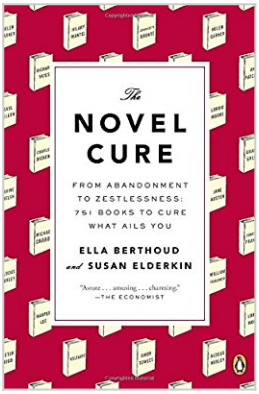


# The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You

*By Ella Berthoud, Susan Elderkin*



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***Publisher's Weekly***
**"Delightful... elegant prose and discussions that span the history of 2,000 years of literature."**

A novel is a story transmitted from the novelist to the reader. It offers distraction, entertainment, and an opportunity to unwind or focus. But it can also be something more powerful—a way to learn about how to live. Read at the right moment in your life, a novel can—quite literally—change it.

*The Novel Cure* is a reminder of that power. To create this apothecary, the authors have trawled two thousand years of literature for novels that effectively promote happiness, health, and sanity, written by brilliant minds who knew what it meant to be human and wrote their life lessons into their fiction. Structured like a reference book, readers simply look up their ailment, be it agoraphobia, boredom, or a midlife crisis, and are given a novel to read as the antidote. Bibliotherapy does not discriminate between pains of the body and pains of the head (or heart). Aware that you've been cowardly? Pick up *To Kill a Mockingbird* for an injection of courage. Experiencing a sudden, acute fear of death? Read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for some perspective on the larger cycle of life. Nervous about throwing a dinner party? Ali Smith's *There but for The* will convince you that yours could never go *that* wrong. Whatever your condition, the prescription is simple: a novel (or two), to be read at regular intervals and in nice long chunks until you finish. Some treatments will lead to a complete cure. Others will offer solace, showing that you're not the first to experience these emotions. *The Novel Cure* is also peppered with useful lists and sidebars recommending the best novels to read when you're stuck in traffic or can't fall asleep, the most important novels to read during every decade of life, and many more.

Brilliant in concept and deeply satisfying in execution, *The Novel Cure* belongs on everyone's bookshelf and in every medicine cabinet. It will make even the most well-read fiction aficionado pick up a novel he's never heard of, and see

familiar ones with new eyes. Mostly, it will reaffirm literature’s ability to distract and transport, to resonate and reassure, to change the way we see the world and our place in it.

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**"This appealing and helpful read is guaranteed to double the length of a to-read list and become a go-to reference for those unsure of their reading identities or who are overwhelmed by the sheer number of books in the world."**

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## Editorial Review

Review
***The Guardian* (UK)**
**"An exuberant pageant of literary fiction and a celebration of the possibilities of the novel."**
**--*Guardian* (UK)**

***The Economist***
**"Astute and often amusing . . . a charming addition to any library. Time spent leafing through its pages is inspiring - even therapeutic."**

***Publishers Weekly***
**"A delightful reference guide… [Berthoud and Elderkin] tackle serious and not-so-serious ailments with equal verve… elegant prose and discussions that span the history of 2,000 years of literature will surely make readers seek out these books. Taking two novellas and calling the bibliotherapists in the morning sounds welcome indeed."**

***Kirkus***
**"A fine remedy for bibliophiles."**

***Vogue* (UK)**
**Brilliant . . . A perfect gift**

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About the Author
**Susan Elderkin** and **Ella Berthoud s**tarted giving novels to each other when they met as English students at Cambridge twenty-five years ago. A novelist, travel writer, writing teacher, and fiction reviewer for the *Financial Times*, Elderkin now lives in Connecticut with her husband and son. Berthoud lives in Sussex with her husband and three girls and paints in a hut in her back garden. They have run a bibliotherapy service out of The School of Life in London since 2008, prescribing books to clients all around the world.

**TheNovelCure.com**



Praise for *The Novel Cure*

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—*The Economist*

“We’re hooked.”

—*Psychologies Magazine* (UK)

“The tone throughout is witty and self-aware, but the authors’ advice is sensible too. . . . If you’re looking for a book full of intriguing recommendations, it’s just what the doctor ordered.”

—*Sunday Business Post* (Dublin)

“Elderkin and Berthoud handle their varied subject matter deftly. *The Novel Cure* remains serious without taking itself too seriously, gives advice without preaching and advocates, with warmth and humor, the importance of literature as a therapeutic medium. . . . A note of caution, however, if reading *The Novel Cure* on public transport: it will make you laugh. Very loudly.”

—*The Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia)

“A delightful reference guide . . . [Berthoud and Elderkin] tackle serious and not-so-serious ailments with equal verve. . . . Elegant prose and discussions that span the history of two thousand years of literature will surely make readers seek out these books. Taking two novellas and calling the bibliotherapists in the morning sounds welcome indeed.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin started giving novels to each other when they met as English students at Cambridge twenty-five years ago. An artist and art teacher, Berthoud lives in Sussex, England, with her husband and three girls and paints while absorbing audiobooks intravenously. A novelist, travel writer, writing teacher, and fiction reviewer for the *Financial Times*, Elderkin now lives with her husband and son in Connecticut, where she regularly kayaks with a novel in hand. The authors have run a bibliotherapy service out of the School of Life in London since 2008, prescribing books to clients around the world.

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To Carl and Ash

and in memory of Marguerite Berthoud and David Elderkin,

who taught us to love books—and build the bookshelves

One sheds one’s sicknesses in books—repeats and presents again one’s emotions, to be master of them.

—D. H. LAWRENCE
*(The Letters of D. H. Lawrence)*

## INTRODUCTION

**bib•lio•ther•a•py** *noun*

i-ble---'ther--pe-, -'the-r-py

: the prescribing of fiction for life's ailments

—Berthoud and Elderkin, 2013

This is a medical handbook—with a difference.

First of all, it does not discriminate between emotional pain and physical pain—you're as likely to find a cure within these pages for a broken heart as a broken leg. It also includes common predicaments you might find yourself in, such as moving house, looking for Mr. or Mrs. Right, or having a midlife crisis. Life's bigger challenges, such as losing a loved one or becoming a single parent, are in here too. Whether you've got the hiccups or a hangover, a fear of commitment or a sense of humor failure, we consider it an ailment that deserves a remedy.

But there's another difference too. Our medicines are not something you'll find at the drugstore, but at the bookshop, in the library, or downloaded onto your electronic reading device. We are bibliotherapists, and the tools of our trade are books. Our apothecary contains Balzacian balms and Tolstoyan tourniquets, the salves of Saramago and the purges of Perec and Proust. To create it, we have trawled two thousand years of literature for the most brilliant minds and restorative reads, from Apuleius, second-century author of *The Golden Ass*, to the contemporary tonics of Ali Smith and Jonathan Franzen.

Bibliotherapy has been popular in the form of the nonfiction self-help book for several decades now. But lovers of literature have been using novels as salves—either consciously or subconsciously—for centuries. Next time you're feeling in need of a pick-me-up or require assistance with an emotional tangle, reach for a novel. Our belief in the effectiveness of fiction as the purest and best form of bibliotherapy is based on our own experience with patients and bolstered by an avalanche of anecdotal evidence. Sometimes it's the story that charms; other times it's the rhythm of the prose that works on the psyche, stilling or stimulating. Sometimes it's an idea or an attitude suggested by a character in a similar quandary or jam. Either way, novels have the power to transport you to another existence and see the world from a different point of view. When you're engrossed in a novel, unable to tear yourself from the page, you are seeing what a character sees, touching what a character touches, learning what a character learns. You may *think* you're sitting on the sofa in your living room, but the important parts of you—your thoughts, your senses, your spirit—are somewhere else entirely. "To read a writer is for me not merely to get an idea of what he says, but to go off with him and travel in his company," said André Gide. No one comes back from such a journey quite the same.

Whatever your ailment, our prescriptions are simple: a novel (or two), to be read at regular intervals. Some treatments will lead to a complete cure. Others will simply offer solace, showing you that you are not alone. All will offer the temporary relief of your symptoms due to the power of literature to distract and transport. Sometimes the remedy is best taken as an audiobook, or read aloud with a friend. As with all medicines, the full course of treatment should always be taken for best results. Along with the cures, we offer advice on particular reading issues, such as being too busy to read or what to read when you can't sleep, along with the ten best books to read in each decade of life; and the best literary accompaniments for important rituals or rites of passage, such as being on vacation—or on your deathbed.*

We wish you every delight in our fictional plasters and poultices. You will be healthier, happier, and wiser for them.

A

ABANDONMENT

*Plainsong*

KENT HARUF

If inflicted early, the effects of physical or emotional abandonment—whether you were left by too busy parents to bring yourself up, told to take your tears and tantrums elsewhere, or off-loaded onto another set of parents completely (see: Adoption)—can be hard to shrug. If you're not careful, you might spend the rest of your life expecting to be let down. As a first step to recovery, it is often helpful to realize that those who abandon you were most likely abandoned themselves. And rather than wishing they'd buck up and give you the support or attention you yearn for, put your energy into finding someone else to lean on who's better equipped for the job.

Abandonment is rife in *Plainsong*, Kent Haruf's account of small-town life in Holt, Colorado. Local schoolteacher Guthrie has been abandoned by his depressed wife, Ella, who feigns sleep when he tries to talk to her and looks at the door with "outsized eyes" when he leaves. Their two young sons, Ike and Bobby, are left bewildered by her unexplained absence from their lives. Old Mrs. Stearns has been abandoned by her

relatives, either through death or neglect. And Victoria, seventeen years old and four months' pregnant, is abandoned first by her boyfriend and then by her mother, who, in a backhanded punishment to the man who'd abandoned them both many years before, tells her, "You got yourself into this, you can just get out of it," and kicks her out of the house.

Gradually, and seemingly organically—although in fact it is mostly orchestrated by Maggie Jones, a young woman with a gift for communication—other people step into the breach. Most astonishing are the McPheron brothers, a pair of "crotchety and ignorant" cattle-farming bachelors who agree to take the pregnant Victoria in: "They looked at her, regarding her as if she might be dangerous. Then they peered into the palms of their thick callused hands spread out before them on the kitchen table and lastly they looked out the window toward the leafless and stunted elm trees." The next thing we know they are running around shopping for cribs, and the rush of love for the pair felt by Victoria, as well as the reader, transforms them overnight. As we watch the community quicken to its role as extended family—frail Mrs. Stearns teaching Ike and Bobby to make cookies, the McPherons watching over Victoria with all the tender, clumsy tenacity they normally reserve for their cows—we see how support can come from very surprising places.

If you have been abandoned, don't be afraid to reach out to the wider community around you—however little you know its inhabitants as individuals. They'll thank you for it one day.

ACCUSED, BEING

*True History of the Kelly Gang*

PETER CAREY

If you're accused of something and you know you're guilty, accept your punishment with good grace. If you're accused and you didn't do it, fight to clear your name. And if you're accused and you know you did it but you don't think what you did was wrong, what *then*?

Australia's Robin Hood, Ned Kelly—as portrayed by Peter Carey in *True History of the Kelly Gang*—commits his first crime at ten years old when he kills a neighbor's heifer so his family can eat. The next thing he knows, he's been apprenticed (by his own mother) to the bushranger, Harry Power. When Harry robs the Buckland Coach, Ned is the "nameless person" who blocked the road with a tree and held the horses so "Harry could go about his trade." And thus Ned's fate is sealed: He's an outlaw forever. He makes something glorious of it.

In his telling of the story—which he has written down in his own words for his baby daughter to read one day, knowing he won't be around to tell her himself—Ned seduces us completely with his rough-hewn, punctuation-free prose that bounds and dives over the page. But what really warms us to this Robin Hood of a boy/man is his strong sense of right and wrong: Ned is guided at all times by a fierce loyalty and a set of principles that happen not to coincide with those of the law. When his ma needs gold, he brings her gold; when both his ma and his sister are deserted by their faithless men, he'll "break the 6th Commandment" for their sakes. And even though Harry and his own uncles use him "poorly," he never betrays them. How can we not love this murdering bushranger with his big heart? It is the world that's corrupt, not him, and we cheer and whoop from the sidelines as pistols flash and his Enfield answers. And so the novel makes outlaws of its readers.

Ned Kelly is a valuable reminder that just because someone has fallen foul of society's laws, he's not necessarily bad. It's up to each one of us to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong in life. Draw up

your personal constitution, then live by it. If you step out of line, be the first to give yourself a reprimand. Then see: Guilt.

ADDICTION TO ALCOHOL

*See:* Alcoholism

ADDICTION TO COFFEE

*See:* Coffee, can’t find a decent cup of

ADDICTION TO DRUGS

*See:* Drugs, doing too many

ADDICTION TO GAMBLING

*See:* Gambling

ADDICTION TO SEX

*See:* Sex, too much

ADDICTION TO SHOPPING

*See:* Shopaholism

ADDICTION TO THE INTERNET

*See:* Internet addiction

ADDICTION TO TOBACCO

*See:* Smoking, giving up

ADOLESCENCE

*The Catcher in the Rye*

J. D. SALINGER

• • •

*Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?*

LORRIE MOORE

• • •

*In Youth Is Pleasure*

DENTON WELCH

Hormones rage. Hair sprouts where previously all was smooth. Adam's apples bulge and voices crack. Acne erupts. Bosoms bloom. And hearts—and loins—catch fire with the slightest provocation.

First, stop thinking you're the only one it's happened to. Whatever you're going through, Holden Caulfield got there first. If you think everything is "lousy," if you can't be bothered to talk about it, if your parents would have "two hemorrhages apiece" if they knew what you were doing right now, if you've ever been expelled from school, if you think all adults are phonies, if you drink/smoke/try to pick up people much older than you, if your so-called friends are always walking out on you, if your teachers tell you you're letting yourself down, if the only person who understands you is your ten-year-old sister, if you protect yourself from the world with your swagger, your bad language, your seeming indifference to whatever happens to you next—if any of these is true for you, *The Catcher in the Rye* will carry you through.

Adolescence can't be cured, but there are ways to make the most of it. Lorrie Moore's *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* is full of the usual horrors. The narrator, Berie, is a late developer who hides her embarrassment by mocking her "fried eggs" and "tin cans run over by a car," and she and her best friend, Sils, roll about laughing when they remember how Sils once tried to shave off her pimples with a razor. In fact, laughing is something they do a lot of together—and they do it "violently, convulsively," with no sound coming out. They also sing songs together—anything from Christmas carols to TV theme tunes and Dionne Warwick. And we applaud that they do. Because if you don't sing loudly and badly with your friends when you're fourteen and fifteen, letting the music prepare your heart for "something drenching and big" to come, when do you get to do it?

A teenage boy who makes no friends at all yet lives with incredible intensity is Orvil Pym in Denton Welch's *In Youth Is Pleasure*. This beautifully observed novel, published in 1945, takes place over the course of one languid summer against the backdrop of an English country hotel, where Orvil, caught in a state of pubescent confusion, holidays with his father and brothers. Aloof and apart, he observes the flaws in those around him with a pitiless lens. He explores the countryside, guiltily tasting the communion wine in a deserted church, then falling off his bike and crying in despair for "all the tortures and atrocities in the world." He borrows a boat and rows down a river, glimpsing two boys whose bodies "glinted like silk" in the evening light. New worlds beckon, just beyond his reach, as he hovers on the edge of revelation. And for a while, he considers pretending to be mad, to avoid the horrors awaiting him back at school. Gradually he realizes that he cannot leap the next ten years—that he just has to survive this bewildering stage and behave in "the ordinary way," smiling and protecting his brothers' pecking order by hiding his wilder impulses.

Adolescence doesn't have to be hell. Remember that your peers are struggling to cross the chasm too. If you can, share the struggles together. Friends or no friends, be sure to do the silly, crazy things that only adolescents do. Then, when you're older, at least you'll be able to look back at these heady, high, hormonal times and laugh.

*See also:* Bed, inability to get out of • Internet addiction • Irritability • Rails, going off the • Risks, taking too many • Teens, being in your

ADOPTION

*Run*

ANN PATCHETT

• • •

*The Graveyard Book*

NEIL GAIMAN

Children's literature is strewn with adoptees. Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden* is a spoiled adoptee who learns to love in her new cold climate; Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* is brought up by wolves; Tarzan in the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs is reared by apes. A romance seems to surround these lost and found—and indeed who, as a child, hasn't had a run-in with their parents and fantasized that they too were a foundling? Adoptees find their way into adult literature too: there's James in Grant Gillespie's *The Cuckoo Boy*, a novel with some disturbing views on adoption but a riveting read nonetheless; Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, who upsets the delicate balance of his adoptive family; "Wart" in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, who is one of the rare success stories in this list—an adoptee who turns out to be Arthur, King of Camelot.

In reality, adoption is less romantic and can be hard for all concerned—for the natural parents who decide to give their child away; for the child who finds out in a nonideal way (see: Abandonment); for children who blame their adoptive parents for their confusion and who may seek out their natural parents, only to be disappointed; and for the adoptive parents who have to decide when to tell their children that they are "special" and not blood related. The whole matter is fraught with pitfalls, but also with love, and it can bring an end to childless grief (see: Children, not having). Anyone involved would do well to explore its complexity via those who have been there before.

One of the loveliest novels featuring adoptees is Ann Patchett's *Run*. Bernard Doyle, the white ex-mayor of Boston, has three sons: Sullivan, Teddy, and Tip. One is a white redhead, and two are black, athletic, and extremely tall. Bernard's fiery-haired wife, Bernadette, Sullivan's mother, is dead. Teddy and Tip's real mother is "the spy who came in from the cold"—she has watched her sons grow up from a distance, aware of their successes and failures, their friendships and rivalries, and presiding over them like a guardian angel.

When eleven-year-old Kenya—the runner of the title—unexpectedly comes to live in the Doyle household, the complex family dynamics begin to move in new directions. Teddy and Tip seem to be successful, as a scientist and a would-be priest, but Doyle wishes they had followed him into politics. Sullivan has been in Africa for some time trying to help in the battle against AIDS, running away from a terrible incident in his past. With the new issues raised by Kenya's presence, the stories of the brothers' different origins gradually emerge, and it is Kenya's simple but overwhelming need to run—beautifully portrayed by Patchett: "She was a superhuman force that sat outside the fundamental law of nature. Gravity did not apply to her"—that brings them all together. The overall message of the novel is clear, and delivered without sentimentality: blood matters, but love matters more.

Confirmation that even the most unconventional parents can make a good job of adopting a child is found within the pages of *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman. When a toddler goes exploring one night, he manages to evade death at the hands of "the man Jack," who murders the rest of his family. Ending up in a nearby graveyard, he's adopted by a pair of ghosts. The dead Mr. and Mrs. Owens never had children of their own in life and relish this unexpected chance to become parents. They name him "Nobody" but refer to him as Bod. During his eccentric childhood, Bod picks up unusual skills such as "Fading, Haunting, and Dream Walking," which turn out to be very useful later on.

Bod's ghostly parents do an excellent job. "You're alive, Bod. That means you have infinite potential. You can do anything, make anything, dream anything. If you can change the world, the world will change." Their wisdom from the grave gives Bod the impetus to live his life to the fullest, despite the tragedy of his early years. And he certainly does.

Adoption is never a simple thing. Honesty on all sides is essential to allow those involved to come to terms with who they are and what relationship they have to whom. Whatever part you play, these novels will show you you're not alone. Read them and then pass them around your family—however that family is defined.

*See also:* Abandonment • Outsider, being an

ADULTERY

*Madame Bovary*

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

• • •

*Anna Karenina*

LEO TOLSTOY

• • •

*Patience*

JOHN COATES

• • •

*The Summer Without Men*

SIRI HUSTVEDT

The temptation to have an affair generally starts when those who are one half of a pair feel dissatisfied with who they are—or who they feel themselves perceived to be—within their current relationship. If only they could be with someone new, they think, they would be a sparklier, wittier, sexier version of themselves. Perhaps they justify their betrayal by telling themselves that they married too young, when they were not fully grown into themselves, and now their real self wants its moment on the stage. And maybe they *will* be that sexier, shinier person—for a while. But affairs that break up long-term relationships usually go the same way in the end, as the old self and habits catch up, albeit within a slightly different dynamic. Often insecurities creep in too. Because if the relationship began as a clandestine affair for at least one of you, it's easy to become paranoid that infidelity will strike again.

For Emma Bovary, the temptation to stray comes almost immediately after tying the knot with doctor Charles, stuck as she is in her adolescent preconceptions of what a marriage should be. While expecting love to be "a great bird with rose-colored wings" hanging in the sky, instead she finds her marriage to her adoring husband stifling and oppressive. Such absurdly sentimental notions of marriage, we are slightly embarrassed to admit, were picked up from literature—Sir Walter Scott is named and shamed—for at the age of fifteen Emma swallowed down a great number of romantic novels, riddled with tormented young ladies "fainting in lonely pavilions" and gentlemen "weeping like fountains."* When she meets the lustful, false Rodolphe, full of clichéd flattery and the desire to serenade her with daisies, she is putty in his hands. If you suspect you are harboring similarly unrealistic ideas of romantic love and marriage, you need to dose yourself up with some contemporary realists: the works of Jonathan Franzen and Zadie Smith are a good place to start.

Anna Karenina is not actively looking for a way out of her marriage to the conservative Karenin, but she certainly finds the full expression of her vivacious self with Vronsky. When, on the way back to St. Petersburg after having met the young officer on her visit to Moscow, she sees him on the platform, she is unable to stop the animation bubbling forth. And when she next sets eyes on her husband, she can't bear the customary "ironical" smile with which he greets her (or, now she comes to think of it, his "gristly" ears). More strongly than ever, she feels that she is pretending, that the emotion between them is false—and she feels dissatisfied with herself as a result. Now that she has seen herself around Vronsky, how can she go back to being the Anna she is with cold Karenin?

What Anna also finds, of course, is that loving Vronsky involves guilt. In fact (and this time we take pleasure in pointing it out), it is while she is reading a novel about a guilty baron that she first becomes aware that the emotion has hatched within herself. Guilt and self-hatred ultimately bring the stricken heroine crashing down, for she can never shake the principles and values that formed her—particularly with regard to the love she owes her son. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation, be aware that guilt is hard to live with. See: Guilt, for how to survive a stricken conscience and still come out standing.

A more devious way of dealing with guilt is to ride in the slipstream of a partner who has been unfaithful first. In 1950s London, the eponymous heroine of *Patience* is a contentedly married woman whose stuffy husband, Edward, expects little more from her than keeping house, cooking regular meals, and performing her duties in the bedroom, which she does while planning what vegetables to buy for tomorrow's lunch. The revelation that Edward is having an affair with the not so Catholic Molly leaves her feeling oddly relieved. Her sense of imminent liberation rapidly finds a focus in the form of Philip, a handsome, intriguing bachelor who awakens her to what sex can be. Patience brings about the end of her marriage and embarks on a new life with Philip, somehow in an almost painless way. Even her three young children remain unscathed. Her suggestion that Philip keep his bachelor flat—where he works and where they sometimes have an assignation—seems to be particularly full of foresight. Perhaps a second home is the secret to an enduring second love.

Sadly, Edward doesn't come off so lightly: he is deeply thrown, his whole tidy world turned upside down, and is landed, somewhat unfairly, we feel, with the blame for it all. There is a chance that adultery may free you from a loveless marriage and catapult you into a fine romance. But there's a chance it won't. You may simply take your problems with you, be capsized by religious or personal guilt, and leave at least one wreckage behind, apart from yourself. The fact is, unless you married late or were very lucky—or are one of the fortunate few whose parents raised you to be fully in your skin by age twenty—you probably will hit a time when you feel there is more to you than your marriage, at present, allows (see also: Midlife crisis).

Having an affair does not always destroy a long-term partnership, and if you're the aggrieved spouse who suspects or knows that your partner is having an affair, it's worth taking courage from Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men*, an intriguing take on the cliché of older man leaves wife of thirty years to try a younger version on for size. When her husband, Boris, announces he wants a "pause" in their relationship, Mia feels all the things you'd expect, and which you may feel too: humiliated, betrayed, and enraged. She ends up spending time in a psychiatric unit. (For help in dealing with this phase and to avoid temporary madness yourself, see: Anger; Rage; and Broken heart.) But then she takes herself off to the backwater town in Minnesota where she grew up, and where her mother still lives in an old folks' home. Surrounded by various women who for one reason or another are living without men, Mia heals a vital part of herself. Sometimes, a relationship can be better for a dramatic "pause" in which grievances are aired—by both parties. And if you don't want to return to a partner who has abandoned you, temporarily or otherwise, a summer without men (or women) may well give you the strength to forge ahead alone (see: Divorce).

The breaking of trust causes deep wounds, and for many couples recovery is just too hard. If your partner has

been unfaithful, you have to be honest with each other and decide between you if your trust can be rebuilt. If you're the one having an affair (or tempted by it), have a go at unleashing your unexpressed self within your marriage instead (to get some ideas, see: Stuck in a rut). You'll save everyone a lot of pain and trouble if you achieve it, and it may make both of you feel better about yourselves.

*See also:* Dissatisfaction • Guilt • Jump ship, desire to • Midlife crisis • Regret • Trust, loss of

AGE GAP BETWEEN LOVERS

*A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*

MARINA LEWYCKA

A May-to-December romance tends to worry those observing the relationship more than those actually having it. But the disapproval and suspicion of others can be undermining, and if you are on the verge of falling into the arms of someone significantly older or younger than yourself, it's worth asking whether your relationship will be strong enough to withstand the ingrained cultural prejudice against large age gaps that persists in the West.

The first thing to establish is what you're both in the relationship for—and whether either of you is in any sort of denial about your own or your partner's motivation. When Nadia's eighty-six-year-old father in *A Short History of Traitors in Ukrainian* announces his engagement to Valentina—a thirty-six-year-old Ukrainian divorcée with "superior breasts" and an ambition to escape her drab life in the East—she gets straight to the point: "I can see why you want to marry her. But have you asked yourself why she wants to marry *you*?" Papa knows, of course, that she's just after a visa and a posh car in which to drive her fourteen-year-old son to school, but he sees no harm in rescuing her and Stanislav in return for a little youthful affection. She will cook and clean for him, and care for him in his old age. That she'll also clean out his meager life savings and bring them all to their knees with boil-in-the-bag cuisine is something he refuses to acknowledge, however, and it takes a good deal of teamwork between Nadia and her estranged "Big Sis" Vera to persuade him to open his rheumy eyes to the damage this "fluffy pink grenade" of a woman is doing to their family.

Yet you'd have to be a bit mean-spirited to begrudge the elderly tractor expert the new lease on life that Valentina, for all her faults, gives him. As long as both parties understand and accept each other's motivations, a relationship between two people at opposite ends of the innocence-experience spectrum can be a wonderfully symbiotic thing. There needs to be openness on both sides, though, and no game playing. If you've got that, you have our blessing. Fall away—whatever the age of those arms.

AGING, HORROR OF

*Logan's Run*

WILLIAM F. NOLAN AND GEORGE CLAYTON JOHNSON

• • •

*Jitterbug Perfume*

TOM ROBBINS

In an age where almost every person in the public eye has ironed away their wrinkles, Botoxed their frowns, and banished gray hair forever, we can understand the impulse to flee the first signs of aging the way a rabbit would run from a fox. Growing old gracefully is a lovely idea . . . for your grandparents. But when it starts happening to you, it's hard to see where gracefulness enters into the picture.

Several novels—generally in the realm of science fiction and fantasy—indulge the notion of banishing old age forever. In *Logan's Run*, for instance, billed as a "terrifying novel of the twenty-third century," the authors William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson have invented a seemingly carefree (though postapocalyptic) world in which smooth-skinned young people indulge in no-strings-attached sensual romps in between bouts of cosmetic surgery. Work, such as it is, amounts to little more than hobbies, and there are no frowning oldies to scold the slackers to behave themselves and grow up. All this may sound like delicious, escapist wish fulfillment, until it dawns upon you that, even in the fanciful world of sci-fi, avoiding old age means dying young. (You knew there had to be a catch, right?) Yep. Youth's stuff will not endure, and the frivolous denizens of Nolan and Johnson's futurama are put to sleep—*permanently*—on their twenty-second birthdays. A fleet of enforcers called "Sandmen" hunt and trap the "runners" who perversely decide, as the deadline looms, that they wouldn't mind a few crow's-feet after all. Logan, the title character, is one of the most dedicated of these Sandman vigilantes—until his own twenty-second birthday looms. Which prompts, of course, his "run." But where can you run to in a world without old folks' homes? Whenever you get depressed about being physically past your peak, medicate with a dose of *Logan's Run* and be grateful for your comparative longevity.

King Alobar, the hero of *Jitterbug Perfume*, Tom Robbins's exploration of a similar scenario (set not in the future but a fictional eighth century of the past), has very good reason to dread the approach of senescence. It is customary for his tribe to commit regicide with a poisoned egg at the king's first sign of middle age. Here we distill the essence of *Jitterbug Perfume* in order to give you Alobar's recipe for eternal youth. For a fuller exposition, read the novel in its entirety.

INGREDIENTS

1 eighth-century king on the brink of middle age

1 immortal, goaty god giving off a strong stench

1 vial of perfume that has the power to seduce whole cities when released

1 measure of Jamaican jasmine, procured by the beekeeper Bingo Pajama

1 most vital part of beetroot

METHOD

Fold ingredients earnestly inside a French perfumery until combined, adding at the last moment your beetroot's vital part. Breathe in a never-ending loop while you fold. Now ensure that the Bandaloop doctors preside over your potion while you take a hot bath. Then achieve orgasm with your sexual partner, drawing all the energy from this act up into your brain stem. Repeat daily for a thousand years.

If you have not by then achieved your aim, take Alobar's best advice of all: lighten up.

*See also:* Baldness • Birthday blues • Old age, horror of

AGING PARENTS

*The Corrections*

JONATHAN FRANZEN

• • •

*Family Matters*

ROHINTON MISTRY

We wish this ailment on all of you. To have aged parents is something to celebrate, the alternative being to have faced their deaths before their time (see: Death of a loved one). However, one can't deny that people sometimes get annoying when they get old. They become crankier, more opinionated, less tolerant, more set in their ways. And on top of it all, they become physically incapacitated and need looking after, forcing a quite disconcerting reversal of the parent-child relationship. To that end, we address aging parents as a condition requiring a salve as well as a celebration. We recommend two excellent novels with this theme at their heart, revealing the practical and psychological effects of aging parents on the caring—or uncaring—children.

All three children veer heavily toward the latter in Jonathan Franzen's painfully funny *The Corrections*—though maybe Alfred and Enid Lambert had it coming. We first meet the Lambert parents in the final, most troubled stage of their lives. Alfred has Alzheimer's and dementia, and Enid joins the children in worrying about how to look after him (he has taken, among other things, to peeing in bottles in his den, because it's too far to get to the toilet). The driving force behind the narrative is Enid's desperation that all her children and grandchildren should come home for Christmas, as if this alone will reassure her that life is still worth living. Her eldest son, Gary, pretends that one of his children is ill in order to avoid the trip home. Daughter Denise has her own fish to fry with her new restaurant, and Chip, the youngest, has fled about as far away as you can get—Lithuania—on the back of a highly dubious Internet business.

As we move toward the inevitable Christmas showdown, we revisit significant moments in this seemingly conventional family's past: Alfred refusing—out of meanness—to sell a patent that could have made his fortune, Alfred dominating Enid in an increasingly worrisome fashion, and Enid taking out her misery on her children by feeding them the food of revenge (rutabaga and liver). Perhaps it's the memory of this meal that persuades these three grown children to put Alfred into a retirement home—which, never one to miss an opportunity for a joke, Franzen names Deepmire. It works well for everybody except Alfred. The terrorizing experience of reading this novel will remind you that avoiding such poor parent-child relations in the first place is highly recommended.

Mistry's Bombay novel begins with a celebration: the seventy-ninth birthday of the patriarch of the Vakeel family, Nariman. Nariman is a Parsi, whose religion prevented him from marrying the woman he loved for thirty years, and in fact lived with for many of these, until he gave in to his family's dogma and married a woman of his own faith. Now widowed and suffering from Parkinson's disease, he finds himself increasingly dependent on his two stepchildren, Jal and Coomy, who have always resented him because of his imperfect love for their mother. When one day on his daily excursion he breaks his leg, he's forced to put himself in their hands entirely. Soon he is lying in bed wishing that one of them would wash him, change his clothes, and play him some music, but he is too worried about disturbing them to ask for help. When they hear him crying at night, they realize he is depressed. Finding the management of his personal hygiene intolerable—loathing the details of bedpans and bedsores they know come from their own neglect—they send him to live with his blood daughter, Roxana, in the tiny flat she shares with her husband and two sons.

Here Grandpa Nariman has to sleep on the settee with Jehangir, the nine-year-old, while Murad, the older boy, sleeps in an improvised tent on the balcony—which, luckily, he finds a wonderful adventure. Roxana and her husband do an infinitely better job, compassionately embracing Grandpa and his fastidiousness over his dentures. Years later, Jehangir remembers with fondness and affection the time that his grandfather lived with them.

*Family Matters* is a wonderful example of how to look after one's aging parents with compassion—and how not to. And even though Nariman's stepchildren do a poor job, at least they take him in. In our Western world of dependence on nursing homes and hospitals, we would do well to take note of this example of a family caring for its elderly at home. Aged parents: don't be so objectionable that your children and spouse want to hole you up somewhere you can't embarrass them. Children of these parents: listen to their pleas for dignity and privacy, and do your utmost to help them retain these last vital assets. Both parties: try to forgive one another's different moralities and expectations. And, if possible, make it home for Christmas (for some survival tips, see: Christmas).

## AGORAPHOBIA

*The Woman in the Dunes*

KOBO ABE

Agoraphobics experience great discomfort when they find themselves in new places. Surrounded by the unfamiliar, the fear that they could lose control can trigger a panic attack (see: Panic attack). And so they prefer to stay at home—resulting in isolation, depression, and loneliness. Kobo Abe's novel is the perfect antidote.

Jumpei Niki, an amateur entomologist, takes a trip to a coastal desert at the end of the railway line, on the hunt for a new species of insect. While he searches for invertebrates, he stumbles upon a village hidden among eternally shifting dunes. Here he finds a unique community of people who live in houses nestled at the bottom of holes fifty feet deep in the buff terrain. To prevent their homes from being submerged, the residents must dig bucketfuls of golden dirt every day, which they send up on ropes to the villagers above.

Their work takes place in the moonlight, as the sun makes their shafts unbearably hot. Jumpei is lured into one of the burrows for the night, where he helps a young widow in the endless battle against the fluid sand. In a twist of fate, Jumpei wakes the next morning to find the ladder that should have been his exit has been removed. His escape attempts are alternately heroic, sadistic, and desperate. Slowly he accepts his fate as one who must work all day, sending buckets of sand up on ropes to helpers above—in between eating, sleeping, and having sex with the widow. By the end of the novel you have shared Jumpei's humiliation—for the villagers above find his inadvertent life change highly amusing—and his gradual acceptance of his bizarre new existence. And it's not all bad, for he does make a discovery under the sand.

Let Jumpei teach you to submit to the unexpected. And once you've experienced being hemmed in by imaginary walls of sand, you may be glad to take some tentative steps beyond your own, less imprisoning walls.

*See also:* Anxiety • Loneliness

## ALCOHOLISM

*The Shining*

STEPHEN KING

• • •

*Under the Volcano*

MALCOLM LOWRY

• • •

*Once a Runner*

JOHN L. PARKER, JR.

Alcoholics knock around in the pages of novels like ice cubes in gin. Why? Because alcohol loosens tongues. And because it's always the old soaks who collar us to tell a tale. When they're on the page, we can enjoy their ramblings without having to smell their beery breath. But let's agree to keep them on the page. Nobody wants a real one in their home, and if you find yourself heading that way, we suggest you terrify yourself with a couple of graphic portrayals of bottle-induced ruin. Our cure is to be imbibed in three parts: two heady cocktails that will show you a glimpse of your potential fate to sober yourself up quick smart, followed by an enticing shot that will prompt you to put on your trainers and run yourself into a new, clean life.

Jack Torrance, the writer in Stephen King's spine-chilling *The Shining*, has been on the wagon for some years. Though his wife has stayed with him, he lost her trust when he broke his son Danny's arm in a drink-fueled rage. By working through the winter as caretaker of the Overlook Hotel in the Colorado Rockies, he hopes he can reconnect with his wife and now five-year-old son, and get his career back on track by writing a new play.

The two big obstacles to Jack's happiness have been an excessive reliance on alcohol and an explosive temper—not a good combination to take to a vast, spooky hotel where you are likely to be cut off from the outside world for several weeks once the snow hits. Jack starts his work in the firm conviction that he will stay sober. But one of the Overlook's ghostly attributes—apart from architecture that redesigns itself regularly—is an ability to produce cocktails from out of nowhere.

At first these are merely imaginary, but soon Jack is confronted with a genuine gin served to him by the (deceased) bartender, Lloyd (see: Haunted, being). Looking into the gin is "like drowning" for Jack: the first drink he's held to his lips in years. In the company of increasingly malign spirits, the specter of Jack's lurking alcoholism is delighted to break out and let rip. Observing Jack's disintegration will put the fear of the demon drink into you in more ways than one and will have you heading for the orange juice rather than the hooch.

Drunks tend to be either intoxicating or infuriating. Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, set on the Day of the Dead in the Mexican town of Quauhnahuac, shows us both aspects of the psyche in dipsomaniac hero Geoffrey Firmin. The British consul of this volcano-shadowed town, he spends the day juggling his drinking needs with the complicated reappearance of his estranged wife, Yvonne. This ought to be the most important day of his life, he suspects, but all he can do is drink, telling himself he's downing a beer "for its vitamins" (he doesn't really bother with food), and dread the arrival of guests that fail to bring fresh supplies of liquor with them.

The events cover just one day and take place largely inside the consul's head, but the scope of this enormously powerful novel attains to the epic. As the Day of the Dead celebrations build to their feverish climax, the consul plunges tragically and irredeemably toward self-destruction, his thoughts laced always with whiskey and mescal. His musings are at times blackly funny, and references to Faust are frequent. Firmin is heading gleefully to hell, and his last words—"Christ, what a dingy way to die," foretold at the opening of the novel by Firmin's filmmaker friend Laruelle—echo with a ghastly reminder of what a horrible route this is to take in life.

Enough warnings! Those seeking to break such damaging habits need a glowing, inspirational model too—an alternative way to live. To this end, we urge you to read *Once a Runner* by John L. Parker, Jr. An underground classic when the author self-published it in 1978, it was taken up as a sort of novel-manual for competitive runners (bibliotherapy at work in the world). It tells the story of Quenton Cassidy, a member of Southeastern University's track team, training under Olympic gold medal winner Bruce Denton to run the mile. Denton pushes him and his running cronies to limits they never even knew existed. Quenton revels in the countless laps that Denton forces him to run, pushing himself so much that he urinates blood and openly weeps, his "mahogany hard legs" pounding the track all the while. At his peak, he is "vital, so quick, so nearly immortal" that he knows that life will never be "quite so poignant" as it is now.

Let *Once a Runner* inspire you to change your relationship with your body completely. Push it to the limit in a positive way. Put it to work and see what it can do. While Firmin in Lowry's novel wishes away the minutes between drinks, Cassidy in John Parker's breathes space into every second, getting the most out of each. The pure joy—and pain—of running, the sweat and ruthless determination of the race are as far a cry as you can get from the nihilism of the alcoholic. Buy yourself a pair of sneakers and serve this novel up to yourself instead of after-dinner drinks. May it be a symbol of your commitment to ditching the booze.

*See also:* Antisocial, being • Cold turkey, going • Hangover • Hiccups • Libido, loss of • Rails, going off the • Sweating

ALOPECIA

*See:* Baldness • Stress

AMBITION, TOO LITTLE

*The Crimson Petal and the White*

MICHEL FABER

If you find yourself watching everybody else's race but your own, or even that you're still standing on the starting line, you need a novel to galvanize you into setting some finishing posts, then pelting toward them. There's no better novel for the job than *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

Our young heroine starts life in a place most would say was so far from the possibility of even competing that she might as well give up before she starts. Sugar was forced into prostitution by her mother at the tender age of thirteen and grows up believing she has no choice but to submit to the gentlemen who come to her bed "to keep her warm." But she yearns to rise above this base existence. Her way of going about it is to become the best in the brothel—and then the best in Britain. Soon not only has she acquired phenomenal accomplishments in the bedroom, but she knows how to make a man feel eloquent, witty, and full of vitality, simply by the way she listens and flirts. But underneath her charming exterior, she still finds her work

grotesque and pours her disgust into a novel she writes in secret at her desk.

Her big break comes when she meets William Rackham of Rackham Perfumeries, who discovers her through the pages of the gentleman's magazine *More Sprees in London*. Rackham is so smitten with Sugar that he arranges to keep her for his exclusive use. Eventually she becomes invaluable to him, not just for her charms and beauty, but for her brains, being more astute and more in touch with her customer's needs than he is himself. It's not long before Sugar is the guiding force behind his advertising campaigns and overall business strategy.

Faber portrays in minute detail a Victorian world of social inequality and rigid convention. "Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them," he exhorts at the start of the novel. Follow Sugar (though not into prostitution), and rise wisely, determining your own fate rather than those of others. As Oscar Wilde put it: "Our ambition should be to rule ourselves, the true kingdom for each one of us."

*See also:* Apathy • Bed, inability to get out of • Lethargy

AMBITION, TOO MUCH

*Great Expectations*

CHARLES DICKENS

Some of us have too little of it, others too much. According to the Taoist philosopher Lao-Tzu, ambition—in its best ratio—has one heel nailed in well, "though she stretch her fingers to touch the heavens." When neither heel is nailed down firmly, and we overreach our innate talents and social limitations, we are in danger of losing our purchase completely.

This is what happens to Pip in *Great Expectations*. Orphaned Pip lives with his older sister, the harsh and unsympathetic Mrs. Joe, whose face looks as if it has been "scrubbed with a nutmeg grater" and who believes in bringing him up "by Hand" (though she is tempered by her gentle husband, Joe, who shows kindness to Pip throughout his turbulent life). When Pip meets Estella, the beautiful but ice-hearted ward of eccentric Miss Havisham, who is still wearing the wedding dress in which she was jilted at the altar forty years ago, Pip is encouraged by his sister to nurture a hope that this strange old lady has plans to groom him for Estella. The hope turns to a conviction, giving him the green light to behave "like a gentleman"—not necessarily of the best sort—and look down on his origins, including his friend Biddy, who sees the way that Pip is going and doesn't like it.

Pip and his sister are proved horribly wrong. Though Pip does land a surprise inheritance, and outwardly this makes him a "gentleman," worldly success is shown to be naught to success in love. Fortunes can be lost as easily as they are won. Pip would have saved a lot of time and heartache if he had never been "raised up." Let Pip's mistake stand as a warning. By all means look to the skies. But keep at least one foot on the terra firma of your origins.

*See also:* Greed • Selling your soul • Social climbing • Workaholism

**READING AILMENT** *Amnesia, reading associated*

**CURE** *Keep a reading journal*

Sufferers of reading-associated amnesia have little or no recollection of the novels they have read. They come home from the bookshop, excited by the crisp new novel in their hands, only to be struck five or twenty pages in by a sense of déjà vu. They join a conversation about a classic novel they believe they've read, only to be posed a question they can't answer—usually what happened at the end.

What you need, blancmange-brained reader, is a reading journal. A small notebook to carry with you at all times, ideally one that's beautiful and pleasing to the touch. Dedicate one page to each book you read, and on the day you turn the last page write down the book's title and author, the date, and the place you read it. You might like to sum up the story in one headline-grabbing line: MAN MURDERS PAWNBROKER, FEELS GUILTY FOR NEXT FIVE HUNDRED PAGES, for example. Or you might opine at length on the motivations of a character you found particularly intriguing. You may also want to make a note of how the book left you feeling—uplifted or downhearted? Like taking a walk on the windy moors, or emigrating to New Zealand? If words don't come easily, use images to summarize your feelings, or give it marks out of ten, or write a list of the words that you found in the book and liked.

This journal will be a record of your reading journey. Over the years you can flip back and recollect the highs and the lows. And if an author or title eludes you midconversation, make an excuse to go to the bathroom and look it up.

AMPUTATION

*See:* Limb, loss of

ANALLY RETENTIVE, BEING

*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*

LAURENCE STERNE

If you're anally retentive, you'll know all about the importance of order, logic, and neatness. A maker of lists, your life consists of accomplishing tasks that you can then tick off. Anything that comes between you and your task—an unexpected telephone call, a sunlit field calling you to take a stroll, an uninvited guest dropping by for tea—is grossly unwelcome. Your single-track mind cannot wander from its course. Now is your moment to swap psyches with Tristram Shandy. After 480 pages of living inside the head of this lovable philosopher and accompanying him on his remarkably prolix ramblings, you will be cured of your anal retentiveness forever.

Published in successive volumes from 1760 to 1767, *Tristram Shandy* is perhaps the first interactive novel, inviting the reader to take Sterne's proffered hand and join in the author's game. Like Italo Calvino two hundred years later, the authorial voice intrudes often and merrily, asking readers to consider the ways in which he has advanced their understanding of a character.

Shandy's determination to write his memoirs is unstinting, but it takes him until volume three to arrive at his birth. Because this memoir, and indeed his life, consists entirely of diversions from the point. While he was still a mere homunculus inside his mother's womb, the road to his existence was disturbed, at the very moment of procreation, by his mother asking his father if he had remembered to wind the clock. This interruption to the act of conception results, he believes, in his prenatal self falling prey to "melancholy dreams and fancies" even before he came to fully exist. And when his name, which his father considered of

enormous importance to his nature and fortunes, is accidentally mangled by the time it reaches the curate, and he is inadvertently christened Tristram—apparently the least auspicious of names—rather than Trismegistus as intended, he believes himself to be even less blessed by the fates.

All of which, perhaps, explains why Shandy's/Sterne's prose is so unruly—a page left blank for readers to draw their own version of Widow Wadman, the paramour of Uncle Toby; asterisks where the reader is invited to imagine what a character is thinking; and an entirely black page that supposedly "mourns" the loss of Parson Yorick. There are even squiggly loops indicating the shape of the narrative digressions themselves.

One cannot help but come under the spell. "Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine. They are the life, the soul, of reading!" says Tristram at the start of the novel. We wholeheartedly agree. Interrupt the reading of this book by opening *Tristram Shandy*. Go on, just for a chapter. Although after a few pages, perhaps, it'll be time for a cup of tea. And then a spontaneous excursion might take your fancy. You might forget you were reading this book in the first place. (That's okay; you can come back to it in the middle of some other task some other day.) A digression a day keeps the doctor away—and so will *Tristram Shandy*.

*See also:* Control freak, being a • Give up halfway through, refusal to • Humorlessness • Organized, being too • Reverence of books, excessive • Single-mindedness

ANGER

*The Old Man and the Sea*

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Because even after eighty-four consecutive days of going out in his boat without catching a single fish, the old man is cheerful and undefeated. And even when the other fishermen laugh at him, he is not angry. And even though he now has to fish alone—because the boy who has been with him since he was five, and whom he loves, and who loves him, has been forced by his family to try his luck with another boat—he holds no grudge in his heart. And because on the eighty-fifth day he goes out again, full of hope.

And even though, when he does hook a big fish—the biggest fish that he or anyone else has ever caught—it pulls on his line so fiercely that the skin on his hand is torn, he still lets the fish pull him farther out. And though he wishes to God that the boy were with him, he is grateful that at least he has the porpoises that play and joke around his boat. And even when it's been a day and a night and another day stretches ahead, and it's only him and the fish and there's no one to help, still he keeps his head. And even when he has been pushed further than he has ever been pushed in his life, and he begins to feel the edge of despair, he talks himself around, because he must think of what he has, and not what he does not have, and of what he can do with what there is. And though his hand becomes so stiff it is useless, and though he is hungry and thirsty and blinded by the sun, he still thinks of the lions he once saw on the beach in Africa, like some sort of heavenly vision. Because he knows that there is nothing greater, or more beautiful, or more noble than this fish that tugs him ever on. And even when it is dead, and the sharks come to feast—first one, then half a dozen—and the man loses his harpoon and then his knife in his attempts to fend them off; and even when he has ripped out the keel of his boat to use as a club; and even though he fails to save the flesh of the fish, and the ordeal leaves him so tired and weak he is nearly lost himself; and even though when he finally makes it to shore all that is left of the fish is a skeleton, he accepts what has happened, and is not broken, nor angry, but goes, rather gratefully, to bed.

Because by immersing yourself in the simple, calming prose of this story, you too will rise above your

emotions. You will join the old man in his boat, witness firsthand his love for the boy, for the sea, for the fish, and allow it to fill you with peace and a noble acceptance of what is, leaving no space for what was or what you would like to be. Sometimes we all go out too far, but it doesn't mean we can't come back. And just as the old man is made happy by his vision of lions on a beach, you too can have your vision—perhaps of the old man and the way he talks himself around. And after you have read it, you will keep this novel on your shelf, somewhere you will see it whenever you feel angry. And you'll remember the old man, the sea, the fish, and you'll be calm.

*See also:* Rage • Road rage • Turmoil • Vengeance, seeking • Violence, fear of

ANGST, EXISTENTIAL

*Siddhartha*

HERMANN HESSE

As anyone who has stood at the top of a cliff will tell you, alongside the fear of falling to your death is an equally strong and entirely conflicting emotion: the urge to jump. The knowledge that nothing is stopping you from making that leap, the leap into possibility—the realization that you have absolute freedom of will, infinite power to create and to destroy—fills you with horror and dread. It is this horror, according to Soren Kierkegaard, that lies at the root of existential angst.

If you are unlucky enough to have been struck with this debilitating affliction, you will be in urgent need of spiritual refreshment. You need to pare back the possibilities, to renounce the world, and join, at least for a while, the ascetics. You need *Siddhartha*.

Siddhartha, the young son of a fictional Brahmin in ancient India, brings joy and bliss to everyone—except himself. Leading a seemingly idyllic existence surrounded by a family who loves him, he appears destined for great things. But despite his material and spiritual wealth, young Siddhartha feels that something is missing.

And so, as young men in ancient India were wont to do, he goes on a spiritual quest. First he joins the Samana, a band of self-flagellating ascetics who deny the flesh and seek enlightenment through renunciation. Fully flagellated but still discontented, he encounters Gotama, the Buddha, who teaches him the eightfold path that illuminates the way to the end of suffering. Not content with this knowledge alone, and wanting to reach his goal through his own understanding, he meets Vasudeva, a ferryman with an astonishing inner light, who seems content with his simple life. But this, too, fails to satisfy. Even after living a sensual and happy life for many years with the beautiful Kamala, still something is missing for Siddhartha. For a while he contemplates death by drowning. But then he remembers the astoundingly happy ferryman, Vasudeva, and learns that he must study the river.

Here he finds revelations to last a lifetime—including the true cycle of life and death, and what it is to be part of a timeless unity. And from that day on he radiates transcendent understanding, self-knowledge, and enlightenment. From all over the world, people come to him to seek wisdom and peace. People like you.

*See also:* Anxiety • Despair • Dread, nameless • Pointlessness

ANGST, TEENAGE

*See:* Adolescence • Teens, being in your

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

*See:* Eating disorder

ANTISOCIAL, BEING

*The Accidental Tourist*

ANNE TYLER

• • •

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

SHIRLEY JACKSON

Being not the most sociable person in the world doesn't have to mean you're a sad excuse for a human being. Greta Garbo—no slouch, she—famously got an Oscar nomination for declaring "I want to be alone" (three times) in the movie *Grand Hotel*.

Since novelists spend days, weeks, months, and even years inside their own invented worlds, it's not surprising that many of them focus on characters who aren't exactly clubbable. One of the best novels about loners is Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist*, whose introverted lead character, Macon Leary, wants mostly to be left in peace. "It's nice to be so unconnected," he tells his sister, Rose, when his wife leaves him, fed up with his "little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day after day." Macon likes his life when it's free of attachments. "I wish things could stay that way a while," he tells Rose. Macon writes travel guides for businesspeople who don't like traveling and who, as he does, like to "pretend they had never left home." Macon carries this mind-set to such an extreme that he envies his older brother, Charles, when Charles gets stuck in the pantry of the family home, where Macon's grown-up siblings still live. "Macon imagined how safe the pantry must feel, with Rose's jams lined up in alphabetical order and the black dial telephone, so ancient that the number on its face was still the old Tuxedo exchange. What he wouldn't give to be there!"

If you identify with Macon, you may be surprised to find yourself warming to Anne Tyler's story of his transformation to a friendlier sort of person. When Macon meets a bighearted, effusive divorcée named Muriel, her kooky coaxing gradually persuades him to connect more enthusiastically with the world outside his head. Through Muriel, he discovers that he can enjoy the world beyond his own doorstep. Macon's cure can be yours.

If, however, you find yourself stroppily chafing at the idea of interacting more energetically with your fellow man, you might want to prescribe yourself sterner medicine: Shirley Jackson's dark novella *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. In this cautionary tale, Mary Katherine Blackwood and her sister Constance live, by choice, in a secluded house outside a village. Their family's sinister unfriendliness has made them pariahs among the locals. For Mary Katherine, the thought of speaking to any non–family member—even a librarian—fills her with dread, and a visit to the local grocery store is for her a ghastly ordeal. When she picks up bread and sugar, she senses that the "women in the store were watching," and longs to kick them. "It's wrong to hate them," Constance tells her. "It only weakens you." But Mary Katherine hates them all the same, and even wonders "why it had been worthwhile creating them in the first place." Reading the spooky results of their self-imposed solitary confinement might well shake you out of yours.

*See also:* Cynicism • Dinner parties, fear of • Killjoy, being a • Misanthropy • Read instead of live, tendency

to

ANXIETY

*The Portrait of a Lady*

HENRY JAMES

To live with anxiety is to live with a leech that saps you of your energy, confidence, and chutzpah. A constant feeling of unease or fearfulness—as opposed to the sense of frustration that characterizes stress (see: Stress)—anxiety is both a response to external circumstances and an approach to life. While the external circumstances cannot be controlled, the internal response can. Laughter, or a big intake of oxygen (the former leading to the latter), usually relieves systems at least temporarily, as well as offering an encouragement to relax. The cause of the anxiety, however, determines whether laughter or breathing and relaxing is the appropriate cure. Luckily, our cure offers all three.

Of the fourteen causes of anxiety that we have identified,* the first chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James can be expected to ameliorate ten. Opening as it does with a description of the civilized and serene institution of afternoon tea in an English country garden—complete with "mellow" late afternoon light, long shadows, tea cups held "for a long time close to [the] chin," rugs, cushions, and books strewn on the lawn in the shade of the trees—its indirect invitation to slow down and have a cup yourself (helpful for causes 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, and certain elements of 13) is reenforced by James's unhurried, elegant prose, a balm for anxiety arising from all of the preceding causes, and also serves to begin the complete eradication of anxiety arising from cause number 8.

To say that James's prose spreads itself thickly, like butter, is not intended to suggest turgidness, but rather creaminess—and let us make that *salted* butter. For the pleasures of both prose and afternoon tea are made complete by James's dialogue, which contains both frankness and sharpness of wit (a curative for causes 1 through 4, and also excellent for cause 7). For the banter between the three men—the elderly chair-bound American banker Mr. Touchett, his "ugly, sickly" but charming son Ralph, and the "noticeably handsome" Lord Warburton with his quintessentially English face—is always aiming to trigger a chuckle, and the characters are not afraid of teasing (note Lord Warburton's markedly un-English reference to Mr. Touchett's wealth). Freed of the chains of propriety and form that had been shackling dialogue on similar lawns three quarters of a century earlier, it is the sort of conversation that puts you at your ease (again, addressing causes 1 through 4 and 7, while also ameliorating causes 6 and 9 through 12).

Once the little party is joined by Ralph's American cousin Isabel Archer, recently "taken on" by Mrs. Touchett, the conversation loses some of its ease, but gains in spirit—for Isabel, at this stage in her life, has a lightness, a boldness, and a confidence both in herself and in others that cannot fail to rub off on the reader. Those suffering anxiety from cause 9 will find her presence in the story especially curative.

Indeed, we recommend this novel for all sufferers of anxiety except those made anxious by causes 5 and 14 (for the latter, in particular, a novel of any sort is unhelpful, except perhaps to use as a weapon), though readers suffering anxiety from causes 1 and 2 should be warned that the ending may backfire and prompt their symptoms to get worse. In which case, they should immediately turn back to the beginning for another dose of afternoon tea.

*See also:* Angst, existential • Panic attack • Turmoil

## APATHY

*The Postman Always Rings Twice*

JAMES M. CAIN

Although it can manifest as physical sluggishness—like its heavy-limbed cousin, lethargy—apathy is essentially a mental condition, characterized by an attitude of indifference toward outcomes, both for oneself and for the world at large. Its cure, however, is best tackled by addressing the physical sluggishness first, thus further distinguishing it from its other near relations, pessimism and existential angst, which require an overhaul of the mind. This is because apathy is also characterized by a suppression of positive emotions, and to reengage them and rekindle the desire for things to turn out well, one has to stir up the sediment at the bottom of the too sedentary soul.

It's not that it all ends well for Frank Chambers, the itinerant chancer and jailbreaker in James M. Cain's 1934 masterpiece *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Indeed, if you were to adopt his philosophy of life, you'd end up (as he does) with a price on your head and several angry women in hot pursuit. But the novel is written with such rattling exuberance that it's impossible to read without becoming physically buzzed. By the end, you'll be up and about with a bounce in your step, throwing caution to the wind in your determination to have a hand in fate, setting you on a more spontaneous and proactive—if slightly reckless—new tack.

From the moment Frank Chambers is thrown off the hay truck, the story is up and running. Within three pages he has swindled the honest owner of the Twin Oaks Tavern into fixing him a colossal breakfast (orange juice, cornflakes, fried eggs, bacon, enchilada, flapjacks, and coffee, if you're interested), got himself hired as a mechanic, and set covetous won't-take-no-for-an-answer eyes on Cora, the tavern owner's sullenly sexy wife. One thing leads to another—and then another—and Cain does a splendid job of keeping up with Frank, capturing his immoral inability to say no in short, snappy sentences laced with slang. The combination of story and style hits you like a triple espresso, and at only a little over a hundred pages it's also a very quick fix. Rip through it in an afternoon, then jack your apathy onto your back and chuck it out on the street as you go. You'll be inspired by Frank's irrepressible interest in each new moment—even when things aren't going so well—and determined not to blow, as he does, the opportunities that arise.

*See also:* Ambition, too little • Bed, inability to get out of • Lethargy • Pessimism • Pointlessness • Zestlessness

## APPETITE, LOSS OF

*The Leopard*

GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA

Losing one's appetite is a terrible thing. For one's appetite for food is part and parcel of one's appetite for life. A result of various kinds of physical and emotional sickness (the latter including lovesickness, depression, heartbreak, and bereavement), total loss of appetite can lead in only one direction. To bring it back, and solicit a reengagement with life, whet and tempt with one of literature's most sensual novels.

The Leopard, Don Fabrizio Corbèra, Prince of Salina, feels as if he has been dying for years. But even now,

in his old age, he is Appetite writ large. He still has the energy, at seventy-three, to go to brothels, and is still delighted to see his favorite dessert—a rum jelly in the shape of a fortress, complete with bastions and battlements—on the dining table (it's rapidly demolished beneath the assault of his large, equally lusty family). There are ravishing descriptions of desire of many different kinds: the daily pursuit of a hare in the "archaic and aromatic fields," and the intense and overwhelming attraction of young Tancredi and Angelica as they chase each other around the palace, forever finding new rooms in which to yearn and dream, for "these were the days when desire was always present, because always overcome."

One cannot help but revel in the old patriarch's appreciation for the sensual world. This is a novel that will help you rediscover your appetite—for food, for love, for the countryside, for Sicily with all its history and rampant beauty. And, most important, for life itself.

ARROGANCE

*Pride and Prejudice*

JANE AUSTEN

• • •

*Angel*

ELIZABETH TAYLOR

• • •

*Mildred Pierce*

JAMES M. CAIN

Arrogance is one of the greatest crimes in literature. We know this because when Mr. Darcy snubs Elizabeth Bennet at Bingley's ball—refusing to dance with her, dismissing her beauty as just "tolerable," and generally turning sour on the inhabitants of Longbourn—he is immediately written off by everyone, even Mrs. Bennet, as the "proudest, most disagreeable man in the world." And this is despite being much more handsome than the amiable Mr. Bingley, despite his having a large estate in Derbyshire, and despite his being by far the most eligible man for a twenty-five-mile radius—which, as we know, means a great deal to Mrs. Bennet, with five daughters to marry off.

Luckily, the playful Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen's heroine in *Pride and Prejudice,* knows how to bring him down to size. She uses a combination of teasing ("I am perfectly convinced . . . that Mr. Darcy has no defect," said to his face) and blunt, hyperbolic rejection ("I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry"), which not only corrects his flaws but displays the "liveliness of [her] mind" to such a degree that he falls in love with her all over again—and properly this time. If you are inflicted with similar arrogance, learn from this novel how to spot intelligent teasing and courageous honesty—and welcome it. You should be so lucky to be turned into the perfect man/woman by someone like Elizabeth.

Sometimes, however, the arrogance is so deeply instilled that nothing and no one can shift it. The eponymous heroine of *Angel*, by Elizabeth Taylor—not the Hollywood actress but the mid-twentieth-century British writer—is just fifteen years old when we meet her, and to say she thinks she's the bee's knees is an

understatement. An incorrigible liar, this strange child is vain, bossy, and utterly devoid of humor. She feels nothing but contempt for her classmates, is unmoved when one of them is taken to the hospital with diphtheria, and fantasizes about a future in which, dressed in emeralds and a chinchilla wrap, she'll be able to employ her own, tiresome mother as her maid. Naturally, her mother is pretty appalled by the daughter she's raised—just as Mildred is horrified by her similarly monstrous daughter Veda in James M. Cain's *Mildred Pierce*. Veda drains the family coffers to support her extravagant lifestyle and steals her mother's new man. It's not hard to see why Mildred tries to kill the monster she's created.

Fascinatingly, Angel's über-confidence carries her a long way—all the way to those emeralds, in fact. Veda, too, gets exactly what she wants. Neither discovers humility. Rejection—in Angel's case, from publishers and critics; in Veda's, by her own mother—has no sobering effect on either of them.

Do not be an Angel or a Veda. When you inspire rejection, question what you might have done to deserve it. Instead, be a Darcy. Though he's initially angered and mortified by Elizabeth's refusal of his proposal—and her accusations against his character—he knows the difference between right and wrong and craves the good opinion of someone he admires. Be glad when others pull your leg—chances are, they'll be improving you.

*See also:* Confidence, too much • Vanity

ATTENTION, SEEKING

*See:* Neediness

B

BAD BLOOD

*See:* Anger • Bitterness • Hatred

BAD MANNERS

*See:* Manners, bad

BAD TASTE

*See:* Taste, bad

BAD TEMPERED, BEING

*See:* Grumpiness • Irritability • Killjoy, being a • Querulousness

BALDNESS

*Blow Fly*

PATRICIA CORNWELL

• • •

*Sun Dog*

MONIQUE ROFFEY

• • •

*Shine Shine Shine*

LYDIA NETZER

If you have a shiny pink pate on which nothing grows—and you catch glimpses of its outward spread reflected in windows as you pass—you may feel dismay at the passing of your locks, and perhaps with them, a sense of virility. You envy the thick manes you see around you and wish that some of their excess could be transferred to you. But think of the evolution of man from ape to nearly hairless human. You are the superior being, your high-domed forehead more evolved. It is the mop-headed brutes who should feel shifty in your presence and who would surely shave it all off if they had enough brains to think it through.

If these sentiments don't reassure you, Patricia Cornwell's seventeenth novel, *Blow Fly*, will. Jean-Baptiste Chandonne was born with a fine down of black hair—not just on his head but covering every inch of his body. As a child, he was treated as a worrying curiosity, hidden from the public by his embarrassed parents. As an adult he has assumed the role of monster, a "wolfman" repellent to the eye—not merely because of his pelt, but because the condition brings with it a deformed body and a terrifyingly bestial face.

Hair hangs around this novel, clogging sinks, coming out in tufts in people's hands, and left incriminatingly on dead bodies. Forensic science brings a magnifying lens to these hairs with medical examiner Kay Scarpetta on the case (and in fact she has met this hirsute beast before). As Scarpetta and Chandonne sharpen their claws on each other's armory, you will be increasingly repelled by the sheer ickiness of all the hair and will run your hand over your smooth scalp with untold relief.

And if you need further convincing that bald is best, read Monique Roffey's *Sun Dog*. Her protagonist, August, is a man who can change his bodily attributes with the seasons. In the autumn he has blood orange hair that leaps from his head "as if from a burning attic." In winter he turns blue and emits snowflakes. In spring, buds emerge from his armpits, nipples, and ears. And in summer his hair comes off in swathes. It is then, at his baldest and most vulnerable, that August meets his true love. Luckily, she has no interest in whether he's tufty or smooth; she loves him for himself.

It was the alopecia of Sunny Mann, the bald heroine of Lydia Netzer's novel *Shine Shine Shine*, that endeared her to her first love, and later husband, Maxon Mann, a math-minded astronaut with a touch of Asperger's. He and Sunny fell in love as teenagers, when they would sit in their local planetarium looking up at the stars. Maxon longed to draw the constellations on Sunny's smooth skull and was fond of imagining her head lighting up like a celestial globe. Sunny is comfortable in her own scalp, and she secretly looks "askance" at women with long hair, feeling they are somehow "overcompensating." All the same, she can't help dreaming of a miracle cure, and after she and Maxon marry, she starts wearing a blond wig so as to fit in with the other wives in her neighborhood. When that wig accidentally flies off, Sunny feels wildly liberated: "She woke up out of her sleep, she dropped out from her orbit, scattered across the sky on every different vector, every crazy angle." She becomes, in short, her genuine, glorious, undisguised self, which her friends turn out to like just as much as her bewigged incarnation. "Own it," Sunny says to herself. "Own the bald." If baldness is your bugbear, be like Sunny: Fear it no longer. Accept your shining pate.

*See also:* Aging, horror of

BEANS, TEMPTATION TO SPILL THE

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

THOMAS HARDY

For reasons medical science has never explained (although, naturally, we have our own hypothesis; see below), it's physically uncomfortable to keep a secret bottled up, and a great relief to let it out. And confessing—or spilling the beans—can bring not only immense relief, but also sometimes a sadistic pleasure. The look on someone's face during the moment of spillage can be both entertaining and gratifying (see: Schadenfreude). But these positive emotions are usually short-lived, particularly if the spilling of the beans has caused pain or anguish in the spillee, or the beans were not yours to spill. Before such spillages are indulged in, therefore, the short-term gain (for you) of spilling must be weighed against the long-term consequences (for you and others). Because beans, once spilled, cannot be unspilled, and it may be better for everyone if you live with the discomfort of keeping them pent up inside instead.

If Tess Durbeyfield had lived with her beans—as her mother Joan advised her to—her marriage could have been saved and a happy ending secured. Tess's confession to her husband, Angel Clare, on their wedding night about her tarnished past with Alec d'Urberville is made after Angel owns up to a previous liaison of his own. She, understandably enough, sees this as the perfect moment for them both to clear their consciences. But Angel, to his great discredit, fails to forgive Tess as she has forgiven him. He rejects his sullied Tess and heads off to Brazil in a serious sulk.

All might have been well if Tess had kept her beans inside her and waited until such time as Angel was man enough to see the situation for what it was—she as the victim, Alec as the assailant. By this time she would also have realized (as she eventually does) that the beans were not hers to feel guilty about in the first place—that they were in fact Alec d'Urberville's beans and should have been his all along. Tess is an innocent victim of nineteenth-century patriarchy, of course, but the emotional truth still holds: she should have kept those beans inside.

A word of warning, though. If your secret is a guilty one through and through, and having weighed the pros and cons you've decided to keep the secret inside, be prepared that the discomfort may get worse over time—whether it indicts you or someone else. Bottled-up beans, like actual beans, give off a sort of gas that expands, producing flatulence and indigestion until they eventually erupt without warning, usually at the very worst possible moment. This is a situation worth avoiding at all costs and indicates that your secret has more guilt attached than you may have realized. If you suspect that your beans might turn gaseous, find an intermediary on whom to off-load them, who can then spill them in a more considered and controlled fashion—or help you to. See: Guilt, for an example of an intermediary at work in this way.

*See also:* Goody-goody, being a • Regret

BED, INABILITY TO GET OUT OF

*Bed*

DAVID WHITEHOUSE

Perhaps you have a headache or a hangover (see: Headache; Hangover). Perhaps you hate your job and have declared a Duvet Day. Perhaps your central heating is on the blink and you can't get warm. Perhaps everything seems pointless (see: Pointlessness) or you're depressed (see: Depression, general). Whatever the

reason, if you know that sometimes staying in bed seems a much better idea than emerging into your day, keep this volume under your pillow (so you don’t have far to stretch). Read it once, and then during subsequent attacks of the condition you will need only a brief dip to send you leaping out from under your duvet and thence into anything other than the small suburban bedroom and freak show of a life depicted within its pages.

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