



What we're reading

A selection of the books that have seen us through to spring

Middlemarch by George Eliot words frances ambler

I love the comfort of reading a long classic over the short days of winter. I'm a compulsive speed reader, so it's like a reading reset: forcing me to go at a slower pace than I usually use for contemporary releases. By spring, I'm enthusing about why this classic actually deserves that label – as if generations of readers haven't already reached that conclusion.

So, you've probably read *Middlemarch* already, likely written school or university essays on its themes but – in case you hadn't, like me – let me tell you: it's a classic for a reason. It takes you into the minutiae of a small English town and the lives of its inhabitants, starting in 1829, registering changes at personal, local and national level. *Middlemarch* is also about pride, greed, ambition, love and the full array of emotions. It's over 900 pages – it's safe to say that it covers a lot.

I confess that I read more than a third of it before I felt that it really clicked with me. And I did some fairly extensive skimming over the 19th-century political bits (feeling thankful that I didn't have to write an essay on it). But I'm so glad I persevered. What really drew me in was how skilfully Eliot portrays her characters. She does that all-seeing narrator thing beautifully – showing how each character wants to be, and the reality of how they actually are – as the characters themselves flounder because of their imperfect knowledge of each other. She shifts your sympathies between characters: making apparently black and white scenarios become grey.

I don't live in a small town. My life hasn't been limited by the kind of restrictions that govern Eliot's characters. But, reading *Middlemarch*, as the news spurted out endless headlines of doom, I was feeling pretty frustrated and powerless nevertheless. Eliot had a clarity that cut through that noise, reminding me that an individual acting with conviction can change things, but that it's also about compassion, trying to reach an understanding of our fellow flawed humans. What a worthwhile message to emerge with from winter hibernation. Hey, have you heard? *Middlemarch* – it's a classic.

Attachments by Rainbow Rowell words tahmina begum

There have been many moments when working across newsrooms that I have tried to envision what "fast-paced" journalism was like before the internet. Where conversations took place with the person right next to you rather than being flung in direct message, and copy was transcribed from pen to paper after speaking to a real-life person instead of being chopped and changed according to what's currently trending. But ah, isn't it always the way that whenever we look back in our rose-tinted glasses, we become romantics? Well, romance is the thread that holds *Attachments* by Rainbow Rowell together.

One of the YA author's adult novels, *Attachments* is set in a newsroom, on the cusp of the millennium, where the internet is still a novelty. As it's 1999, Lincoln has been hired as the IT security guy whose main job is to make sure that everyone is using the

internet correctly i.e. not watching porn or scanning through the early incarnation of eBay. While working through the boredom of a night shift, where no one speaks to him but an elderly colleague, Lincoln sifts through people's emails, flagging any problems. But there's a thread that he rarely reports to his boss; the emails back and forth between Beth and Jennifer.

The story is told from three perspectives: Lincoln's every day, as well as the private email thread between Beth, a film reviewer, and Jennifer, the features copy editor. Beth and Jennifer, hilariously, attempt to avoid their emails being flagged by using symbols rather than vowels for curse words. But they are still constantly flagged to Lincoln. Through their emails, we read how Jennifer is navigating her weight but also deciding whether she wants to be a parent as much as her husband does, while Beth's long-term relationship is familiar to us, in that we all know it should have ended a long time ago. Lincoln needs to stay awake for his job and, enjoying the bond between the two women, he keeps reading and realises he really likes Beth. Oh, and Beth definitely calls him her Cute Guy. But how can he introduce himself to a woman when he's technically gone through her post?

What, in 2019, could sound creepy is actually rather sweet and tender to read. Seeing three late twenty-somethings at a crossroads with their lives, technically doing what they want but questioning "the dream" and what they have been taught to believe about themselves, adulthood and love feels truly warming. And for all those hopeless romantics, you will find yourself at every corner of this great, cosy read. →

“Stop worrying about what other people think of you because most of the time, Nobody Cares”

***Certain American States* by Catherine Lacey words terri-jane dow**

After two novels (*Nobody is Ever Missing* and *The Answers*), Catherine Lacey has turned her attention to short stories and the 12 featured here make up her first collection, *Certain American States*. The stories are loosely linked together in theme more than anything else, and, as in her novels, Lacey writes about loss in its different forms. There are breakups and bereavements; distances and loneliness. The stories are funny but dark, in a way that makes you laugh and then feel bad for laughing. In each of them, there's something missed that makes the characters feel that little bit more separate, a little bit further apart from each other. The miscommunications are at their best in “ur heck box”, where a young Texan woman moves to New York after the death of her brother. She tries to decipher seemingly nonsense messages a stranger shows her on his phone, but she's also overly honest with a barista at her coffee shop, and trying to navigate a grief-strained relationship with her mother. All of her interactions are askew, and Lacey manages to write the slightly off-centre feelings of bereavement excellently. The observations written into the stories are sometimes so spot on that it can make for a difficult read.

Easy reads are not as memorable though, and Lacey's writing style in these stories is what makes them so much fun where they might otherwise be overtaken by being

sad. Her sentences are sometimes overly long and meandering, and sometimes the words feel like they are in the wrong order. They are swears and they jump around. The playfulness of the language and its phrasing lift the stories up. Although they may be dark, they are never gloomy. *Certain American States* isn't a collection of stories to read in one sitting, partly because they are so dark and partly because you sometimes have to work at them, but they are perfect to dip in and out of.

***Nobody Cares* by Anne T. Donahue words katie antoniou**

You might know Anne T. Donahue's writing from her newsletter, ‘That's what she said’. Newsletters have become a great platform for writers to express their true voice. And find out if anyone likes the sound of it. If they do, then editors can be convinced that people actually like your no-bullshit brand and will commission you and not edit all the swears out of your work. If you've really cracked a market, then you get to write a book, which is what Anne has done with *Nobody Cares*, a collection of personal essays about her life.

To quote Anne directly, “Here is what most of us already know in the year of our lord 2018: for a very long time, everything has been feeling scary and bad.” This is true on a global scale, but also resonated with me personally. Last year dawned with me having just spent Christmas Day and most of the following week in a psych ward, having suffered my second full-on anxiety attack. It started while I was on holiday and I can tell

you dear reader, that doing a 12-hour flight alone with your two-year-old is not The Right Thing To Do if you are battling anxiety.

Anxiety has come to me late in life. So it's all new to me and I'm still learning how to deal with it. Anne, however, is a veteran. Her chapter on anxiety spoke to me so personally that I burst into tears. She reminds you to breathe. To drink some water. To go outside. She will not tell you to go for a hike or eat your vegetables because that is most definitely Not Anne. She may be a good advice-giver, but she's no saint. She will tell you to stop worrying about what other people think of you because most of the time, *Nobody Cares*.

There were so many parts of this book I identified with. As a writer, it was really cathartic to hear someone else admit to the kind of struggles that are so common: living in borderline poverty to try and make it work, wanting your writing about the next cool thing to somehow make you the next cool thing, being desperate to write a book just so you can have written a book. But somewhere on Anne's journey, between years spent working in retail, moving back in with her parents and quitting drinking, she became a really kick-ass writer. And turns out people want to read about her life lessons and her love of beige foods more than they want to read about the next cool thing.

This book is the ultimate pep talk – like a best friend comforting you by telling you about their own greatest cock-ups. Then reassuring you that you will get through this. Because, in Anne's own words, “Who's better than you? No person, thanks.” ♦