

Books for 2022-23

Hamnet, Maggie O'Farrell (Peg), 2020, 320pp—In 1580's England, during the Black Plague a young Latin tutor falls in love with an extraordinary, eccentric young woman in this “exceptional historical novel” (*The New Yorker*) and best-selling winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction. Agnes is a wild creature who walks her family's land with a falcon on her glove and is known throughout the countryside for her unusual gifts as a healer, understanding plants and potions better than she does people. Once she settles with her husband on Henley Street in Stratford-upon-Avon she becomes a fiercely protective mother and a steadfast, centrifugal force in the life of her young husband, whose career on the London stage is taking off when his beloved young son succumbs to sudden fever.

Mornings in Jenin, Susan Abulhawa (Martha), 2010, 352pp— Forcibly removed from the olive-farming village of Ein Hod by the newly formed state of Israel in 1948, the Abulhejos are displaced to live in canvas tents in the Jenin refugee camp. We follow the Abulhejo family as they live through a half century of violent history. Amal, the granddaughter of the old village patriarch, a bright, is a sensitive girl who makes it out of the camps, only to return years later, to marry and bear a child. Through her eyes, with her evolving vision, we get the story of her brothers, one who is kidnapped to be raised Jewish, one who will end with bombs strapped to his middle.

Harlem Shuffle, Colson Whitehead (Paula), 2021, 336pp—To his customers and neighbors on 125th street, Ray Carney is an upstanding salesman of reasonably priced furniture, making a decent life for himself and his family. He and his wife Elizabeth are expecting their second child, and if her parents on Striver's Row don't approve of him or their cramped apartment across from the subway tracks, it's still home. Few people know he descends from a line of uptown hoods and crooks, and that his façade of normalcy has more than a few cracks in it. Cracks that are getting bigger all the time. Cash is tight, especially with all those installment-plan sofas, so if his cousin Freddie occasionally drops off the odd ring or necklace, Ray doesn't ask where it comes from. He knows a discreet jeweler downtown who doesn't ask questions, either. Then Freddie falls in with a crew who plan to rob the Hotel Theresa—the "Waldorf of Harlem"—and volunteers Ray's services as the fence. The heist doesn't go as planned; they rarely do. Now Ray has a new clientele, one made up of shady cops, vicious local gangsters, two-bit pornographers, and other assorted Harlem lowlifes. *Harlem Shuffle's* ingenious story plays out in a beautifully recreated New York City of the early 1960s. It's a family saga

masquerading as a crime novel, a hilarious morality play, a social novel about race and power, and ultimately a love letter to Harlem.

Mercy Street, Jennifer Haigh (Bonnie), 2022, 331pp—For almost a decade, Claudia has counseled patients at Mercy Street, a clinic in the heart of the city. The work is consuming, the unending dramas of women in crisis. For its patients, Mercy Street offers more than health care; for many, it is a second chance. But outside the clinic, the reality is different. Anonymous threats are frequent. A small, determined group of anti-abortion demonstrators appears each morning at its door. As the protests intensify, fear creeps into Claudia's days, a humming anxiety she manages with frequent visits to Timmy, an affable pot dealer in the midst of his own existential crisis. At Timmy's, she encounters a random assortment of customers, including Anthony, a lost soul who spends most of his life online, chatting with the mysterious Excelsior11—the screenname of Victor Prine, an anti-abortion crusader who has set his sights on Mercy Street and is ready to risk it all for his beliefs. *Mercy Street* is a novel for right now, a story of the polarized American present.

I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, Maryse Conde (Steve), 2009, 246pp—This wild and entertaining novel expands on the true story of the West Indian slave Tituba, who was accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, arrested in 1692, and forgotten in jail until the general amnesty for witches two years later. Maryse Condé brings Tituba out of historical silence and creates for her a fictional childhood, adolescence, and old age. She turns her into what she calls "a sort of female hero, an epic heroine, like the legendary 'Nanny of the maroons,'" who, schooled in the sorcery and magical ritual of obeah, is arrested for healing members of the family that owns her.

The Push, Ashley Audrain (Deb), 2021, 320pp—Blythe Connor is determined that she will be the warm, comforting mother to her new baby Violet that she herself never had. But in the thick of motherhood's exhausting early days, Blythe becomes convinced that something is wrong with her daughter—she doesn't behave like most children do. Or is it all in Blythe's head? Her husband, Fox, says she's imagining things. The more Fox dismisses her fears, the more Blythe begins to question her own sanity, and the more we begin to question what Blythe is telling us about her life as well. Then their son Sam is born—and with him, Blythe has the blissful connection she'd always imagined with her child. Even Violet seems to love her little brother. But when life as they know it is changed in an instant, the devastating fall-out forces Blythe to face the truth.

Mrs. Osmond, John Banville (Grant), 2017, 386pp—In *Mrs. Osmond*, John Banville continues the story of Isabel Archer, the young protagonist of Henry James's beloved *The Portrait of a Lady*. Eager but naïve, in James's novel Isabel comes into a large, unforeseen inheritance and marries the charming, penniless, and—as Isabel finds out too late—cruel and deceitful Gilbert Osmond. Here Banville imagines Isabel's second chapter telling the story of a woman reawakened by grief and the knowledge that she has been grievously wronged, and determined to resume her quest for freedom and independence.

A Game of Hide and Seek, Elizabeth Taylor (Liz), 1951, 328pp—Set in Britain between the wars, Harriet is the only child of a suffragette, a shy and domestic and not especially smart or pretty girl. At eighteen she falls in love with Vesey, but marries another man, Charles, and bears a child. Then Vesey returns. Love is at the center of the book, but so too is Taylor's extraordinary knack for depicting characters. The minor figures in the book—from Harriet's mother's friend Caroline, with her progressive politics, to Charles, his coworkers, and his mother, to Betsy with her schoolgirl crush on her Greek teacher—are as memorable as the passion and heartache of Harriet and Vesey.

When We Were Birds, Ayanna Lloyd Banwo (Cornelia), 2022, 304pp—Set in Trinidad in an old house on a hill, where the city meets the rainforest, Yejide's mother is dying. She is leaving behind a legacy that now passes to Yejide: one St Bernard woman in every generation has the power to shepherd the city's souls into the afterlife. But after years of suffering her mother's neglect and bitterness, Yejide is looking for a way out. Raised in the countryside by a devout Rastafarian mother, Darwin has always abided by the religious commandment not to interact with death. He has never been to a funeral, much less seen a dead body. But when the only job he can find is grave digging, he must betray the life his mother built for him in order to provide for them both. Newly shorn of his dreadlocks and his past, and determined to prove himself, Darwin finds himself adrift in a city electric with possibility and danger. Yejide and Darwin will meet inside the gates of Fidelis, an ancient and sprawling cemetery, where the dead lie uneasy in their graves and a reckoning with fate beckons them both.

Red Cavalry, Isaac Babel (Michael), 1926, 352 pp—One of the great masterpieces of Russian literature, the *Red Cavalry* cycle retains today the shocking freshness that made Babel's reputation when the stories were first published in the 1920s. This collection of short stories offer a 'fictional' recounting of certain actions in the Polish-Soviet War during summer/autumn of 1920. Using his own experiences as a journalist and propagandist with the Red Army during the war against Poland,

Babel brings to life an astonishing cast of characters from the exuberant, violent era of early Soviet history: commissars and colonels, Cossacks and peasants, and among them the bespectacled, Jewish writer/intellectual, observing it all and trying to establish his role in the new Russia.