

Reading YA: 18 Literary Novels You'll Love

If the term “literary” frightens you, you’re not alone. It’s something of a buzz word, and a confusing one at that. Literary YA, though, is a little different to literary adult fiction--generally speaking, it’s more accessible, and a great place to get started if you’re curious about lit fic, especially if you love language. These novels run the gamut from fantasy through contemporary, some light, some dark, some in between, each with a strong focus on character. Some are closer to middle grade, but all will appeal YA lovers.

*mature content

1. BOOK OF A THOUSAND DAYS, Shannon Hale

When Dashti, a maid, and Lady Saren, her mistress, are shut in a tower for seven years for Saren’s refusal to marry a man she despises, the two prepare for a very long and dark imprisonment. As food runs low and the days go from broiling hot to freezing cold, it is all Dashti can do to keep them fed and comfortable. But the arrival outside the tower of Saren’s two suitors—one welcome, and the other decidedly less so—brings both hope and great danger, and Dashti must make the desperate choices of a girl whose life is worth more than she knows. With Shannon Hale’s lyrical language, this forgotten but classic fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm is reimagined and reset on the central Asian steppes; it is a completely unique retelling filled with adventure and romance, drama and disguise.

2. STARDUST, Neil Gaiman

Tristan Thorn falls in love with the prettiest girl in town and makes her a foolish promise: he says that he'll go find the falling star they both watched streak across the night sky. She says she'll marry him if he finds it, so he sets off, leaving his home of Wall, and heads out into the perilous land of faerie, where not everything is what it appears. Gaiman is known for his fanciful wit, sterling prose and wildly imaginative plots, and Stardust is no exception.

3. THIS IS WHAT I DID, Ann Dee Ellis*

Eighth-grader Logan is struggling to deal with a violent situation he witnessed a year ago between his best friend, Zylar, and Zylar's abusive father but insists to everyone around him that he is fine. Just fine. Reluctant readers will be drawn into this story, which also includes bullying classmates and a dismal winter camping trip. Frequent line breaks, screenplay-style dialogue,

and e-mails and notes illustrated with black icons break up the scenes. Logan gets to play one of the Lost Boys in the school play, and finds that the theater crowd offers a respite from bullies. A friendship with a girl named Laurel (a palindrome collector who is thinking of changing her name to Loral), and a relationship with a counselor help Logan to begin the healing process and convince him to reconnect with Zyler. This psychological drama effectively explores our failure to protect youth from abuse inflicted by peers or adults. Caution: there's a slang term for scrotum on page 1. -- Dobrez, Cindy for Booklist

4. SPEAK, Laurie Halse Anderson

Melinda Sordino busted an end-of-summer party by calling the cops. Now her old friends won't talk to her, and people she doesn't even know hate her from a distance. The safest place to be is alone, inside her own head. But even that's not safe. Because there's something she's trying not to think about, something about the night of the party that, if she let it in, would blow her carefully constructed disguise to smithereens. And then she would have to speak the truth. This extraordinary first novel has captured the imaginations of teenagers and adults across the country.

5. THE UNDERNEATH, Kathi Appelt

Appelt's impressive novel (her first) entails animals in crisis—a topic of enduring popularity. But the author, whose path from picture books to fantasy is discussed in the Story behind the Story, breathes new life into the sentient-animals premise, introducing strong currents of magic realism into a tale as rich and complex as “the gumbo-like waters of the bayous.” Chained and starved by cruel trapper Gar Face, lonely hound Ranger finds companions in a stray cat and her two kittens. When Mother Cat falls victim to Gar Face's abuse, the surviving animals, especially sensitive kitten Puck, struggle to keep their makeshift family together. The animals' caring, generous bonds juxtapose with the smothering love of an ancient shape-shifter in a moving parallel story. Joining Natalie Babbitt's Tuck Everlasting as a rare example of youth fantasy with strong American underpinnings, Appelt's novel folds in specific traditions of the Caddo peoples of east Texas, and casts the bayous as a kind of enchanted forest laden with spirits and benign, organic presences. Some readers may struggle with Appelt's repeated phrases and poetic fragments, and wish the connections and conflicts in the story came to a faster boil. But most children will be pulled forward by the vulnerable pets' survival adventure and by Small's occasional, down-to-earth drawings, created with fluid lines that are a perfect match for the book's saturated setting and Appelt's ebbing, flowing lyricism. Grades 4-8. --Jennifer Mattson for Booklist

6. THE STAR OF KAZAN, Eva Ibbotson

Abandoned as a baby, Annika is found and adopted by Ellie and Sigrid, cook and housemaid for three professors. Growing up in early-20th-century Vienna, she learns to cook and clean and is perfectly happy until a beautiful aristocrat appears and claims to be her mother, sweeping her off to a new life in a crumbling castle in northern Germany. Annika is determined to make the best of things, and it takes a while for her to realize that her new "family" has many secrets, most of them nasty. With the help of Ellie, Sigrid, the professors, and friends old and new, Annika escapes from a ghastly fate and learns to face the truth about her relatives. Winding like a braid through this story is a mystery involving a chest of worn costumes and junk jewelry left to Annika by an old woman she has befriended. This is a rich saga in the tradition of Frances Hodgson Burnett, full of stalwart friends, sly villains, a brave heroine, and good triumphing over evil. Annika's determination to do the right thing is both laudable and utterly frustrating, especially when readers realize that her loyalty is misplaced. Almost every character is distinct, but the ones that stand out are the "regular folk," individuals whose sense of decency propels them into amazing acts of courage. Vienna itself is colorfully portrayed, brimming with pastries, coffee, and dancing Lipizzaner horses. An intensely satisfying read.—Eva Mitnick, Los Angeles Public Library for School Library Journal

7. A THOUSAND NEVER EVERS, Shana Burg

Set in rural Mississippi during the civil rights movement, this gripping first novel offers an up-close look at the racism and violence endured in an African-American community. By the time Addie Ann Pickett, the narrator, enters junior high, she is well aware of the racial divisions in her county. She has been warned not to stay on the white side of town after the sun has set and not to "look at white folks too close." But her older brother and the local minister have different ideas and argue that "there comes a time when a man's dignity's worth more than his life." Caught between her mother's rule to stay away from trouble and the call to take action, Addie must make decisions, especially when the lives of two family members are at stake. References to significant historical events (Medgar Evers's assassination, the March on Washington) add authenticity and depth, while Addie's frank, expertly modulated voice delivers an emotional wallop. --PW

8. A CONSPIRACY OF KINGS, Megan Whalen Turner

Following *The Thief*, a 1997 Newbery Honor Book, and *The King of Attolia*, a 2007 Best Book for Young Adults, Turner continues her exquisite series with another rich story that examines peace, power, leadership, and loyalty. After initial, tense prison scenes focused on Eugenides, the king of Attolia, the novel's viewpoint switches from third to first person, and Sophos, the reluctant king of Sounis who prefers poetry to politics, relates the adventures that precipitated his rise to questionable power. Tutors have drilled Sophos in imaginary attacks, but after he loses his family in a real invasion, he is bereft and goes into hiding as a slave on a nobleman's estate in order to avoid his sovereign responsibilities. Even though Eugenides' fans will miss his presence, he continues to pull strings from the sidelines as he joins leaders in high-priced alliances and prepares for an invasion. Turner's plotting remains deft, and the subtlety with which she balances her characters' inner and outer worlds will delight both series newcomers and fans, who will be waiting to grab this stand-out, stand-alone adventure, filled with all the expected intrigue and political machinations, from the shelves.--Cindy Dobrez for Booklist

9. NORTH OF BEAUTIFUL, Justina Chen Headley

Sixteen-year-old Terra seems to be a typical high-achieving high-school student. Under her heavy makeup, though, she hides a port-wine colored birthmark on her cheek that makes her feel like an outsider. During yet another attempt to remove the birthmark, Terra runs into Jacob, a gorgeous Goth with a cleft-palette scar. That encounter initiates a transformation in both Terra and her subservient mother. Headley has written an exquisite book that explores the difference between physical and true beauty as Terra and her mother travel from Washington state to China, and from the home of a shame-faced, cruel cartographer into the presence of an adventurous, strong woman and her insightful teenage son. Headley uses map metaphors throughout, even in the activity, geocaching, which helps bond Terra and Jacob in both Washington and China. She also uses Terra's artistic medium, collage, as a literary device to create layer upon layer of experiences and insights into a artfully written journey of self-discovery, self-actualization, and love. With every carefully chosen word, well-crafted sentence, and fully developed character, Headley maps out a wholly satisfying reading experience that takes readers from terra nullis to terra firma. --Frances Bradburn for Booklist

10. A WIZARD OF EARTHSEA (series), Ursula K. LeGuin

Often compared to Tolkien's Middle-earth or Lewis's Narnia, Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea is a stunning fantasy world that grabs quickly at our hearts, pulling us deeply into its imaginary realms. Four books (A Wizard of Earthsea, [The Tombs of Atuan](#), [The Farthest Shore](#), and [Tehanu](#)) tell the whole Earthsea cycle--a tale about a reckless, awkward boy named Sparrowhawk who becomes a wizard's apprentice after the wizard reveals Sparrowhawk's true name. The boy comes to realize that his fate may be far more important than he ever dreamed possible. Le Guin challenges her readers to think about the power of language, how in the act of naming the world around us we actually create that world. Teens, especially, will be inspired by the way Le Guin allows her characters to evolve and grow into their own powers.

In this first book, A Wizard of Earthsea readers will witness Sparrowhawk's moving rite of passage--when he discovers his true name and becomes a young man.--Amazon

11. WHEN YOU REACH ME, Rebecca Stead

Four mysterious letters change Miranda's world forever. By sixth grade, Miranda and her best friend, Sal, know how to navigate their New York City neighborhood. They know where it's safe to go, like the local grocery store, and they know whom to avoid, like the crazy guy on the corner. But things start to unravel. Sal gets punched by a new kid for what seems like no reason, and he shuts Miranda out of his life. The apartment key that Miranda's mom keeps hidden for emergencies is stolen. And then Miranda finds a mysterious note scrawled on a tiny slip of paper:

I am coming to save your friend's life, and my own.

I must ask two favors. First, you must write me a letter.

The notes keep coming, and Miranda slowly realizes that whoever is leaving them knows all about her, including things that have not even happened yet. Each message brings her closer to believing that only she can prevent a tragic death. Until the final note makes her think she's too late.

12. STARGIRL, Jerry Spinelli

"She was homeschooling gone amok." "She was an alien." "Her parents were circus acrobats."

These are only a few of the theories concocted to explain Stargirl Caraway, a new 10th grader at

Arizona's Mica Area High School who wears pioneer dresses and kimonos to school, strums a ukulele in the cafeteria, laughs when there are no jokes, and dances when there is no music. The whole school, not exactly a "hotbed of nonconformity," is stunned by her, including our 16-year-old narrator Leo Borlock: "She was elusive. She was today. She was tomorrow. She was the faintest scent of a cactus flower, the flitting shadow of an elf owl."

In time, incredulity gives way to out-and-out adoration as the student body finds itself helpless to resist Stargirl's wide-eyed charm, pure-spirited friendliness, and penchant for celebrating the achievements of others. In the ultimate high school symbol of acceptance, she is even recruited as a cheerleader. Popularity, of course, is a fragile and fleeting state, and bit by bit, Mica sours on their new idol. Why is Stargirl showing up at the funerals of strangers? Worse, why does she cheer for the opposing basketball teams? The growing hostility comes to a head when she is verbally flogged by resentful students on Leo's televised Hot Seat show in an episode that is too terrible to air. While the playful, chin-held-high Stargirl seems impervious to the shunning that ensues, Leo, who is in the throes of first love (and therefore scornfully deemed "Starboy"), is not made of such strong stuff: "I became angry. I resented having to choose. I refused to choose. I imagined my life without her and without them, and I didn't like it either way."

13. THE ADORATION OF JENNA FOX, Mary E. Pearson

Seventeen-year-old Jenna Fox awakens after more than a year in a coma to find herself in a life—and a body—that she doesn't quite recognize. Her parents tell her that she's been in an accident, but much of her past identity and current situation remain a mystery to her: Why has her family abruptly moved from Boston to California, leaving all of her personal belongings behind? Why does her grandmother react to her with such antipathy? Why have her parents instructed her to make sure not to tell anyone about the circumstances of their move? And why can Jenna recite whole passages of Thoreau's *Walden*, but remember next to nothing of her own past? As she watches family videos of her childhood, strange memories begin to surface, and she slowly realizes that a terrible secret is being kept from her. Pearson has constructed a gripping, believable vision of a future dystopia. She explores issues surrounding scientific ethics, the power of science, and the nature of the soul with grace, poetry, and an apt sense of drama and suspense. Some of the supporting characters are a bit underdeveloped, but Jenna herself is complex, interesting, and very real. This is a beautiful blend of science fiction, medical thriller, and teen-relationship novel that melds into a seamless whole that will please fans of all three genres.—Meredith Robbins for School Library Journal

14. THE BOOK THIEF, Marcus Zusak

Zusak has created a work that deserves the attention of sophisticated teen and adult readers.

Death himself narrates the World War II-era story of Liesel Meminger from the time she is taken, at age nine, to live in Molching, Germany, with a foster family in a working-class neighborhood of tough kids, acid-tongued mothers, and loving fathers who earn their living by the work of their hands. The child arrives having just stolen her first book—although she has not yet learned how to read—and her foster father uses it, *The Gravediggers Handbook*, to lull her to sleep when she is roused by regular nightmares about her younger brother's death. Across the ensuing years of the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Liesel collects more stolen books as well as a peculiar set of friends: the boy Rudy, the Jewish refugee Max, the mayor's reclusive wife (who has a whole library from which she allows Liesel to steal), and especially her foster parents. Zusak not only creates a mesmerizing and original story but also writes with poetic syntax, causing readers to deliberate over phrases and lines, even as the action impels them forward. Death is not a sentimental storyteller, but he does attend to an array of satisfying details, giving Liesel's story all the nuances of chance, folly, and fulfilled expectation that it deserves. An extraordinary narrative.—Francisca Goldsmith for *School Library Journal*

15. THE GIVER, Lois Lowry

In the "ideal" world into which Jonas was born, everybody has sensibly agreed that well-matched married couples will raise exactly two offspring, one boy and one girl. These children's adolescent sexual impulses will be stifled with specially prescribed drugs; at age 12 they will receive an appropriate career assignment, sensibly chosen by the community's Elders. This is a world in which the old live in group homes and are "released"—to great celebration—at the proper time; the few infants who do not develop according to schedule are also "released," but with no fanfare. Lowry's development of this civilization is so deft that her readers, like the community's citizens, will be easily seduced by the chimera of this ordered, pain-free society. Until the time that Jonas begins training for his job assignment—the rigorous and prestigious position of Receiver of Memory—he, too, is a complacent model citizen. But as his near-mystical training progresses, and he is weighed down and enriched with society's collective memories of a world as stimulating as it was flawed, Jonas grows increasingly aware of the hypocrisy that rules his world. With a storyline that hints at Christian allegory and an eerie futuristic setting, this intriguing novel calls to mind John Christopher's *Tripods* trilogy and Hans Christian Andersen's

The Little Match Girl. Lowry is once again in top form--raising many questions while answering few, and unwinding a tale fit for the most adventurous readers.--PW

16. JELLICOE ROAD, Melina Marchetta

Taylor Markham isn't just one of the new student leaders of her boarding school, she's also the heir to the Underground Community, one of three battling school factions in her small Australian community (the others being the Cadets and the Townies). For a generation, these three camps have fought "the territory wars," a deadly serious negotiation of land and property rife with surprise attacks, diplomatic immunities, and physical violence. Only this year, it's complicated: Taylor might just have a thing for Cadet leader Jonah, and Jonah might just be the key to unlocking the secret identity of Taylor's mother, who abandoned her when she was 11. In fact, nearly every relationship in Taylor's life has unexpected ties to her past, and the continual series of revelations is both the book's strength and weakness; the melodrama can be trying, but when Marchetta isn't forcing epiphanies, she has a knack for nuanced characterizations and punchy dialogue. The complexity of the backstory will be offputting to younger readers, but those who stick it out will find rewards in the heartbreaking twists of Marchetta's saga. --Daniel Kraus for Booklist

17. CRANK, Ellen Hopkins

Seventeen-year-old Kristina Snow is introduced to crank on a trip to visit her wayward father. Caught up in a fast-paced, frightening, and unfamiliar world, she morphs into "Bree" after she "shakes hands with the monster." Her fearless, risk-taking alter ego grows stronger, "convincing me to be someone I never dreamed I'd want to be." When Kristina goes home, things don't return to normal. Although she tries to reconnect with her mother and her former life as a good student, her drug use soon takes over, leaving her "starving for speed" and for boys who will soon leave her scarred and pregnant. Hopkins writes in free-verse poems that paint painfully sharp images of Kristina/Bree and those around her, detailing how powerful the "monster" can be. The poems are masterpieces of word, shape, and pacing, compelling readers on to the next chapter in Kristina's spiraling world. This is a topical page-turner and a stunning portrayal of a teen's loss of direction and realistically uncertain future.--Sharon Korbeck for School Library Journal

18. PUSH, (Precious), Sapphire *

An electrifying first novel that shocks by its language, its circumstances, and its brutal honesty, Push recounts a young black street-girl's horrendous and redemptive journey through a Harlem

inferno. For Precious Jones, 16 and pregnant with her father's child, miraculous hope appears and the world begins to open up for her when a courageous, determined teacher bullies, cajoles, and inspires her to learn to read, to define her own feelings and set them down in a diary.