

Cambridge Creative Writing Company
Menna's Reading List

There are many novels I adore and admire – it's hard to whittle it down to just a few! – but here I have tried. I've picked novels that I tend to reference when teaching since they each showcase something deeply impressive in terms of characterisation, structure, language. A few even do everything all at once. So, in no particular order...

The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro

I use this text to teach students about unreliable narrators and this is the best of them. It's also one of the most moving books I've ever read about an unfulfilled life. The ending makes me cry every time. It's also one of the few books for which the film adaptation is just as good as the novel – and there are very few of them.

The Bloody Chamber by Angela Carter

A masterful collection of short stories, the best of which – in my humble opinion – it the titular one, a reimagining of the fairy tale *Bluebeard*. The language, as in all of Carter's stories, is lyrical and luscious, containing some of the most beautiful sentences I've ever read. It also contains one of the most brilliantly terrifying scenes ever written. Carter is my literary hero.

Rebecca & My Cousin Rachel by Daphne du Maurier

I couldn't decide which one of these magnificent novels I loved most, so I chose them both. I read *Rebecca* when I was 18 and it marked me as a writer; perhaps everything I've written since has been a homage to that novel. And, while my favourite aspect of any novel is always character, this novel has one of the best plot twists ever written. *My Cousin Rachel* is another perfect marriage of character and plot, with an ending that will leave you thinking and questioning and wishing you could contact du Maurier in the afterlife and beg her to tell you what Rachel did.

Circe by Madeline Miller

In terms of character arc – from submissive to empowered – this is one of the most brilliantly rendered. When I'm writing novels I always begin with the character arc, then work the plot around it, and this novel is certainly all about the character arc. The fact that the language is absolutely luscious too is a wonderful bonus.

The Night Circus by Erin Morgenstern

A novel I re-read excerpts from frequently for the extremely evocative descriptions alone. The plot is good, the characters too, but the description of the circus is stunning and sublime. When I open the book's pages – or listen to the audio, which is excellently read by Jim Dale – I feel completely and utterly immersed the magical world of the circus and I'll visit it whenever I can.

Stardust by Neil Gaiman

A fantastically short book and virtually perfect: a pure, unapologetic fairy tale without a wasted word. In this case, the film adaptation – written by Jane Goldman – is, dare I say, even better than the book. Now that's a first.

Heartburn by Nora Ephron

A superb example of a bittersweet story, also a not-so-thinly-veiled fictionalised memoir. Ephron was the writer of many of my favourite romantic comedies (*When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You've Got Mail*, *Julie & Julia*, *Heartburn* – another film that's as good as the book) and I read this book every year. It's so short you can read it in a few hours. I promise laughter and tears. A masterclass in comedy and tragedy.

The Uncommon Reader by Alan Bennett

One of my favourite comfort reads and a treasure to read on a rainy Sunday afternoon. The premise is: what if the Queen of England became an avid reader? It's a glorious read, very funny and touching too. And it's very short – which is always a bonus – you'll finish it in an hour, then you'll want to start all over again.

Dreyer's English by Benjamin Dreyer

For those of us who didn't receive an education in grammar at school, there are many books that can help (**Eat, Shoots and Leaves** by Lynne Truss being the best, in my opinion) but this gives a wider perspective and includes one of the best writing exercises I've ever come across in a "how to" book – you'll have to read it to find out!

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron

It's not an exaggeration to say that this book changed my life. I found it – or it found me – when I was 19 and deeply immured by self-doubt and perfectionism. I did the "morning pages" for two or three years and that went a great way to freeing me of both those debilitating states of mind. I also learnt about "artist's dates" which I continue to go on whenever I can and highly recommend to all aspiring writers – indeed to every one!

From Where You Dream: the Process of Writing Fiction by Robert Olen Butler

This is a particularly excellent book for convincing the reader of the necessity/great benefits for writing every day while you're in the midst of a writing project – it's the advice I most commonly give to writers and Butler puts it far more eloquently than I.

Aspects of the Novel by E. M. Forster

A wonderful book for dipping in and out of. Forster, naturally, has many excellent things to say about characterisation, plot, structure etc and while he's not saying anything groundbreaking to modern-day readers, the way he writes is reason enough to read this book.

The Science of Storytelling by Will Storr

A fascinating book which says a lot about the writing process from a scientific standpoint, it's both eye-opening and inspiring!

Of my own books, from a writerly perspective I recommend **Men, Money & Chocolate**, which is essentially a fictional memoir about my life as a waitress/aspiring-writer when I was in my 20s and struggling for inspiration and desperate for advice. It contains a lot of the advice I wish I'd received at the time. In terms of fiction proper, the novels I'm most proud of are probably **The House at the End of Hope Street** and **The Sisters Grimm** trilogy. Please bear in mind that the first one is (intended to be) comforting and uplifting, while the second is also uplifting but also challenging and a lot darker.