

2021 NOTABLE BOOKS LIST
American Library Association
Reference and User Services Association

FICTION

“[Leave the World Behind](#)” by Rumaan Alam (Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers) A family’s stay in a luxury vacation rental is interrupted when the homeowners arrive seeking shelter from a menacing but nebulous catastrophe.

“[The Vanishing Half](#)” by Brit Bennett (Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House) Twin African-American sisters escape their oppressive Louisiana hometown to lead very different lives. A story about race, identity, and the consequences of individual choice.

“[Piranesi](#)” by Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury Publishing) The occupant of a labyrinthine house explores its infinite rooms and corridors until the world he knows begins to unravel.

“[The Office of Historical Corrections: A Novella and Stories](#)” by Danielle Evans (Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House) Through rich characters and inventive settings, this witty collection explores the identity of Black women and pervasive racism in America — past and present.

“[Breasts and Eggs](#)” by Mieko Kawakami, translated from the Japanese by Sam Bett and David Boyd (Europa Editions) The intimate journeys of three women confronting oppressive mores and their own uncertainties sketch a portrait of contemporary female identity in Japan.

“[Temporary](#)” by Hilary Leichter (Coffee House Press) An unnamed protagonist searches for permanence through increasingly absurd job assignments in this inventive gig economy satire.

“[Deacon King Kong](#)” by James McBride (Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House) Brooklyn, 1969. A man called “Sportcoat” shoots a local drug dealer, and it takes a village to tell the rest of the darkly comic tale.

“[Hamnet: A Novel of the Plague](#)” by Maggie O’Farrell (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group) In 1580 England, a Latin tutor pursues a career in London’s playhouses while his wife attempts to protect their children from a pandemic in Stratford-upon-Avon.

“[Little Eyes](#)” by Samanta Schweblin, translated by Megan McDowell (Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House) In the near future, Kentucky—small robots purchased by eager “keepers” but controlled by anonymous human “dwellers”—sweep the globe, with unnerving results.

“[Shuggie Bain](#)” by Douglas Stuart (Grove Press, an imprint of Grove Atlantic) A heart-wrenching and haunting story of a gender-nonconforming boy and his alcoholic mother, set against the bleak backdrop of 1980s Glasgow.

“[Run Me To Earth](#)” by Paul Yoon (Simon & Schuster) In this cinematic tale, three orphans in 1960s Laos do what is necessary to survive the chaos of war and its aftermath.

NONFICTION

“[A Knock at Midnight: A Story of Hope, Justice and Freedom](#)” by Brittany K. Barnett (Crown, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House) In this passionate memoir, a driven lawyer recounts fighting draconian sentences meted out to Black Americans in the “War on Drugs.”

[“Carville’s Cure: Leprosy, Stigma and the Fight for Justice”](#) by Pam Fessler (Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company) At a little-known government treatment facility in rural Louisiana, patients battle the physical symptoms and unwarranted ostracism that result from Hansen’s disease.

[“Children of the Land: A Memoir”](#) by Marcelo Hernandez Castillo (Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers) In eloquent and unflinching prose, a Mexican-born poet chronicles his family’s harrowing experiences with the U.S. immigration system.

[“Hidden Valley Road: Inside the Mind of an American Family”](#) by Robert Kolker (Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House) A haunting and compassionate chronicle of a household of twelve siblings, six diagnosed with schizophrenia, told in parallel with scientists’ efforts to understand the disorder.

[“Just Us: An American Conversation”](#) by Claudia Rankine (Graywolf Press) A collection of essays, poems, and art that draws the reader into a frank and intimate dialogue about race and white privilege.

[“Oak Flat: A Fight for Sacred Land in the American West”](#) by Lauren Redniss (Random House, a division of Penguin Random House) Beautiful and heartbreaking, this illustrated work seamlessly compiles an array of voices, illuminating the conflict over an Apache holy place slated to become a mine.

[“Becoming Wild: How Animal Cultures Raise Families, Create Beauty, and Achieve Peace”](#) by Carl Safina (Henry Holt and Company) Intimate and accessible portraits of three species reveal how culture and social learning shape their lives.

[“We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China’s Surveillance State”](#) by Kai Strittmatter (Custom House) An eye-opening journalistic account of escalating totalitarianism, its tools and technologies, and its implications worldwide.

[“Memorial Drive: A Daughter’s Memoir”](#) by Natasha Trethewey (Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers) In spare prose, a poet celebrates and mourns the mother whose life was cut brutally short, forging lifelong grief into moving remembrance.

[“Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents”](#) by Isabel Wilkerson (Random House, a division of Penguin Random House) A stark examination of America’s systemic discrimination that reveals unsettling parallels to hierarchies in India and Nazi Germany.

[“Wilmington’s Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy”](#) by David Zucchino (Grove Press, an imprint of Grove Atlantic) A sobering, resonant look at a little-known insurrection that for decades was wrongly described as a race riot instigated by its city’s Black population.

POETRY

[“Owed”](#) by Joshua Bennett (Penguin Books, a division of Penguin Random House) Through masterful wordplay and resonant themes, these poems vividly explore the perspective of the othered, childhood, family, and memory.

[“Postcolonial Love Poem”](#) by Natalie Diaz (Graywolf Press) A dazzling collection that explores the beauty of desire, the terror of violence on Indigenous people, and the vital need for the preservation of culture.

[“Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry”](#) by John Murillo (Four Way Books) Combining the classical and the modern, this tripartite collection melds technical mastery of language with themes of memoir, police violence, and authenticity.