

Best Fiction Reads of 2023

by

Vicky Calmes, Director of the Colby Community Library

40. The Exchange: After the Firm by John Grisham

What became of Mitch and Abby McDeere after they exposed the crimes of a Memphis law firm and fled the country? The answer is in *The Exchange*, the riveting sequel to *The Firm*. It is now fifteen years later, and Mitch and Abby are living in Manhattan, where Mitch is a partner at the largest law firm in the world. When a mentor in Rome asks him for a favor that will take him far from home, Mitch finds himself at the center of a sinister plot that has worldwide implications—and once again endangers his colleagues, friends, and family.

39. Just Another Missing Person by Gillian McAllister

Olivia has been missing for a day. She was last seen entering a dead-end alley and not coming back out. Julia, the detective heading up the search for Olivia, has no idea just how close to home this case is going to get because the criminal at the heart of the disappearance has something she never expected. His weapon isn't a gun or a knife: it's a secret. Julia knows her family's safety depends on one thing: she must NOT find out what happened to Olivia and must frame somebody else for the murder.

38. An Honest Man by Michael Koryta

After discovering seven men murdered aboard their yacht, including two Senate rivals, Israel Pike is regarded as a prime suspect. A troubled man infamous on Salvation Point Island for killing his own father a decade before, Israel has few options, no friends, and a life-threatening secret. Elsewhere on the island, 12-year-old Lyman Rankin seeks shelter from his alcoholic father in an abandoned house only to discover that he is not alone. A mysterious woman greets him with a hatchet and a vow: "Make a sound and I'll kill you." As the investigation barrels forward, Lyman, Israel, and the fate of the case collide.

37. How It Had to Be by Marissa Vanskike

When Megan Palmer gets a call on the morning of her 27th birthday, the last thing she expected to hear was that her estranged father had committed suicide. The circumstances surrounding his death are strange, but nothing is stranger than the text he sent to her while she was asleep. His cryptic message just may be the key that unlocks everything, if Megan can figure out what it means. With the help of her lifelong friends, Megan dives headfirst into an investigation of her father's death that proves darker and more dangerous than she ever imagined.

36. Watch Us Shine by Marisa de los Santos

Cornelia Brown is reeling from a terrifying act of violence when she gets word that her mother has been badly injured in an accident. Cornelia returns to Virginia, to the house she grew up in, and she watches her mother Ellie struggle to recover, fluctuating between her usual crisp, can-do clarity and periods of delirium during which she seems haunted by a devastating loss from her past. As Cornelia and her sister uncover truths about their mother's life—some beautiful, some ugly, some tragic—Cornelia herself begins to heal, to forgive herself, and to find her way back home.

35. Where Coyotes Howl by Sandra Dallas

1916. The two-street town of Wallace is not exactly what Ellen Webster had in mind when she accepted a teaching position in Wyoming, but within a year's time she's fallen in love—both with the High Plains and with a handsome cowboy named Charlie Bacon. Life is not easy in the flat, brown corner of the state where winter blizzards are unforgiving and the summer heat relentless. Ellen and Charlie face it all together. Their relationship grows stronger with each shared success and each deeply felt tragedy.

34. The Only Survivors by Megan Miranda

A mystery about a group of former classmates who reunite to mark the tenth anniversary of a tragic accident—only to have one of the survivors disappear, casting fear and suspicion on the original tragedy.

33. Her Deadly Game by Robert Dugoni

Keera Duggan was building a solid reputation as a Seattle prosecutor, until her romantic relationship with a senior colleague ended badly. For the competitive former chess prodigy, returning to her family's failing criminal defense law firm to work for her father is the best shot she has. Keera's chance to play in the big leagues comes when she's retained by Vince LaRussa, an investment adviser accused of murdering his wealthy wife. The prosecutor is equally challenging: Miller Ambrose, Keera's former lover, who's eager to destroy her in court on her first homicide defense. As Keera and her team follow the evidence, they uncover a complicated and deadly game.

32. Heart of Disaster by Rachel Wesson

Inspired by true events, *Heart of Disaster* is the fictionalized story of the Irish steerage passengers who joined RMS Titanic. Four single friends, a newly married couple and a stoker who works in the belly of the ship meet that fateful night. When disaster strikes, not all survive. Even the ones who are alive have lost something forever in the freezing Atlantic Ocean.

31. The Nurse's Secret by Amanda Skenandore

Based on the little-known story of America's first nursing school, a young female grifter in 1880s New York evades the police by conning her way into Bellevue Hospital's training school for nurses. Based on Florence Nightingale's nursing principles, Bellevue is the first school of its kind in the country. Where once nurses were assumed to be ignorant and unskilled, Bellevue prizes discipline, intellect, and moral character, and only young women of good breeding need apply. At first, Una balks at her prim classmates and the doctors' endless commands, but life on the streets has prepared her for the horrors of injury and disease found on the wards. Just as she finds her footing, Una's suspicions about a patient's death put her at risk of exposure.

30. Soulmate by Sally Hepworth

There's a cottage on a cliff, and it is Gabe and Pippa's dream home. Alas, their perfect house hides something sinister. The tall cliffs have become a popular spot for people to end their lives. Night after night Gabe comes to their rescue, literally talking them off the ledge until one night he doesn't. When Pippa discovers Gabe knew the victim, the questions spiral...Did the victim jump? Was she pushed? Would Gabe, the love of Pippa's life lie? As the perfect facade of their marriage begins to crack, the deepest and darkest secrets begin to unravel.

29. What the Neighbors Saw by Melissa Adelman

When Alexis and her husband Sam buy a neglected Cape Cod house in an exclusive DC suburb, they are ecstatic. Sam is on the cusp of making partner at his law firm, Alexis is pregnant with their second child, and their glamorous neighbors welcome the couple with open arms. Things are looking up, and Alexis believes she can finally leave her troubled past behind. The neighborhood's picture-perfect image is shattered when their neighbor Teddy – a handsome, successful father of three – is found dead on the steep banks of the Potomac River. The community is shaken, and as the police struggle to identify and apprehend the killer, tension in the neighborhood mounts and long-buried secrets start to emerge.

28. What She Found by Robert Dugoni

Detective Tracy Crosswhite has agreed to look into the disappearance of investigative reporter Lisa Childress. Solving the cold case is an obsession for Lisa's daughter, Anita. So is clearing the name of her father, a prime suspect who became a pariah. After twenty-five years, all Anita wants is the truth—no matter where it leads. For Tracy, that means reopening the potentially explosive investigations Lisa was following on the dark night she vanished: an exposé of likely mayoral graft; the shocking rumors of a reserved city councilman's criminal sex life; a drug task force scandal compromising the Seattle PD; and an elusive serial killer who disappeared just as mysteriously as Lisa. As all the pieces come together, it becomes clear that Tracy is in the midst of a case that will push her loyalties and her resilience to the limit. What she uncovers will come with a greater price than anyone feared.

27. Stolen from Her Mother by Rachel Wesson

Ireland, 1941: While war rages across the world, Kate struggles on her family farm. Living off rations and looking after her sick father, she doesn't dare dream of falling in love. Then, she meets American airman, Tony, and they fall madly in love. Tony vows to make her his wife. Their time is cut short when Tony leaves for war, promising to come back for her. Only then does Kate learn she is carrying his child—but when her family members find out, she is shunned and is imprisoned in a home for unmarried mothers, where the windows are covered in barbed wire, the girls survive on scraps and sleep in a crammed dormitory. Kate writes to Tony to tell him about their child, but she never hears back... Is he even still alive? When she gives birth to baby Eva, Kate's worst nightmare comes true: her precious child is sold to a stranger. She made a promise to her darling daughter to never stop looking for her.

26. The Zero Night by Brian Freeman

After nearly dying of a gunshot wound, Jonathan Stride has been on leave from the Duluth Police for more than a year. When his partner, Maggie Bei, gets called about a suspicious abduction involving a local lawyer, she tells Stride it's time for him to come back. As Stride digs for the truth about Gavin Webster and his wife, he must also deal with a crisis in his own marriage.

25. The Only One Left by Riley Sager

The Hope family murders shocked the Maine coast one bloody night in 1929. While most people assume seventeen-year-old Lenora was responsible, the police were never able to prove it. Other than her denial after the killings, she has never spoken publicly about that night, nor has she set foot outside Hope's End, the cliffside mansion where the massacre occurred. It's now 1983, and home-health aide Kit McDeere arrives at a decaying Hope's End to care for Lenora after her previous nurse fled in the middle of the night. In her seventies and confined to a wheelchair, Lenora was rendered mute by a series of strokes and can only communicate with Kit by tapping out sentences on an old typewriter. One night, Lenora makes a tantalizing offer to tell everything.

24. Good Bad Girl by Alice Feeney

Sometimes bad things happen to good people, so good people have to do bad things. Twenty years after a baby is stolen from a stroller, a woman is murdered in a care home. The two crimes are somehow linked. Edith may have been tricked into a nursing home, but at eighty-years-young, she's planning her escape. Patience works there, cleaning messes and bonding with Edith, a kindred spirit. Patience is lying to Edith about almost everything. Edith's own daughter, Clio, won't speak to her. Then, someone knocks on Clio's door and their intentions aren't good.

23. I Will Find You by Harlan Coben

David and Cheryl Burroughs were living the dream life when tragedy struck. Now, five years after that terrible night, Cheryl is remarried and David is serving a life sentence in a maximum-security prison for the brutal murder of their son. Then Cheryl's sister, Rachel, arrives unexpectedly during visiting hours and drops a bombshell. She's come with a photograph that a friend took on vacation at a theme park with a boy in the background who has a familiar, distinctive birthmark. Even though David and Rachel realize it can't be, they both just know it's David's son, Matthew, and he's still alive. David plans a harrowing escape from prison, determined to do what seems impossible—save his son, clear his own name, and discover the real story of what happened that devastating night.

22. Everyone Here is Lying by Shari Lapena

William Wooler is a family man, on the surface, but he's been having an affair, an affair that ended horribly this afternoon at a motel up the road. So when he returns to his house, devastated and angry, to find his difficult nine-year-old daughter, Avery, unexpectedly home from school, William loses his temper. Hours later, Avery's family declares her missing. Suddenly, the town doesn't feel so safe. William isn't the only one on his street who's hiding a lie. As witnesses come forward with information that may or may not be true, Avery's neighbors become increasingly unhinged.

21. Gone Tonight by Sarah Pekkanen

Catherine Sterling thinks she knows her mother. Ruth Sterling is quiet, hardworking, and lives for her daughter. All her life, it's been just the two of them against the world, but now Catherine is ready to spread her wings, move from home, and begin a new career. Ruth Sterling will do anything to prevent that from happening. Ruth Sterling thinks she knows her daughter. Catherine would never rebel, would never question anything about her mother's past or background. Then, Ruth's desperate quest to keep her daughter by her side begins to reveal cracks in Ruth's carefully constructed world, and both mother and daughter begin a dance of deception.

20a. The Five Wishes of Mr. Murray McBride by Joe Siple (Read this first)

With all his family and friends gone, one-hundred-year-old Murray McBride is looking for a reason to live. He finds it in Jason Cashman, a ten-year-old boy with a terminal heart defect and a list of five things he wants to do before he dies. Together, they race against the limited time each has left, ticking off wishes one by one. Along the way, Murray remembers what it's like to be young, and Jason fights for the opportunity to grow old. When tragedy strikes, their worlds are turned upside-down, and an unexpected gift is the only thing that can make Jason's final wish come true.

20b. The Final Wish of Mr. Murray McBride by Joe Siple (Read this second)

Jason Cashman has reached the goal he spent the last twenty years seeking, but instead of feeling content, he feels empty. When he meets Alexandra Lopez, a ten-year-old America-loving girl facing deportation, he is inspired by his old friend, Murray McBride, to give her five wishes before she must leave. They set out to check off as many wishes as possible, but when Jason's transplanted heart begins to fail, he must choose between his obligations to the past and his hope for a future.

19. My Child is Missing by Lisa Regan

When a desperate mother calls Denton Police Department to report her children missing, Detective Josie Quinn races to investigate. Sixteen-year-old Kayleigh and her little sister Savannah went for a walk in the woods but never came home. They are good girls and know not to go far, say their frantic parents. Kayleigh always looks after Savannah and brings her home safely. Until now with the legend of "The Woodsman" circulating: when pairs of children go into the woods, the Woodsman takes one of them and only one comes out alive. Little Savannah Patchett is soon mercifully found alive, alone and terrified, but she tells Josie "the Woodsman has taken my sister."

18. Exiles by Jane Harper

At a busy festival site on a warm spring night, a baby lies alone in her pram, her mother vanishing into the crowds. A year later, Kim Gillespie's absence casts a long shadow as her friends and loved ones gather deep in the heart of South Australian wine country to welcome a new addition to the family. Joining the celebrations is federal investigator Aaron Falk, but as he soaks up life in the lush valley, he begins to suspect this tight-knit group may be more fractured than it seems. Between Falk's closest friend, a missing mother, and a woman he's drawn to, dark questions linger as long-ago truths begin to emerge.

17. Go As a River by Shelley Read

On a cool autumn day in 1948, Victoria Nash delivers late-season peaches from her family's farm set amid the wild beauty of Colorado. As she heads into her village, a disheveled stranger stops to ask her the way. How she chooses to answer will unknowingly alter the course of both their young lives. So begins the mesmerizing story of split-second choices and courageous acts that propel Victoria away from the only home she has ever known and towards a reckoning with loss, hope and her own untapped strength.

16. The Whispers by Ashley Audrain

The Loverlys sit by the hospital bed of their young son who is in a coma after falling from his bedroom window in the middle of the night; his mother, Whitney, will not speak to anyone. Back home, their friends and neighbors are left in shock, each confronting their own role in the events that led up to what happened that terrible night: the warm, altruistic Parks who are the Loverlys' best friends; the young, ambitious Goldsmiths who are struggling to start a family of their own; and the quiet, elderly Portuguese couple who care for their adult son with a developmental disability.

15. The Quarry Girls by Jess Lourey

Minnesota, 1977. Heather and Brenda have a secret. Something they saw in the dark and can't forget. They've decided to never tell a soul. Their vow is tested when their friend disappears—the second girl to vanish in a week. Heather is terrified that the missing girls are connected to what she and Brenda stumbled upon that night. Desperately searching for answers on her own, she learns that no one in her community is who they seem to be: not the police, not the boys she met at the quarry, not even her parents. She can't stop digging because she knows those girls are in danger.

14. Listen to Me by Tess Gerritsen

Boston homicide detective Jane Rizzoli and medical examiner Maura Isles are newly plagued by what seems like a completely senseless murder. Sofia Suarez, a widow and nurse who was universally liked by her neighbors, lies bludgeoned to death in her own home. Anything can happen behind closed doors, and Sofia seemed to have plenty of secrets in her last days, making covert phone calls to traceless burner phones. When Jane finally makes a connection between Sofia and the victim of a hit-and-run from months earlier, the case only grows more puzzling. What exactly was Sofia involved in? The killer will do anything it takes to keep their secret safe.

13. Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus

Chemist Elizabeth Zott is not your average woman in the early 1960s and her all-male team at Hastings Research Institute takes a very unscientific view of equality. The exception is Calvin Evans, the lonely, brilliant, Nobel-prize nominated man who falls in love with—of all things—her mind. True chemistry results, but like science, life is unpredictable. A few years later Elizabeth Zott finds herself not only a single mother, but the reluctant star of America's most beloved cooking show *Supper at Six*. Elizabeth's unusual approach to cooking ("combine one tablespoon acetic acid with a pinch of sodium chloride") proves revolutionary. As her following grows, not everyone is happy as Elizabeth is daring them to change the status quo.

12. October in the Earth by Olivia Hawker

Del Wensley, wife of the most celebrated preacher in Harlan County, tries to mind her place until her husband's infidelity pushes an already strained marriage to a breaking point. Clinging to her last hope for self-respect, Del turns her back on the rigid life she's known. A coal train is rolling through the valley. With her eyes wide open to the unfamiliar, and to the freedom she craves, Del takes to the rails. Rumbling across America, Del is soon drawn into a transient community among outcasts—and finds a special friend in Louisa Trout. A nomadic single mother, Louisa teaches Del the ways of the boxcars and promises to help her reach a migrant enclave where Del can learn the skills she'll need to survive.

11. The Rise of Light by Olivia Hawker

1975. In the town of Rexburg, Idaho, aspiring artist Aran Rigby, his younger sister, Tamsin, and their two brothers are locked in orbit around their emotionally abusive father. Gad is the kind of man who soothes the failures of his own life by controlling the lives of others. But Aran and Tamsin are united in rebellion against their father. Arriving in Rexburg is Linda Duff, an outsider from Seattle hoping to plant new roots far from the bitter ones of her childhood. She's quickly taken with Aran, in no small part because of his talent. When they fall in love, Linda is drawn into a family more damaged than the one she left behind. She also becomes privy to a secret Aran and Tamsin share that could dismantle everything everyone holds dear.

10. One for the Blackbird, One for the Crow by Olivia Hawker

Wyoming, 1870. For as long as they have lived on the frontier, the Bemis and Webber families have relied on each other. With no other settlers for miles, it is a matter of survival. When Ernest Bemis finds his wife, Cora, in a compromising situation with their neighbor, he doesn't think of survival. In one impulsive moment, a man is dead, Ernest is off to prison, and the women left behind are divided by rage and remorse. Losing her husband to Cora's indiscretion is another hardship for stoic Nettie Mae. As a brutal Wyoming winter bears down, Cora and Nettie Mae have no choice but to come together as one family—to work the land and raise the children.

9. The Ragged Edge of Night by Olivia Hawker

Germany, 1942. Franciscan friar Anton Starzmann is stripped of his place in the world when his school is seized by the Nazis. He relocates to a small German hamlet to wed Elisabeth Herter, a widow who seeks a marriage—in name only—to a man who can help raise her three children. Anton seeks something too—atonement for failing to protect his young students from the wrath of the Nazis. Neither he nor Elisabeth expects their lives to be shaken once again by the inescapable rumble of war. As Anton struggles to adapt to the roles of husband and father, he learns of the Red Orchestra, an underground network of resisters plotting to assassinate Hitler. Despite Elisabeth's reservations, Anton joins this army of shadows. When the SS discovers his schemes, Anton will embark on a final act of defiance that may cost him his life.

8. The Music of Bees by Eileen Garvin

Alice Holtzman is stuck in a dead-end job and reeling from the unexpected death of her husband. Alice has begun having panic attacks whenever she thinks about how her life hasn't turned out the way she dreamed. The beloved honeybees she raises in her spare time aren't helping her feel better these days. In the grip of a panic attack, she nearly collides with Jake—a troubled, paraplegic teenager with the tallest mohawk in Hood River County—while carrying 120,000 honeybees in the back of her pickup truck. Charmed by Jake's sincere interest in her bees and seeking to rescue him from his toxic home life, Alice surprises herself by inviting Jake to her farm. Then, there is Harry, a twenty-four-year-old with debilitating social anxiety who is desperate for work. When he applies to Alice's ad for part-time farm help, he's shocked to find himself hired. As an unexpected friendship blossoms among Alice, Jake, and Harry, a nefarious pesticide company moves to town, threatening the local honeybee population and illuminating deep-seated corruption in the community. The unlikely trio must unite for the sake of the bees.

7. **The Memory of an Elephant by Alex Lasker**

The Memory of an Elephant is an epic saga told by an aging African elephant as he makes a last, perilous journey to find the humans who rescued him as an orphan some fifty years ago. Interwoven with his narrative are the tumultuous lives of the family who raised and then lost him: a famed hunting guide and his wife, who runs an animal orphanage (a conflict that in time upends their marriage); their son and daughter; and the young Kikuyu who finds the orphaned elephant and becomes part of the Hathaway family. This timeless story is alternately heartwarming and heartbreaking, spanning East Africa, Great Britain and New York from 1962 to 2015.

6. **West with Giraffes by Lynda Rutledge**

An emotional, rousing novel inspired by the incredible true story of two giraffes who made headlines and won the hearts of Depression-era America. Woodrow Wilson Nickel, age 105, feels his life ebbing away. When he learns giraffes are going extinct, he finds himself recalling the unforgettable experience he cannot take to his grave. It's 1938. The Great Depression lingers. Hitler is threatening Europe, and world-weary Americans long for wonder. They find it in two giraffes who miraculously survive a hurricane while crossing the Atlantic. What follows is a twelve-day road trip in a custom truck to deliver Southern California's first giraffes to the San Diego Zoo. Behind the wheel is the young Dust Bowl rowdy Woodrow. Inspired by true events, the tale weaves real-life figures with fictional ones, including the world's first female zoo director, a crusty old man with a past, a young female photographer with a secret, and assorted reprobates as spotty as the giraffes.

5. **The Golden Doves by Martha Hall Kelley**

American Josie Anderson and Parisian Arlette LaRue are thrilled to be working in the French resistance, stealing so many Nazi secrets that they become known as the Golden Doves, renowned across France and hunted by the Gestapo. When they are finally arrested and taken to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, along with their loved ones, a reclusive Nazi doctor does unspeakable things to Josie's mother, a celebrated Jewish singer. Arlette's son is stolen from her, never to be seen again. A decade later the Doves fall headlong into a dangerous dual mission: Josie is working for U.S. Army intelligence and accepts an assignment to hunt down the infamous doctor, while a mysterious man tells Arlette he may have found her son. The Golden Doves embark on a quest across Europe discovering a web of terrible secrets.

4. **The Winter Guest by Pam Jenoff**

Life is a constant struggle for the eighteen-year-old Nowak twins as they raise their three younger siblings in rural Poland under the shadow of the Nazi occupation. The constant threat of arrest has made everyone in their village a spy and turned neighbor against neighbor. Though rugged, independent Helena and pretty, gentle Ruth couldn't be more different, they are staunch allies in protecting their family from the threats the war brings. Then, Helena discovers an American paratrooper stranded outside their small mountain village, wounded, but alive. Risking the safety of herself and her family, she hides Sam—a Jew—but Helena's concern for the American grows into something much deeper.

3. **Lady Tan's Circle of Women by Lisa See**

According to Confucius, "an educated woman is a worthless woman," but Tan Yunxian—born into an elite family, yet haunted by death, separations, and loneliness—is being raised by her grandparents to be of use. Her grandmother is one of only a handful of female doctors in China, and she teaches Yunxian the pillars of Chinese medicine, the Four Examinations—looking, listening, touching, and asking—something a man can never do with a female patient. From a young age, Yunxian learns about women's illnesses, many of which relate to childbearing, alongside a young midwife-in-training, Meiling. The two girls find fast friendship and a mutual purpose and they vow to be forever friends, sharing in each other's joys and struggles. But when Yunxian is sent into an arranged marriage, her mother-in-law forbids her from seeing Meiling and from helping the women and girls in the household.

2. All the Broken Places by John Boyne

Ninety-one-year-old Gretel Fernsby has lived in the same well-to-do mansion block in London for decades. She lives a quiet, comfortable life, despite her deeply disturbing, dark past. She doesn't talk about her escape from Nazi Germany at age 12. She doesn't talk about the grim post-war years in France with her mother. Most of all, she doesn't talk about her father, who was the commandant of one of the Reich's most notorious extermination camps. Then, a new family moves into the apartment below her. In spite of herself, Gretel can't help but begin a friendship with the little boy, Henry, though his presence brings back memories she would rather forget. *All The Broken Places* moves back and forth in time between Gretel's girlhood in Germany to present-day London as a woman whose life has been haunted by the past.

...And the Number One Choice for 2023 (Do not be intimidated by the length of this book!):

1. The Covenant of Water by Abraham Verghese

Spanning the years 1900 to 1977, *The Covenant of Water* is set in Kerala, on South India's Malabar Coast, and follows three generations of a family that suffers a peculiar affliction: in every generation, at least one person dies by drowning—and in Kerala, water is everywhere. The family is part of a Christian community that traces itself to the time of the apostles, but times are shifting, and the matriarch of this family, known as Big Ammachi—literally “Big Mother”—will witness unthinkable changes at home and at large over the span of her extraordinary life.