mysterious master of Blackbird Hall, Hugh Sinclair, who is hiding a shocking secret. Livesey's seventh novel lovingly adheres to Brontë's rich, rewarding format. (★★★★ May/June 2012)



## Further Reading

**SOLSBURY HILL** | SUSAN M. WYLER (2014; BASED ON **WUTHERING HEIGHTS** BY EMILY BRONTË)

**STATE OF WONDER** | ANN PATCHETT (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2011; BASED ON **HEART OF DARKNESS** BY JOSEPH CONRAD)

**BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY** | HELEN FIELDING (1996; BASED ON **PRIDE AND PREJUDICE** BY JANE AUSTEN)

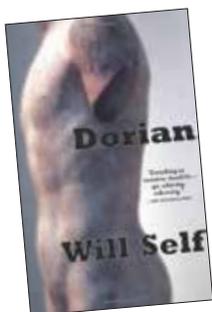
## The Victorian Era

### Dorian

**An Imitation**

By Will Self (2002)

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), the story of a man who remains creepily young while his portrait ages, offered a vicious commentary on the fin de siècle. This modern spin on that classic, a critique of postmodernism, starts in 1981 London, the summer of the Royal Wedding and the Brixton riots. Henry Wooten, an aristocratic drug addict, and his ex-lover and protégé, avant-garde artist Baz Hallward, meet the sensual, enigmatic, and amoral Dorian Gray; Dorian subsequently becomes the subject of



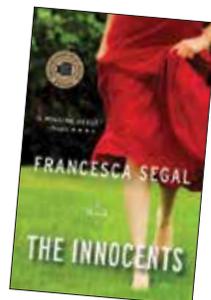
## Nineteenth-Century America

### The Innocents

By Francesca Segal (2012)

◆ COSTA FIRST NOVEL AWARD

Edith Wharton wrote about upper-class New York society in the 1870s in *The Age of Innocence* (◆ PULITZER PRIZE, 1921). Segal's debut takes place in an insular Jewish suburb of contemporary London. Successful young lawyer Adam Newland (Newland Archer), 28, has finally become engaged to the conventional Rachel Gilbert (May Welland), whom he has been dating for more than a decade. But when Rachel's beautiful, provocative younger cousin Ellie Schneider (Countess Ellen Olenska), who has been asked

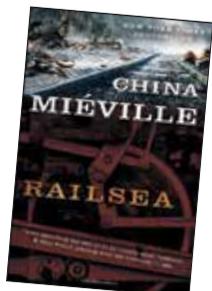


to leave Columbia for her private scandals, moves back home from New York, Adam becomes transfixed with her and her freewheeling, independent lifestyle. Suddenly, Adam begins to question the world he has always known—his tight-knit Jewish community, his engagement to Rachel, and his prescribed future.

## Railsea

By China Miéville (2012)

The spectacle of his first moldywarpe hunt should have Sham clamoring for life on the railsea, an interconnected world of train tracks in a desert ocean. But in this lighthearted parody of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), he's always dreamed of more. When Sham, investigating a train wreck, comes across the key to something wonderful—something impossible—that exists outside his limited experience, he embarks on the adventure of a lifetime. Using *Moby-Dick* as his source material (and Robert Louis Stevenson for his pirates), Miéville refigures the world in his own inimitable way, replete with Captain Naphi (she's not who you think she is) seeking to avenge a severed limb; the setting's desolate, awe-inspiring grandeur; and the hunt for Mocker-Jack, the legendary white . . . mole. The railsea, she can be a cruel mistress. (★★★★ July/Aug 2012)



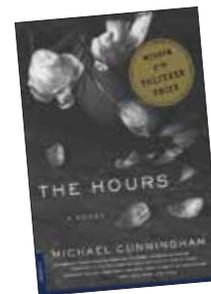
## Twentieth-Century Britain

### The Hours

By Michael Cunningham (1998)

- ♦ PULITZER PRIZE
- ♦ PEN/FAULKNER AWARD

In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Virginia Woolf detailed a day in the life of the high-society Clarissa Dalloway in post-World War I England. *The Hours* borrows from both Woolf's classic novel and Woolf herself as it follows three generations of women. Woolf, struggling with mental illness, writes her famous novel *Mrs. Dalloway*; Mrs. Brown, wife of a World War II veteran, plans her husband's birthday party as she reads *Mrs. Dalloway*; Clarissa Vaughan, a modern-day woman (and stand-in for Clarissa Dalloway) in New York, lives with her female lover and has a best friend who is dying from AIDS. Written in a stream-of-consciousness style like the original, *The Hours* presents situations experienced by the original Clarissa Dalloway—all over the course of one day.



### Further Reading

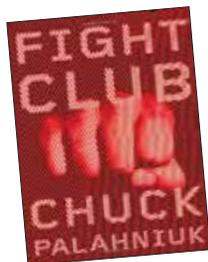
ON BEAUTY | ZADIE SMITH (2005); HOWARDS END BY E. M. FORSTER)

## Twentieth-Century America

### Fight Club

By Chuck Palahniuk (1996)

Palahniuk is something of a cult novelist: his self-described “transgressive fiction” is gritty, cynical, and raw, filled with testosterone and disturbing black humor. His most famous novel, *Fight Club*, features a nihilist who, caught in American pop culture, establishes an underground fighting club as a radical, anarchic form of therapy. Palahniuk stated that *Fight Club* is an updated version of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925); with some differences, Tyler may be Gatsby; Marla, a stand-in for Daisy; and the unnamed narrator, Nick Carraway. Then, of course, there's Project Mayhem, a cult-like organization bent on bringing down modern civilization. If Fitzgerald's classic explored the hollow soul of society after World War I and the failings of the American dream, Palahniuk's loosely updated work rejects that dream but similarly suggests the necessity of human contact over material perfection.



## Young Adult Titles

GOING BOVINE | LIBBA BRAY (2009, ♦ MICHAEL L. PRINTZ AWARD; BASED ON DON QUIXOTE BY MIGUEL DE CERVANTES)

THE MOCKINGBIRDS | DAISY WHITNEY (2010; BASED ON TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD BY HARPER LEE)

THE NEW GIRL | PAIGE HARBISON (2012; BASED ON REBECCA BY DAPHNE DU MAURIER)

GREAT | SARA BENINCASA (2014; BASED ON THE GREAT GATSBY BY F. SCOTT FITZGERALD)

SECOND STAR | ALYSSA B. SHEINMEL (2014; BASED ON PETER PAN BY J. M. BARRIE)

TAM LIN | PAMELA DEAN (1991; BASED ON THE SCOTTISH LEGEND TAM LIN)

FLY ON THE WALL: HOW ONE GIRL SAW EVERYTHING | E. LOCKHART (2006; BASED ON THE METAMORPHOSIS BY FRANZ KAFKA)

THE WEDNESDAY WARS | GARY D. SCHMIDT (2007, ♦ NEWBERY HONOR; BASED ON THE TEMPEST BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE)

SPEAK | LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON (♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST, 1999; BASED ON THE SCARLET LETTER BY NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE)

THE TURNING | FRANCINE PROSE (2012; BASED ON THE TURN OF THE SCREW BY HENRY JAMES) ■