

Pressed for time?

From novels by James Baldwin and Han Kang to a guide to quantum physics – a former Booker prize judge recommends immersive one-sitting wonders

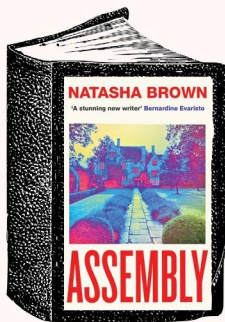
The Guardian (UK) Story

A one-sitting read is typically the domain of the short story – a form that largely depends on a reader's pure, unbroken attention. But there is some-thing special about the intensity of beginning and ending an entire book in a single day. Of all my reading experiences, these have been among the most memorable.

As a judge for last year's Booker prize, faced with 153 books and just over six months in which to read them, it was my task to try to turn every novel into one that could be read in a day. While I loved the experience, it wasn't exactly a recipe for satisfying reading.

Booker judging aside, everyone's time feels squeezed. The Booker prizes recently published research co-authored by the Reading Agency that reported 35% of readers struggle to finish books. The publisher Vintage describes its new collection of "short masterpieces" – by writers including Nella Larsen, Ursula K Le Guin, Toni Morrison and Fyodor Dostoevsky – as books that fit "contemporary reading lives". And it's true that if you pick a book of the appropriate dimensions and take the right precautions (phone in another room, don't answer the door), reading a book in a day becomes a real possibility – particularly with summer holidays coming up.

But what to choose? That's where this list comes in. It's a personal selection, not a comprehensive one. And I've omitted some great but perhaps overfamiliar candidates – Heart of Darkness, The Great Gatsby, Ethan Frome. But all these books, familiar or not, are worth a day of your time.



Assembly

Natasha Brown

A hundred pages long and written in vignettes that leave a lot of white space on the page, there is something brilliantly, startlingly aggressive about Assembly's economy. Brown's debut is narrated by a young Black woman working in finance (Brown's own career before becoming a novelist). She has success; money; a loving, liberal, generationally wealthy boyfriend.

She seems to have it all. But boiling up from the book's depths comes a desperate rage: "I am what we've always been to the empire: pure, fucking profit."

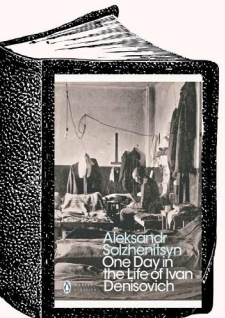


Kick the Latch

Kathryn Scanlan

Sonia is a horse trainer who has spent decades working at racetracks across America. In a note at the end of Kick the Latch, Scanlan thanks the mysterious Sonia "for the conversations", and this is a book packed with rich, unusual details that come from a true insider. Priests bless horses' legs; jockeys puke to make weight; vets give B12

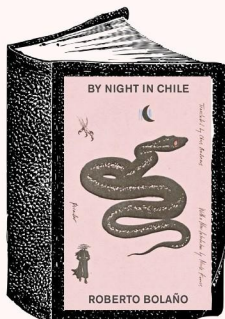
shots not just to the animals in their care but the riders, too. In terse, controlled prose, Scanlan plunges us into the arcana of a closed world.



One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, translated by HT Willetts

There are many novels set entirely on one day – Ulysses, Mrs Dalloway, Under the Volcano – but very few of them can also be read in a matching span of time. Solzhenitsyn's novel begins with the prison camp reveille of a hammer being banged on a rail and ends 150 pages later with its eponymous character going to sleep. Between these points we are immersed in the brutal daily struggle for survival that is life – or more often death – in the Soviet gulag.

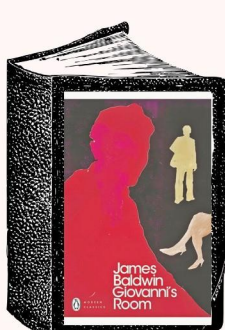


By Night in Chile

Roberto Bolaño, translated by Chris Andrews

The priest, poet and literary critic Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, delirious on his deathbed, embarks on a dizzying monologue that takes in falconry, war, Nobel prize-winning writers and Catholic guilt. Bolaño's novella is a high-wire act, a wonder of rhythm and pacing. Its most audacious invention, a torture chamber operating under

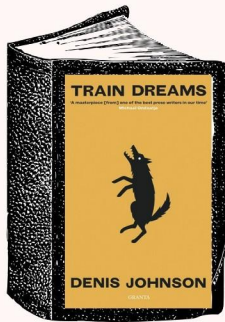
the cover provided by a literary salon, blends Bolaño's obsessive interest in literature, fascism and violence so completely as to seem self-parodic. Of course, it turns out to be taken from life.



Giovanni's Room

James Baldwin

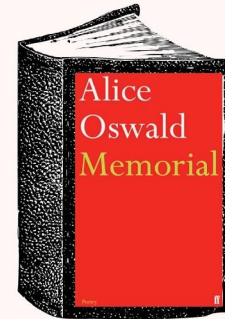
David, the protagonist of Baldwin's second novel, is a white gay American reflecting on his Parisian love affair with a bartender called Giovanni. Much has been said about the sexual and racial politics, but on a first reading what grips is the intensity of its description. When David walks towards Giovanni, the gay bar's newest employee causing a stir among the clientele, he feels as if he's "moving into the field of a magnet", or "approaching a small circle of heat". And we feel it too.



Train Dreams

Denis Johnson

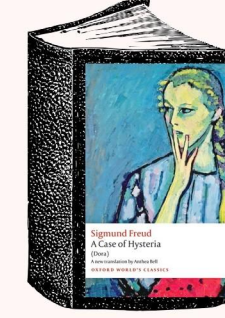
Johnson's haunting, at times almost unbearably beautiful novella about the life of a railroad labourer and logger has had a long journey to ubiquity. First published in the Paris Review in 2002, it didn't appear as a book until 2011. Now, with the recent release of Clint Bentley's Oscar-nominated film adaptation, it has become Johnson's best-known work. For me, though, the film is weak beer beside the novella, the spare majesty of which is salted with the startling, surreal moments of everyday life.



Memorial

Alice Oswald

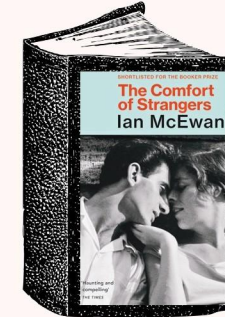
Being in the audience to see Oswald recite Memorial – without reference to the text – is one of the great live literary experiences of my life. An "oral cemetery" naming more than 200 of the dead from Homer's Iliad, her poem uses repeating, chant-like stanzas and arresting similes, taken primarily from the natural world, to build a tomb from language. Constantly surprising, utterly absorbing, the poem demands to be read as a song is listened to, in one concentrated sitting.



A Case of Hysteria (Dora)

Sigmund Freud, translated by Anthea Bell

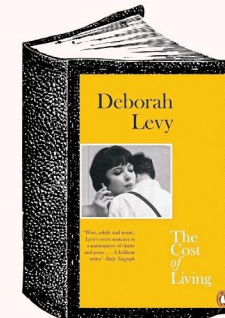
One of only a handful of case histories Freud wrote about his own patients, A Case of Hysteria has been described as "a classical Victorian domestic drama". Dora, whose real name was Ida Bauer, claimed to have resisted sexual advances made by her father's friend. Whatever your take on Freud's methodology – here he often seems more interrogator than doctor – his narrative skill in revealing aspects of the case, particularly connections between Dora's symptoms and her dreams, is pronounced.



The Comfort of Strangers

Ian McEwan

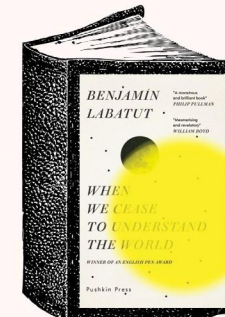
There's more than a hint of the Freudian to McEwan's most uncanny novel. "Colin and Mary had never left the hotel so late," he writes in the opening pages of this bracingly nasty book, "and Mary was to attribute much of what followed to this fact." So begins a short, brutal descent into manipulation and violence, as these two holidaymakers fall into the orbit, and under the spell, of another couple. The book is only made more menacing by blending its sense of threat with a dreamlike languor and beauty.



The Cost of Living

Deborah Levy

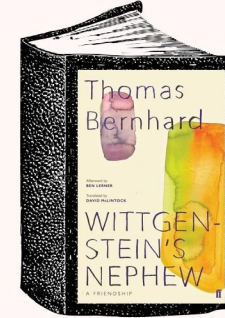
The second volume of Levy's "living autobiography", The Cost of Living describes the end of a long marriage and the death of the author's mother. The end of a marriage means downsizing, hard to accomplish with two children who need time and space. Writing demands the same, and in part this is a book about a writer being brave enough to define herself as one. And the scene with the flattened chicken is indelible.



When We Cease to Understand the World

Benjamin Labatut, translated by Adrian Nathan West

Fictional essays? Essayistic fictions? A nonfiction novel? How best to classify Labatut's addictive exploration of mathematical and scientific concepts and their authors, from the rivalrous Werner Heisenberg and Erwin Schrödinger to tormented Alan Turing and reclusive genius Alexander Grothendieck? Better, perhaps, to forget about categorisation and simply dive into a book that captures the strangeness and significance of the past two centuries' fundamental scientific breakthroughs, and the price they exacted in sanity.



Wittgenstein's Nephew

Thomas Bernhard, translated by David McLintock

The semi-autobiographical account of Thomas Bernhard's friendship with Paul Wittgenstein (actually Ludwig's first cousin once removed, but try making that work as a title) shows the infamously acid Austrian writer at his most personal. The book gives a moving and at times desperately exposing account of male friendship: "the most valuable relationship I have ever had with another man, the only one I have been able to endure for more than the briefest period".

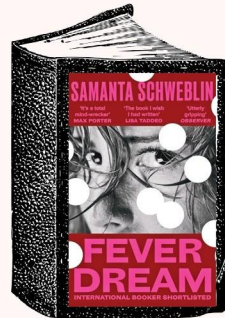


The Spare Room

Helen Garner

When a friend gave me a copy of Garner's auto-biographical novel as a birthday present, I thought of cancer as something that happened to other people. By the time I had read it, it had happened twice to me. The Spare Room is largely taken up with Helen's friend Nicola coming to Melbourne seeking an alternative therapy cure for her end-stage cancer.

Garner's account of this period, of the memorable beginning of their friendship drinking vodka on a jetty in the night, and of "the remains of her care" for Nicola, uses stark simplicity to reveal the desperate complexity of dying and of bearing witness to death.

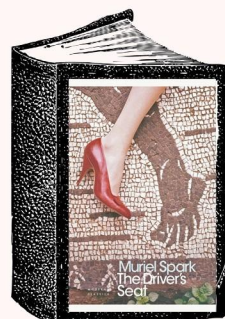


Fever Dream

Samanta Schweblin, translated by Megan McDowell

A panic attack disguised as a novel, Fever Dream takes the form of a dialogue between Amanda, lying in hospital having lost her sight, and her friend Carla's precocious young son, David – who Carla, as she previously told Amanda, thinks has been replaced by someone or something else. Meanwhile, where is Amanda's daughter? While every book on this

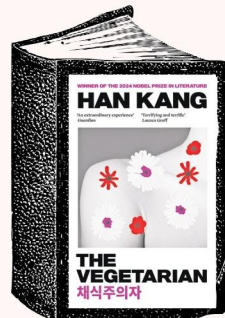
list benefits from being read in one go, Fever Dream is almost impossible to break away from before the final page is turned.



The Driver's Seat

Muriel Spark

Lise, the main character in Spark's still-shocking 1970 novel – her favourite of her works – is "neither good-looking nor bad-looking. Her nose is short and wider than it will look in the likeness constructed partly by the method of identikit, partly by actual photography, soon to be published in the newspapers of four languages". The book is a masterclass in telling readers they're headed somewhere horrible and having them hope things will turn out OK despite knowing they won't.

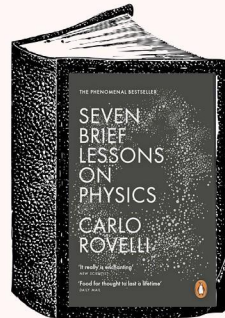


The Vegetarian

Han Kang, translated by Deborah Smith

Long before she became a Nobel prize winner, Han made her English language debut with this, her fifth novel. Questions multiply as we read. Why is Yeong-hye's husband so angry when she stops eating meat? What's with the botanical obsession of her brother-in-law? And is it linked with her later desire to transform into a tree?

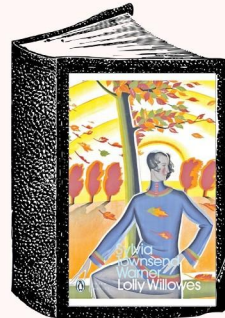
Compelling either because of or despite its mysteriousness, Han's novel – appropriately, given its obsessive return to the imagery of invaded bodies – sinks its roots deep in its readers' minds.



Seven Brief Lessons on Physics

Carlo Rovelli, translated by Simon Carnell and Erica Segre

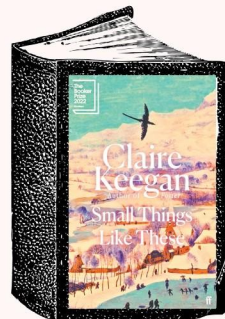
There is something breathtakingly simple in the way Carlo Rovelli, a physicist who originally wrote these short essays for an Italian newspaper, communicates ideas of the utmost complexity. Not that we come away from the book fully grasping general relativity, quantum gravity or the inelegance or otherwise of the Standard Model, but it helps us apprehend the awesome scope of the concepts it so elegantly outlines. And, unlike Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time, at 79 pages you'll actually finish it.



Lolly Willowses

Sylvia Townsend Warner

One of the true originals of 20th-century English literature, Townsend Warner's writing career began with this deeply strange novel 100 years ago. It opens conventionally enough, with young, gentle Lolly quitting London for the country. Then it gleefully begins smashing together genres, some of which weren't even codified in 1926. Nature writing, feminism ("women know they are dynamite", Lolly proclaims), folk horror and more are churned together, with Satan featuring not as a mere concept, but a flesh-and-blood Chiltern gamekeeper.



Small Things Like These

Claire Keegan

Just before the Christmas of 1985, the coalman Bill Furlong makes a shocking discovery in the "powerful-looking" convent that looms over his small Irish town. The church's domination, and Furlong's ability to defy it, is central to this spellbinding book. There's a simplistic reading that positions it as a fable about a good man. It's more complicated than that, and the question of what might happen in the days after Furlong's decisive, perhaps foolhardy action, persists.



Grief Is the Thing with Feathers

Max Porter

Before Max Porter's unique debut – part poem, novel, essay, play – became an unexpected sensation, publishers had grown resistant to short books. Without its example one can well imagine Samantha Harvey being told to go away and add 20,000 words to Orbital, her 140-page Booker prize winner. But Porter's vivid, crackling story, in which a human-sized crow steps from the pages of Ted Hughes's poetry and into the lives of a grieving family, puts the lie to the idea that short must mean insubstantial.