



2019



*National Women's Register*

## Big Read List for 2019

The theme for 2019 is 'Music and Society' reflecting the fact that 2019 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Woodstock and the 'Summer of Love'. Music has an undeniable impact on, and relationship with, society and the world around us. It is also reflective of the world around us, and frequently of our inner emotional worlds. The books on this list link either in diverse ways to this theme or to the country theme of Poland or the conference theme of 'Voyage and Discovery'.

### 1. **If You Can Walk, You Can Dance – Marion Molteno**

We are very lucky that our brand-new patron has written a book which fits so well with our theme for 2019! *If You Can Walk, You Can Dance* is the story of a young woman's life on the run across frontiers, cultures and life-styles – and an exploration of the power of music. It won the Commonwealth Writers Prize as best book in the Africa region and was long-listed for the Bangalore Literature Festival Book Prize, India

*'Suffused with the colours of Africa and the sounds of song, this is an exhilarating book that celebrates the power of music as universal language, healer, political tool – the thread that links humankind across cultures and continents.'* Diana Burrell, composer.

### 2. **Bel Canto – Ann Patchett**

In this book the transformative power of opera music acts in international relations. Terrorists invade an embassy gathering in order to target the president of an underprivileged country (who is actually at home watching his favourite soap opera). The guests are trapped together for weeks and are all impacted by the daily practices of a mega-soprano amongst their number. Amazon describes it as: *"The poignant – and at times very funny – novel from the author of State of Wonder and Commonwealth."*

### 3. **The Awakening – Kate Chopin**

Described as the 'Creole Bovary' it shocked readers when it was published in 1899 because of its honest treatment of the subject of women's infidelity. It was reviled as 'Gilded Dirt' but has come to be seen as the first masterpiece written by an American woman. Edna, the subject of the novel, is brought to tears by a Chopin piece played by Mademoiselle Reisz. Their subsequent interactions illustrate the power of music to change our perceptions.

Goodreads describes it thus: *"Audiences accustomed to the pieties of late Victorian romantic fiction were taken aback by Chopin's daring portrayal of a woman trapped in a stifling marriage, who seeks and finds passionate physical love outside the confines of her domestic situation.....Although the theme of marital infidelity no longer shocks, few novels have plumbed the psychology of a woman involved in an illicit relationship with the perception, artistry, and honesty that Kate Chopin brought to The Awakening."*

#### **4. Music & Silence – Rose Tremain**

Winner of the Whitbread Novel Award in 1999 this novel attracts mixed reviews. It is set in the court of King Christian IV of Denmark in the year 1630. The back cover describes it thus: A young English lutenist named Peter Claire arrives at the Danish Court to join King Christian IV's Royal Orchestra. From the moment when he realises that the musicians perform in a freezing cellar underneath the royal apartments, Peter Claire understands that he's come to a place where the opposing states of light and dark, good and evil, are waging war to the death.

Designated the King's 'Angel' because of his good looks, he finds himself falling in love with the young woman who is the companion of the King's adulterous and estranged wife, Kirsten. With his loyalties fatally divided between duty and passion, how can Peter Claire find the path that will realise his hopes and save his soul? Amazon states that: *“Rose Tremain deserves a Hallelujah chorus dedicated just to her: a decade after the appearance of Restoration--and with a range of stunning novels and short story collections before and after it--now comes her glorious and enthralling Music and Silence.*

*This treasure house of delights, as haunting as it is pleasurable, teems with characters, real and imagined; with intrigues, searches, betrayals, in vivid scene after scene which loop in and out, back and forth, like overlapping and repeated chords.”*

#### **5. A Visit from the Goon Squad – Jennifer Egan**

This book follows the lives of the two main characters; Bennie who is an ageing punk rocker and record producer and Sasha his assistant. The novel draws together several disparate but connected stories and flits through time from 1979 onwards. From Amazon: *“A Visit from the Goon Squad is a book about the interplay of time and music, about survival, about the stirrings and transformations set inexorably in motion by even the most passing conjunction of our fates. In a breathtaking array of styles and tones ranging from tragedy to satire to Powerpoint, Egan captures the undertow of self-destruction that we all must either master or succumb to; the basic human hunger for redemption; and the universal tendency to reach for both-and escape the merciless progress of time-in the transporting realms of art and music. Sly, startling, exhilarating work from one of our boldest writers.”*

#### **6. Accordion Crimes – Annie Proulx**

From the Pulitzer winning author of 'Brokeback Mountain' and 'The Shipping News' this story follows an accordion through nine sections of its life and a century of different owners from when it was made in 1890 in Sicily through its journey to and across America. It is a very interesting historical novel as well as a commentary on how music can unite disparate situations and people – but like all Proulx's work, it doesn't shy away from brute violence, so don't mistake it for a sentimental jaunt.... *“It was as if his eye were an ear and a crackle went through it each time he shot a look at the accordion. ... The notes fell, biting and sharp; it seemed the tooth that bit was hollowed with pain. ”*

### **7. The Invisible Man – H.G. Wells**

This story is not one about music but rather one which inspired a great rock musician, Queen drummer Roger Taylor, to write a song. The Invisible Man bridges the gap between our 2018 theme of 'Dangerous Knowledge' and that of 2019 with its story of a scientist who turns himself invisible and cannot reverse the change. It reminds us to be careful what we wish for, lest it come true. Whilst the Queen song of the same name is not a straight retelling it definitely explores the power ("Now I'm in your room, and I'm in your bed and I'm in your life") and the powerlessness ("Never had a real good friend... No-one knows what I've been through") that comes from being invisible.

### **8. Push Not the River – James Conroyd Martin**

Push Not the River is based on the true eighteenth century diary of Anna Maria Berezowska, a Polish countess who lived through the rise and fall of the historic Third of May Constitution. This is a novel in the grand romantic style of *Gone with the Wind* or *Doctor Zhivago*. The story is set in the Poland of the late 1700's – a time when the country is being torn apart by neighbouring countries and divided loyalties and Empress Catherine's Russian armies are overrunning the country. Lady Anna Maria Berezowska loses both of her parents at the tragically young age of 17 and has to leave her home. She goes to live with her aunt Stella who is kind and loving but this cannot protect Anna from finding out brutally and swiftly about the worlds of love and hate, loyalty and deceit and patriotism and treason.

It is then, at the young and vulnerable age of seventeen, when Lady Anna Maria life and death. Even kind Aunt Stella, Anna's new guardian who soon comes to personify Poland's courage and spirit, can't protect Anna from the uncertain future of the country.

### **9. Inside Out and Back Again – Thanhha Lai**

*Inside Out and Back Again* is a #1 New York Times bestseller, a Newbery Honor Book, and a winner of the National Book Award. It is a book of voyage, flight and self-discovery. The blurb reads: Hà has only ever known Saigon: the thrills of its markets, the joy of its traditions, and the warmth of her friends close by. But now the Vietnam War has reached her home. Hà and her family are forced to flee as Saigon falls, and they board a ship headed toward hope--toward America. This moving story of one girl's year of change, dreams, grief, and healing received four starred reviews, including one from *Kirkus* which proclaimed it "enlightening, poignant, and unexpectedly funny." An author's note explains how and why Thanhha Lai translated her personal experiences into Hà's story.