



from
 Paradise
to
HELL 

GUILTY PLEASURES

Vol. 1

EXCUSE ME, it looks like something fell behind the other books on your bookshelf. Here, behind *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Ulysses*. Wait, what is this? A copy of *Confessions of a Shopaholic*? And look, there's a whole stack of books back here ...

It's a bibliophile's worst nightmare—caught red-handed with a guilty pleasure. Do you live in fear that someone will discover your stash of shame and satisfaction—novels full of sex, temptation, romance, cheesiness, sentimentality, drugs, infidelity, rock 'n' roll, and more sex? It's time to unburden yourself: we're here to celebrate our collective shame. We polled readers, conducted research, and held our own private, top secret confessionals to compile our list of favorite guilty-pleasure novels.

Now some books are more humiliating than others. We turned to a master of guilt—Dante and his *Divine Comedy*—to come up with our categories. Books labeled “Paradise” are a fine read. Some are practically guilt-free, and you're allowed to bring them with you on public transportation, provided you remain delightfully anonymous. “Purgatory” books should travel no further than your nightstand. And as for “Hell” books, well, shame on you.

There's plenty of guilt to go around, so we had to come up with some ground rules for our list. We've done a number of features on crime, science fiction, and fantasy in

the past, so we omitted those from our list. If your interest in degradation is along those lines, please consult your *Bookmarks* back issues. We contained our shame to three genres: Chick Lit, Romance, and Lad Lit. That's enough for now, naughty reader.

CHICK LIT

Are you young, single, and working? Were you at least one of those things once upon a time? Here are your guilt-ridden guides to navigating relationships, friends, family, and careers.

 Paradise
The Group

By Mary McCarthy (1963)

In this satire of upper-class New York society, eight Vassar graduates of the class of 1933 reunite to attend a wedding. Controversial when first published, *The Group* includes discussions of homosexuality, mental illness, Communism, contraception, and breast-feeding—taboo subjects at the time—as it follows the young women's postcollegiate lives

as they deal with sex, infidelity, artistic freedom, love, and the breaking of—or conforming to—tradition.

THE MOVIE: 1966, starring Candice Bergen, Joan Hackett, Elizabeth Hartman, and Shirley Knight, and directed by Sidney Lumet.

The Best of Everything

By Rona Jaffe (1958)

A true page-turner, Jaffe's classic reflects the era's changing social and business milieu with its story of five young female employees of a New York publishing company. One dreams of transitioning from the typing pool to an editor's office, while another secretly yearns for domesticity. Love, sex, happiness, and ambition all play out in this 1950s-era—but nonetheless universally appealing—*Sex and the City*.

THE MOVIE: 1959, starring Hope Lange, Diane Baker, Suzy Parker, and Joan Crawford, and directed by Jean Negulesco.

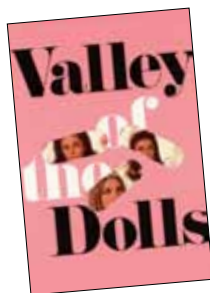
Valley of the Dolls

By Jacqueline Susann (1966)

◆ NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER

When the author died in 1974, *Valley of the Dolls*, a roman à clef, was one of the best-selling novels of all time, with worldwide sales eventually exceeding 30 million. After World War II, three women come together at the start of their careers during the production of a Broadway play, but take divergent paths over the next 20 years as they hit the highest of heights—and the lowest of lows. Sex, love, ambition, abortion, adultery, and drugs (the “dolls” are barbiturates) keep this novel current and riveting.

THE MOVIE: 1967, starring Barbara Parkins, Sharon Tate, Patty Duke, and Paul Burke, and directed by Mark Robson.



♥ Purgatory

Bridget Jones's Diary

By Helen Fielding (1996)

◆ BRITISH BOOK OF THE YEAR

Based loosely on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, this hilarious, irreverent novel captivated the hearts of women worldwide. Bridget, a 30-something “singleton” living in London, can't get anything right—her career, family, looks, weight (she gains 74 pounds but loses 72 over the course of a year), smoking habit, and, most of all, romantic relationships. As she chronicles a year in her life and continues to browbeat the male species, Bridget becomes involved with two men. The sequel: *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999).

THE MOVIE: 2001, starring Renée Zellweger, Hugh Grant, and Colin Firth, and directed by Sharon Maguire.

Sex and the City

By Candace Bushnell (1997)

Before it was a popular HBO series, *Sex and the City* was first a series of columns published in the *New York Observer* and then a book of essays. Fans of the television show will find some differences in this account of Carrie Bradshaw's New York adventures as a single woman on the party circuit and always on the lookout for that perfect love and pair of Manolo Blahniks: in the book, her experiences and friends range farther than Charlotte, Miranda, and Samantha. Also by the author: *Lipstick Jungle* (2005) and *One Fifth Avenue* (2008).

THE MOVIE: 2008, starring Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, and Cynthia Nixon, and directed by Michael Patrick King.

Good in Bed

By Jennifer Weiner (2001)

Weiner, an unabashed maven of Chick Lit, introduces 28-year-old Candace Shapiro, an overweight newspaper reporter. After reading her ex-boyfriend's magazine column “Good in Bed”—specifically, its initial installment, “Loving a Larger Woman,” based on their relationship—Cannie turns to the only comfort she knows: drink and her dog. When her ex reenters her life, she attempts to reconcile. But will Cannie stay strong as she tries to figure out who she is in life? The sequel: *Certain Girls* (2008).

Rachel's Holiday

By Marian Keyes (1998)

Rachel Walsh, a large, unsexy Irish woman, discovers, in Manhattan, the perfect party lifestyle. Despite the lines of coke she inhales every weekend, she denies her drug and alcohol problem. When her father sends her to The Cloisters, a fancy rehabilitation center in Ireland, it's not quite the vacation Rachel has planned. As she starts to confront her addiction, romance and friendships complicate her journey to recovery. Keyes, herself a recovering alcoholic, has written a witty story about a serious issue. Also by the author: *Watermelon* (1995), *Lucy Sullivan Is Getting Married* (1996), *Anybody Out There?* (2006).

The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing

By Melissa Bank (1999)

In this short story collection, Jane Rosenthal recounts her formative life experiences—most of them relating to love and romance. At age 14, she observes her brother's awkward interactions with his girlfriend; at 28, the neurotic, insecure Jane is busy figuring out her own work situation and relationship with an older, unconventional editor. While superficially a light, witty read, Bank's understated stories address deeper issues of work-family balance and coming of age.

THE MOVIE: *Suburban Girl*, 2007, starring Sarah Michelle Gellar, and directed by Marc Klein.

I Don't Know How She Does It

The Life of Kate Reddy, *Working Mother*

By Allison Pearson (2002)

Kate Reddy, the mother of a five-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy, works at a prestigious brokerage firm and lives in a fashionable North London neighborhood. In the diary-like tradition of *Bridget Jones*, she narrates her life as mother, wife, and careerist. Intelligent and humorous, *I Don't Know* offers a loose guide to contemporary women and society's often unrealistic expectations of them. If you've ever considered "distressing" a store-bought pie to make it look homemade for a child's bake sale, this book is for you.



The Nanny Diaries

By Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus (2002)

Topping the "hell" list is this addictive, insider novel about private child care in upper-crust Manhattan. Written by two former nannies, this satire about the upper class features Nan and her ward—the four-year-old son of Mrs. X, a neurotic Park Avenue mother, and an adulterous father. The underpaid Nan endures Mrs. X's condescending demands—until she finds herself involved in the parents' fraying marriage.

THE MOVIE: 2007, starring Scarlett Johansson and Donna Murphy, and directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini.

The Devil Wears Prada

By Lauren Weisberger (2003)

The author once worked as an assistant to Anna Wintour, editor of *Vogue* magazine, and this thinly fictionalized account relates the perils of the fashion industry. When frumpy Andrea Sachs lands a job with Miranda Priestly, the powerful, feared editor of *Runway* magazine, Andrea—a recent Ivy League grad who had hoped to work for the *New Yorker*—has a lot to learn. From dealing with Miranda's insecurities to keeping her balance in Jimmy Choo stilettos, Andrea must somehow work her way up in life—even if it means compromising her relationships and values. Despite the shallowness of it all, it's a great read for lovers of fashion and gossip.

THE MOVIE: 2006, starring Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway, and directed by David Frankel.

Gossip Girl

By Cecily von Ziegesar (2002)

Although really a young adult read, this series (*Gossip Girl*, *You Know You Love Me*, *All I Want Is Everything*, etc.) is shamefully addictive. On Manhattan's Upper East Side,

a group of wealthy high school students—the beautiful, enviable Blair, her boyfriend Nate, and her ex-best friend Serena—attend a prep school where anything can happen: sexual exploration, backstabbing, love, academic competition, and more. It's certainly not *Judy Blume*, but a *Harlequin* romance for the teenager in us.

TV SERIES: 2007, starring Blake Lively, Leighton Meester, Penn Badgley, and Chace Crawford.

Confessions of a Shopaholic

By Sophie Kinsella (2000)

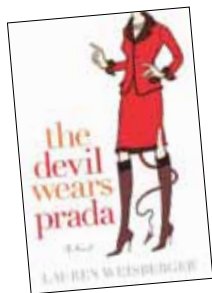
First in the *Shopaholic* series, *Confessions* features Becky Bloomwood, a 20-something London financial journalist whose uncontrollable shopping addiction lands her in serious debt. Filled with misadventures—including a bungled romance with a handsome, wealthy man that could sour after a financial debacle—the hilarious *Confessions* offers some superficial lessons on self-control, opportunity, and unpaid Visa bills. The sequel: *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan* (2001).

THE MOVIE: 2009, starring Isla Fisher and Hugh Dancy, and directed by P. J. Hogan.

Something Borrowed

By Emily Giffin (2004)

Rachel and Darcy have been best friends since kindergarten. Now young adults, Rachel is a single attorney, while the manipulative, flashier Darcy plans to marry the handsome Dex. But after Rachel's 30th birthday bash, Rachel somehow ends up in bed with Dex—and realizes that he's the man for her. Giffin portrays the cheaters sympathetically as she explores how relationships are built, survive, and then fall apart—and whether friendship or true love is more important. The sequel: *Something Blue* (2005).



ROMANCE

When it comes to love, there's something for everyone—from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to juicy bodice rippers and historical romance. Fortunately, the genre has evolved from the helpless heroine and brave hero of yesteryear to encompass strong women and modern-day feminism. But still with some swooning.

Paradise

Gone with the Wind

By Margaret Mitchell (1936)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

◆ TIME MAGAZINE'S 100 BEST NOVELS

A classic of Civil War-era romance, *Gone with the Wind* was an instant best seller: few romances are as epic as those between Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, and Ashley and Melanie Wilkes. On Tara, a Georgia plantation, the high-tempered, raven-haired Scarlett plots to steal Ashley

from her friend, Melanie. But Rhett, a wealthy, contemptuous outcast, has other plans for this Southern belle. Not only a classic romance, this historical novel also depicts the violence and social struggles of the time.

THE MOVIE: 1939, Academy Award winner, starring Vivien Leigh, George Reeves, and Fred Crane, and directed by Victor Fleming.

Rebecca

By Daphne du Maurier (1938)

In this psychological romance and mystery, an American woman marries a wealthy Englishman, Maxim de Winter, and moves to Manderley, his West Country estate. Little does she realize that the ghost of Rebecca—Maxim's first wife, who supposedly drowned in an accident—will haunt their marriage. Undermined by the housekeeper and convinced that Maxim is still in love with Rebecca, the second Mrs. De Winter slowly ferrets out her husband's secrets.

THE MOVIE: 1940, Academy Award winner, starring Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine, and directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

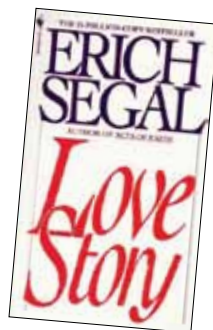
Love Story

By Erich Segal (1970)

♦ NEW YORK TIMES NO. 1 BEST SELLER

First it was a screenplay—and then it was a tearjerker novel. Considered one of the most romantic books of all time, *Love Story* chronicles the unlikely relationship between Oliver Barrett IV, a wealthy Harvard jock, and Jenny Cavilleri, a Radcliffe music major. Their sacrifices and ultimately tragic relationship reveal a love that will leave readers envious. A short, sentimental read about love, loss, pain, and hope, *Love Story* is a classic of the genre.

THE MOVIE: 1970, starring Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal, and directed by Arthur Hiller.



The Accidental Tourist

By Anne Tyler (1985)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD

♦ PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST

When travel writer Macon Leary's wife moves out of their Baltimore home, Macon, paralyzed by grief, finds safe haven with his two brothers and spinster sister. He slowly finds solace—and love—in Muriel, an eccentric dog trainer and single mother. Tyler, known for her quirky characters and plots set in Baltimore, has created an unlikely couple in this classic duo, who come together "for reasons the rest of the world would never guess."

THE MOVIE: 1988, starring William Hurt, Kathleen Turner, and Geena Davis, and directed by Lawrence Kasdan.

Possession

A Romance

By A. S. Byatt (1990)

♦ BOOKER PRIZE

You can hold your head high while reading this true cult classic—a literary thriller with a tale of love, friendship, and intrigue at its core. Two contemporary young scholars unearth the trail of two (fictional) Victorian poets—and, through letters, diaries, and poems, the poets' clandestine romance. What makes the novel truly remarkable is not only the spectacular writing or thrilling plot but also the addition of the fictional poets' literary works, as well as their letters, written in Victorian prose.

THE MOVIE: 2002, starring Gwyneth Paltrow, Aaron Eckhart, Jeremy Northam, and Jennifer Ehle, and directed by Neil LaBute.

The Time Traveler's Wife

By Audrey Niffenegger (2003)

♦ BRITISH BOOK AWARD

♦ ARTHUR C. CLARK AWARD SHORT LIST

In this unusual love story, a work of "soft" science fiction and a book group favorite, a man with a chronodisplacement disorder that causes him to involuntarily travel through time falls in love with a woman who, much to his chagrin, lives a chronologically normal life. Not surprisingly, they face challenges far greater than the typical miscommunications. When they first meet, they are their normal ages (Clare, 20 and Henry, 28)—and though Henry believes they are meeting for the first time, Clare has known him since she was six. Confusing ... or compelling?

THE MOVIE: 2009, starring Eric Bana and Rachel McAdams, and directed by Robert Schwentke.



♥ Purgatory

The Thorn Birds

By Colleen McCullough (1977)

This best-selling saga of deep, forbidden love, dark passions, and unrealized dreams chronicles three generations of the Cleary family, ranchers in the Australian outback, during the 20th century. This sweeping love story centers on beautiful Meggie and her lifelong relationship with a Roman Catholic priest, who must choose between the woman he loves and his beloved vocation—despite the existence of an illegitimate child.

TV MINISERIES: 1983, starring Richard Chamberlain and Rachel Ward, and directed by Daryl Duke.

The Grand Sophy

By Georgette Heyer (1950)

Regency romance, a subgenre of romance set in the early 19th century during the English Regency, has its own plot

conventions, drawn from the “novels of manners” (think Jane Austen). Readers looking for scandalous sex won’t find it in Heyer’s novel. They will, however, find witty dialogue and an engaging story about the charismatic, irresistible Sophia Stanton-Lacy, who, sent to live with her aunt in London, has some clever ideas about how to create happy couples (herself included). Heyer, the queen of Regency romance, was one of the original authors in the genre—with many emulators but few competitors.

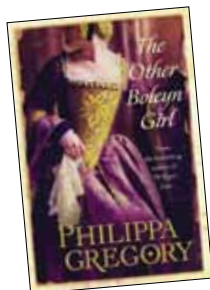
The Other Boleyn Girl

By Philippa Gregory (2002)

It might be 16th-century smut, but this portrayal of Henry VIII’s love affair with Mary Boleyn (the narrator and sister of the more famous Anne Boleyn) exposes the greed, love, sex, and status that brought many of the era’s key players—and lesser-known figures—down.

Although controversial for its historical accuracy, few readers can resist the sibling rivalry, the ruthless quest for status, the evil political shenanigans, and, of course, the sexual dalliances of the court. The five sequels, none of them as good, start with *The Queen’s Fool* (2004). See our interview with the author in our Nov/Dec 2008 issue.

THE MOVIE: 2008, starring Natalie Portman, Scarlett Johansson, and Eric Bana, and directed by Justin Chadwick.



The Dream Trilogy

By Nora Roberts

Between 1991 and 2001, Roberts had 68 novels on the *New York Times* best seller list—though that paper did not review any of those books. That says a lot. However, as one of the first writers to shift the romance genre away from the virginal Regency heroine to more in-depth, modern-day heroines and heroes, Roberts remains wonderfully popular for her light, compelling story lines. The *Dream* trilogy—*Daring to Dream* (1996), *Holding the Dream* (1997), and *Finding the Dream* (1997)—features three girls who shared a home but evolve into very different women, all of whom experience romantic crises involving handsome, dangerous men, family secrets, and scandalous revelations.

The Notebook

By Nicholas Sparks (1996)

◆ NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER

An immediate best seller, *The Notebook* is romance at its sappiest and most clichéd—but also most compelling. A story of love lost and found, the novel features two North Carolina teenagers who fall in love in the 1930s. When they meet again more than a decade later, Noah is a World War II veteran restoring a home, and Allie is engaged to a prosperous man. When passions reignite, Allie must choose

between respectability and true love. The novel has been compared to *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller (1992)—another sentimental tearjerker.

THE MOVIE: 2004, starring Ryan Gosling, Tim Ivey, Rachel McAdams, and Starletta DuPois, and directed by Nick Cassavetes.

A Kingdom of Dreams

Judith McNaught (1989)

Part of the Westmoreland Dynasty Saga, *Kingdom of Dreams* might make readers weep for its sheer sappiness. Will Jennifer Merrick, the beautiful daughter of a Scottish landowner, have to sacrifice the love of her family for loyalty to her English fighter-husband during the English invasion of Scotland? McNaught is largely credited as one of the creators of the Regency Historical romance subgenre, so this novel may appeal to fans of historical fiction—if the sentimental cover doesn’t scare you off first.

More Than a Mistress

By Mary Balogh (2000)

In this Regency-era romance set in London, Jane Ingleby and Duke Jocelyn Dudley seemingly remain separated by birth and class, though Jane carries her own secrets. With their mutual attraction, however, they can’t stay apart forever. But when Jane becomes Jocelyn’s mistress, Jocelyn makes the mistake of falling in love with her. Filled with sensual details, plenty of sex, and compelling historical detail, the two headstrong protagonists somehow work it out. This was Balogh’s first book in hardback—an achievement in the romance writing world.

The Donovan Series

By Elizabeth Lowell

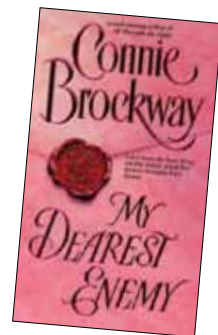
Lowell (the pen name of Ann Maxwell) first became known as a science fiction writer in the 1980s, but she turned to crime, historical fiction, romantic suspense, and contemporary and historical romance. In *Amber Beach* (1997), the first in this predictable and clichéd romance series, Honor Donovan, searching for her missing brother in the San Juan Islands, falls for fishing guide Jake Mallory—who has reasons for keeping his own past secret. Stolen Baltic amber, the Russian Mafia, and government intrigue spice up this rather racy novel. Next in the series: *Jade Island* (1998).

My Dearest Enemy

By Connie Brockway (1998)

◆ ROMANCE WRITERS OF AMERICA RITA AWARD FOR BEST HISTORICAL ROMANCE

Brockway, a historical and contemporary romance novelist, remains exceedingly popular in the genre. After Avery Thorne’s uncle dies, Avery leaves the family manor, Mill House, since his uncle has bequeathed it to a distant relative, suffragist Lily Bede—if she can run it successfully



for five years. Through letters, Brockway charts their formal business relationship; when Avery returns home after traveling around the world, they succumb to an unpredictable sexual attraction—despite being sworn enemies. Warning: sex scenes may leave readers cringing.

LAD LIT

There's a formal counterpart to Chick Lit, and it's called Lad Lit (there are cruder terms—we'll let you research those). Written from the perspective of men, much of it, like Chick Lit, deals with young men, careers, and sexual relationships—and the trouble that lies therein.

Paradise

The Calligrapher

By Edward Docx (2003)

This contemporary love story, a reverse Chick Lit novel, reveals the male perspective on love's trials and tribulations—not to mention that rarely seen phenomenon: male emotion. Twentysomething Londoner Jasper Jackson (“the calligrapher”) transcribes John Donne's love poetry. An unrepentant womanizer with few qualms about his seductions, Jasper falls in love for the first time with a sexy but equally elusive woman. Each chapter opens with a Donne poem mirroring Jasper's experiences. Docx's second novel, *Pravda* (2007), won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and was long-listed for the Booker Prize.

Fight Club (1996) and Choke (2001)

By Chuck Palahniuk

Palahniuk is something of a cult novelist for the gritty, cynical, and raw reader. His self-described “transgressive fiction” provides shock value, disturbing black humor, and lots of testosterone. *Fight Club*, Palahniuk's most famous, features a nihilist who, trapped by American pop culture, establishes an underground fighting club as a radical, anarchic form of therapy; in *Choke*, a med school dropout seeks to escape his life of sex-addict meetings, historical theme parks, and his ill mother.

THE MOVIES: *Fight Club*, 1999, starring Edward Norton, Brad Pitt, and Helena Bonham Carter, and directed by David Fincher; *Choke*, 2008, starring Sam Rockwell and Anjelica Huston, and directed by Clark Gregg.

The Prince of Tides

By Pat Conroy (1986)

When his successful sister attempts suicide, Tom Wingo, after a nervous breakdown, travels from his South Carolina



YOUNG ADULT—AND MORE ADULT—GUILT

We said we weren't going to cover these genres in Part I of “Guilty Pleasures,” but we couldn't resist highlighting these authors.

V. C. Andrews

Andrews remains best known for her novels combining gothic horror and family secrets. Start with *Flowers in the Attic* (1979) of the Dollanganger series, about family secrets and incest. Here, a wealthy Virginia grandmother and mother lock away four beautiful children in the grandmother's attic after the children's mother faces financial ruin. The story continues with *Petals on the Wind* (1980) and three more books.

The Casteel series (starting with *Heaven*, 1985), featuring a young girl whose father sells her and her siblings for money, is also popular. Altogether, Andrews (and her ghostwriters) penned more than 70 equally salacious family dramas.



Stephenie Meyer

Meyer entered the popular literary scene with her vampire romance series, *The Twilight Saga*, *New York Times* best sellers and editor's choices. Start with *Twilight* (2005), then proceed to *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007), and *Breaking Dawn* (2008). Set in a small town on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, the series features teenager Bella Swan and her love affair with heartthrob and vampire Edward Cullen, who thirsts for her blood. A werewolf, a vampire clan, and typical female angst play large roles in the series.

THE MOVIES: *Twilight*, 2008, starring Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, and directed by Catherine Hardwicke; *New Moon*, 2009, starring Kristen Stewart, Robert Pattinson, and Taylor Lautner, and directed by Chris Weitz.

Anne Rice

Though Rice has written many religious-themed books (*Christ the Lord*, 2005), she is best known for her gothic cult novels—including *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), which launched her popular *Vampire Chronicles* (*The Vampire Lestat*, 1985; *The Queen of the Damned*, 1988). Filled with themes of immortality, love, existential despair, evil, and redemption, the first in the series features Louis, who relates his 200-year-long life story—including his transformation from a Louisiana plantation owner into a vampire.

THE MOVIE: 1994, starring Brad Pitt, Christian Slater, Tom Cruise, Kirsten Dunst, and directed by Neil Jordan. ■

backwater to Manhattan to spend time—at the request of his sister’s psychiatrist—unraveling their troubled past. Tom relives memories of an abusive father and a status-conscious mother, and their destructive relationship with each other and with their children. Also by the author: *The Great Santini* (1976), about a Marine fighter pilot who terrorizes his family.

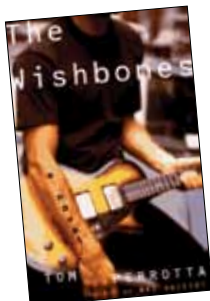
THE MOVIE: 1991, starring Nick Nolte and Barbara Streisand, and directed by Barbara Streisand.

♥ Purgatory

The Wishbones

By Tom Perrotta (1997)

Perrotta, author of the best-selling *Little Children* (2004), based his first novel on his own youth. Here, a group of 30-something men, still living at home with their parents, act like teenagers in matters of love. Dave Raymond uses his average New Jersey wedding band, The Wishbones, as his excuse to never grow up—until a tragedy spurs an engagement to his on-and-off-again girlfriend and he meets a woman who jeopardizes his uncertain marital plans. Sigh—it’s the classic male dilemma.



High Fidelity (1995) and About a Boy (1998)

By Nick Hornby

If ever there were aimless 30-something men, Hornby has perfectly captured their Weltanschauung. In *High Fidelity*, a neurotic record collector who spends his time constructing “top-five” lists (memorable breakups, favorite record singles—you name it) embarks on sexual relationships—and fails many times over. *About a Boy* features a 30-something man who, despite his own self-centeredness, befriends an adolescent boy fleeing from a suicidal mother.

THE MOVIES: *High Fidelity*, 2000, starring John Cusack, and directed by Stephen Frears; *About a Boy*, 2002, starring Hugh Grant, and directed by Chris Weitz.

Kissing in Manhattan

By David Schickler (2001)

Angry, 33-year-old stockbroker and womanizer Patrick Rigg dominates this short story collection, which features the diverse residents of a Manhattan apartment building—from a perfume heiress to a priest, a lascivious high school girl, and a misunderstood actor. Patrick, indulging in sex games as he collects more women, represents the dark, seductive nature of the city and the denizens’ desperate search for meaning in life. Well-written, parts of the novel were first published in the *New Yorker*.

The Catsitters

By James Wolcott (2001)

Wolcott, the cultural critic for *Vanity Fair*, has penned a modern-day Jane Austen classic on dating and courtship in *The Catsitters*—but in Manhattan, and from the male perspective. Instead of Austen’s heroines, the novel features Johnny Downs, a struggling actor/bartender searching for true love. His long-distance friend Darlene listens patiently to his romantic woes but has eschewed any sexual relationship with him even as she starts to run his life. But soon, when Darlene sabotages Johnny’s newest relationship, he starts to realize that love lies right under his nose.



Vox

By Nicholson Baker (1992)

A *New York Times* best seller, *Vox* consists of two young single people’s long conversation as they engage in pay-per-minute phone sex. Extremely vivid (definitely titillating, bordering on the pornographic), the novel explores Jim’s and Abby’s sexual psyches as they invent sexual fantasies for each other, share mundane tidbits about their lives—and develop a surprising friendship. Also by Baker: *The Fermata* (1994), an erotic exploration of one man’s sexual adventures.



The Average American Male

By Chad Kultgen

Kultgen captures the male Weltanschauung with a cynical, hilarious look into the male mind (sex, no cuddling). The 20-something narrator lives in Los Angeles, where he plays video games, works out at the gym, has sex with his girlfriend—and somehow gets roped into agreeing to marry her. Complicating matters is his infatuation with another woman with a smaller butt. You get the idea. While the book focuses on sex, readers just may find meaning in its tepid exploration of American culture’s empty values.

Nonfiction Bonus

The Game

Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists

By Neil Strauss

Books on picking up women belong in their own special circle in the darkest recesses of shame-hell. But reading *about* pickup artists—that’s socially acceptable, right? Strauss was a rock critic and author who worked to transform himself into the world’s greatest pickup artist. He offers a tour of the subculture—from the gurus (Ross Jeffries, Mystery) to the vocabulary (neg, phase shift, AFC). Sure, he could have written a one-page pamphlet that proclaimed, “Act confident!” but that wouldn’t have been nearly as titillating. ■