

The Sunday Edition

Books for solace, perspective and connection during self-isolation

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Amidst a global crisis, many people are turning to books. (Shutterstock)

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As social distancing becomes one of the most effective ways to slow down the spread of the novel coronavirus, people are finding new ways to cope and pass the time in isolation. Acclaimed American writer Yiyun Li launched a daily book club online, using the hashtag "Tolstoy Together." Participants around the world are reading Tolstoy's 1,200-page novel *War and Peace*, at the pace of 12 to 15 pages a day.

"I have found that the more uncertain life is, the more solidity and structure Tolstoy's novels provide," Li wrote.

Books can provide solace. Distraction. Escape. Information. Perspective. Connection. A way to pass the time. All things we need now, more than ever.

- [**Not just diseases but ideas can plague us, says this political scientist**](#)

Some people are turning to books that confront pandemics, disruption or loneliness, in search of instructions for living in times like these. Ariel Leutheusser, a PhD student in comparative literature from London, Ont., has been reading *The Decameron*, which is set in Italy in 1348, during the plague.



Ariel Leutheusser (Pauline Holdsworth)

"It's 10 young Florentines during the Black Death, escaping the city, retreating to the countryside ... and entertaining each other as they wait in quarantine, by telling stories every night," Leutheusser said.

Leutheusser said while it may seem strange to read a book "dwelling on the harsh realities of living through times of plague and pandemics," it's also comforting to think about "people living through this, enduring through this, over time."

[Rohan Maitzen](#), an English professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, has been re-reading beloved books, including Kent Haruf's *Our Souls at Night*.

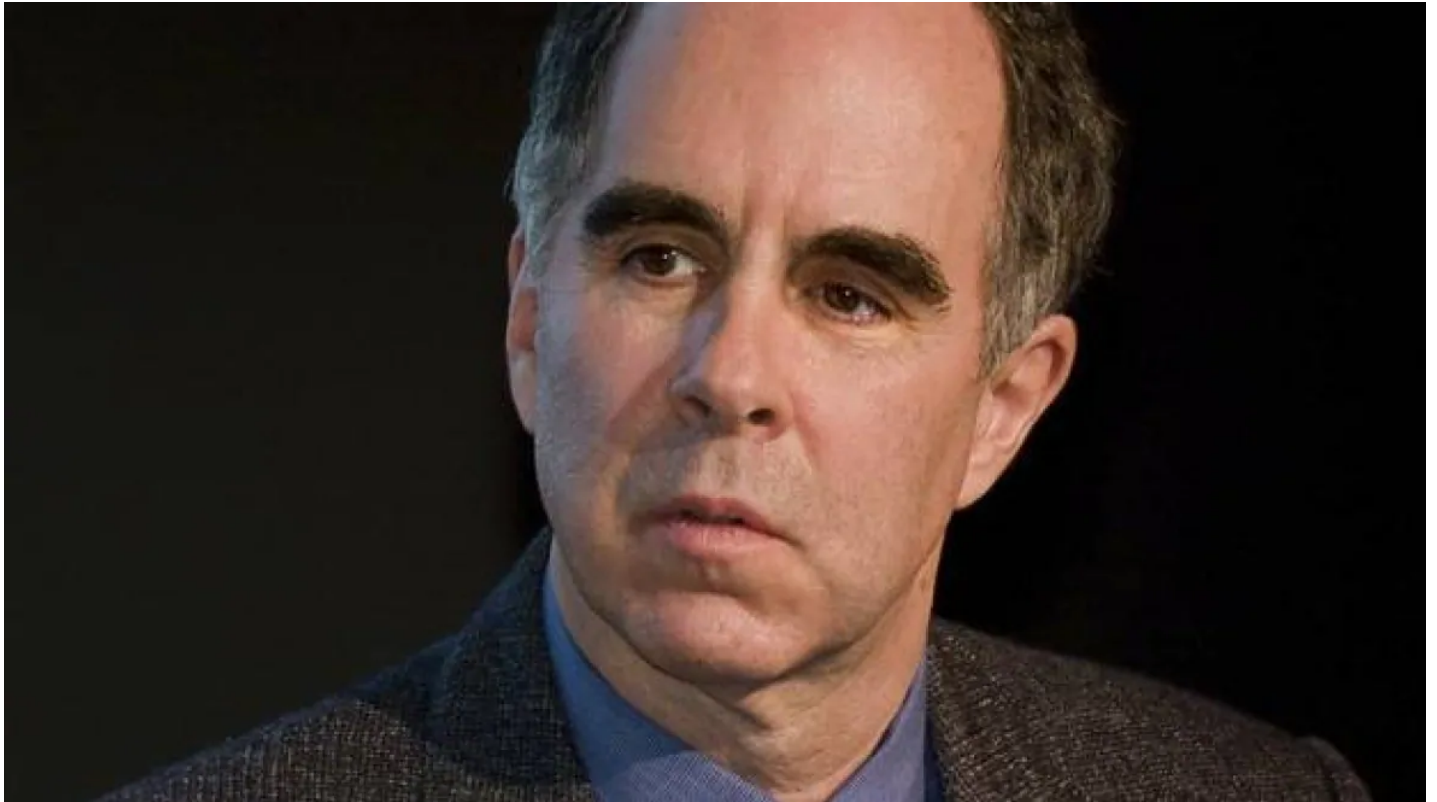


Rohan Maitzen (Mary-Catherine McIntosh/CBC)

"It's about two older people who wish they had someone to talk to, alone in the dark, and they end up sharing nights together and talking and rediscovering conversation and companionship," said Maitzen.

"When it comes right down to it, loneliness is something we can get past by talking to each other. It doesn't take anything very complicated. But Haruf is good at showing you that even the simplest things have complicated layers to them."

Toronto poet laureate [A. F. Moritz](#) has been turning to the poetry of Spanish writer Juan Ramón Jiménez, especially his collection *The Invisible Reality*. "You can't turn the page in this book without finding a heart-piercing and mind-deepening revelation," he said.



A. F. Moritz (Charles Earl)

Jiménez often wrote about his elderly mother, from whom he was separated from by distance. In one poem, called *Beloved Old Age*, he writes of wanting to carry his mother in his arms, the way she carried him as a child.

"I think that really does resonate with the way so many people are worried about older people, coming to their windows to talk to them, to shout up to them in their residences," Moritz said.

When the novel coronavirus struck Europe, British writer [Robert Macfarlane](#), the author of *Underland* and *The Old Ways*, started a Twitter reading group.





Robert Macfarlane (@RobGMacfarlane/Twitter.com)

"It became very quickly clear to me that one of the many things that would be needed was contact from points of isolation. And the internet and Twitter is fabulous at that," he said.

The reading group is centred around *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd. "It's set in the Cairngorms of northeast Scotland. It's her love letter to those mountains. She celebrates its specificity of weather, of creature, of view ... but she uses them to think outwards as well. Big questions of being, of value, of love for place and love for people, of how we come to know what is good and how we hold tight to that," he said.

"We're going to learn so much from this pandemic. So much pain will come from it, but there is good to come from it ... we'll be rethinking value and what matters to all of us, and I think this book will resonate for those reasons at this moment."

Canadian novelist [Sharon Bala](#), the author of *The Boat People*, has been turning to books that allow her to immerse herself in other ideas, times and lives — far away from the coronavirus

pandemic.



Sharon Bala (Nadra Ginting)

"The books that I am definitely *not* reading are books about the apocalypse or pandemics," she said. "My friends keep asking for pandemic book recommendations, and I just keep thinking, 'Isn't the world enough for you?'"

Here are her recommendations:

The Silk Road: A New History of the World, by Peter Frankopan: "If you're looking for something fully immersive that is going to keep you busy for a good long while, this is the book for you. It's a history of the world as I've never read it, because it's centred on the east," Bala said. "When you see the whole scope of human history, it's comforting to realize how small we really are, and how limited our present moment is in the larger context."

Boom Time, a poetry collection set in Fort McMurray, Alta. by Canadian poet Lindsay Bird: "It's incredibly unexpected, it's humorous. She's got a poem that makes bitumen sound beautiful,"

Bala said. "There's something very intimate about her voice in those poems, and it's very comforting."

What We Owe, by Golnaz Hashemzadeh Bonde: "It's about a woman's life, and it moves back and forth in time, between the present day when she's older and just had a devastating cancer diagnosis in Sweden, and the past, [where] she's come from an unnamed country that I think is supposed to be a version of Iran, during revolution ... The narrator is really complicated and prickly. But what's great is when you read her whole history, you understand why she is the way she is. It's a book about loyalty and loss and families and abuse, and it's also about people fleeing and finding refuge."

What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky, by Lesley Nneka Arimah: "This collection of short stories is just incredibly inventive. They're darkly comic. There's a story about a dead mother who returns many years after her death by walking out of a photograph. There's one that takes place in this alternate reality where the way that babies are born is they take scraps of whatever they can and they build a baby. Some people make them out of porcelain, others out of garbage, mud. This girl, she's a hairdresser, so she takes all the hair that's left behind, and she fashions a baby out of it, but it goes awry. Even the dark stories are so entertaining, and some of this darkness is left of reality. It's a little bit absurd, so there's distance in that darkness."

Full list of recommendations, including additional recommendations from guests:

- *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio
- *Our Souls at Night* by Kent Haruf
- *The Invisible Reality* by Juan Ramón Jiménez
- *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd
- *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* by Peter Frankopan
- *Boom Time* by Lindsay Bird
- *What We Owe* by Golnaz Hashemzadeh Bonde
- *What It Means When a Man Falls From The Sky* by Lesley Nneka Arimah
- *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel
- *How to Pronounce Knife* by Souvankham Thammavongsa
- *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain
- *An Ocean of Minutes* by Thea Lim
- *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel
- *Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks

- *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk
- *Journal of a Solitude* by May Sarton
- *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- *The Narrow Road to Oku*, by Matsuo Bashō
- *Exile Literary Quarterly*
- *Henri Bergson* by Vladimir Jankélévitch

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