

LGBTQ+ Literature: A Guide

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Background and introductory reading

The purpose of this LGBTQ+ guide is to give you and your students some new fiction texts and ideas to consider for the A level Literature and A level Language and Literature coursework titles.

In the guide, we focus on nine different fiction texts. These texts cover the themes of love, loss, identity, self-discovery, fear, prejudice and hope, from many different perspectives and voices. Many of the writers use explicit language and terminology to describe the experiences and situations of their characters, and you may want to consider this before you recommend some of the texts to your students.

Each text has the following:

1. a brief plot summary
2. a list of the main themes
3. examples of how meanings are shaped
4. ideas about further reading and some other possible texts that may go well as comparison texts.

The list of texts in this guide is by no means comprehensive or compulsory and we encourage you and your students to explore other texts that you have enjoyed in this varied and ever-changing literary genre.

Throughout the guide, we have referred to two main secondary texts, as they are readily available and affordable. They both contain a number of academic essays and bibliographies, and a short historical guide to gay and lesbian literature.

The two secondary texts are:

- *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011)
- *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd (Cambridge, 2015).

Other useful background reading includes:

- *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (Routledge, 1993)
- *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader's Companion to the Writers and their Works from Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Claude J. Summers (Routledge, 2002)
- *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies* by George E Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Blackwell, 2007)
- *The Cambridge Companion to American Gay and Lesbian Literature*, edited by Scott Herring (Cambridge, 2015)
- *Queer: A Graphic History*, Meg-John Barker, Julia Scheele (Icon Books, 2016).

Background to the guide and other key reading

When researching the texts for this guide, many 'canonical' writers and texts came up again and again as important and key works in the history of LGBTQ+ literature.

Below is a very select list of such writers and texts you may want to suggest to your students. As with all lists, it is not comprehensive but all the texts listed can be studied and enjoyed by students on A level courses.

There are other key writers and texts listed in the 'coursework pairing' section in each of the longer guides to the fiction texts.

Most of these writers and texts have a great deal of critical material written about them, which should be easily accessible to most students. A useful starting point would be the British Library [website](#).

1600s–1800s texts and writers

- **Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593).** Christopher Marlowe's plays and poetry are well known for their allusions and references to same-sex relationships. His play, *Edward II* is the story of the King's relationship with Piers Gaveston, his favourite in court. Marlowe's play focuses on this relationship and the brutal death of his protagonist. His other works, particularly his poem *Hero and Leander*, contain a great deal of homoerotic imagery and motifs.



- **William Shakespeare (1564–1616).** Like Marlowe, [Production of Edward II](#) Shakespeare's writing contained a number of same-sex relationships and images. Many critics cite *The Sonnets* as an example of Shakespeare's own same-sex desires, as a number of the very personal poems are addressed to his patron, the Earl of Southampton. As well as these personal poems, a number of Shakespeare's plays (*The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry IV*) contain strong same-sex relationships or, as part of the comedy, include a number of mistaken identities where women fall in love with women in disguise as men or vice versa.
- **Katherine Philips (1631–1664).** While not as widely read as Aphra Behn (see page 3), Philips' poetry follows similar themes and tropes. Like Behn, Philips' poetry looks at current themes and ideas of the time through the conventions of pastoral poetry. She focuses on female relationships and friendships, and the passion that women feel for each other.

- **Aphra Behn (1640–1689).** Behn was the first female writer to be paid for her work and was a trailblazer for other female writers. Like Marlowe and



Aphra Behn

Shakespeare, her sexuality is not known but her writings show that sexual love and desire exists outside of the conventional heterosexual relationships of the time. In her poetry, Behn uses the pastoral tropes to explore the androgynous nature of men and women.

- **John Cleland (1709–1789).** Cleland is most well-known for his 1748 novel, *Fanny Hill*. The novel was banned and considered hugely scandalous at the time it was published. The narrator, Fanny Hill, is a middle-aged woman who was a prostitute in her youth. The novel recounts her sexual experiences with both men and women, and includes a description of two men

having sex with each other.

- **Matthew Lewis (1775–1818).** *The Monk* (1795) is a Gothic mystery that focuses on Ambrosio, a monk who falls in love with a young novice (who is a woman disguised as a man). This violent novel differs from many Gothic novels as there are many more evil elements than good and more focus on the sexual and moral elements of human nature.

1800 and 1900s texts and writers

- **Anne Lister (1791–1840).** Although Lister is not a writer, her diaries are fascinating and would be a good text for students on the Language and Literature qualification in particular. Lister's diaries show that she was living an openly lesbian life and was happy expressing and talking about her sexuality. Interestingly, many of the entries that talk about her personal life were written in code, which has since been deciphered and published.

- **Walt Whitman (1819–1892).** Waltman was an influential American poet, often called the 'father of free verse'. His collection of poems *Leaves of Grass* (1855) was his life's work and was re-written and republished several times. This collection of poetry (which grew from 12 to over 400 poems), was highly controversial at the time for its depiction of same-sex relationships and explicit sexual imagery.

- **Oscar Wilde (1854–1900).** Oscar Wilde's widely publicised trial and subsequent jail sentence for gross indecency with men came at the height of his fame. All of his works comment on the hypocrisy in society and the many different relationships between men and women. It is his novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890) that perhaps has the

Oscar Wilde



most explicit homoerotic themes and overtones, with its focus on double lives, decadence and aestheticism.

- **Bram Stoker (1847–1912).** Stoker's most famous novel *Dracula* (1897) is well known for its homoerotic imagery, with many critics believing that Stoker's portrayal of desires and 'otherness' shows how both men and women were trying to find a sexual identity in Victorian society.
- **E M Forster (1879–1970).** Forster's novel *Maurice* was published posthumously in 1971. It follows the life of Maurice Hall from his school days until adulthood. It charts his life in 1920s England and his affairs with his university friend, Clive, and his gardener, Alec Scudder. Forster started to write his novel in 1912 and was reportedly inspired by his close friendship with the poet Edward Carpenter.

- **Radclyffe Hall (1880–1943).** Hall's most famous work *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) is perhaps one of the most famous lesbian novels of the 20th century. Hall's ground-breaking novel follows the story of Stephen Gordon who was christened with a boy's name as her parents were expecting her to be a boy. The novel follows Stephen's life but also questions the assumptions and prejudices of the time around homosexuality and sexual identity.

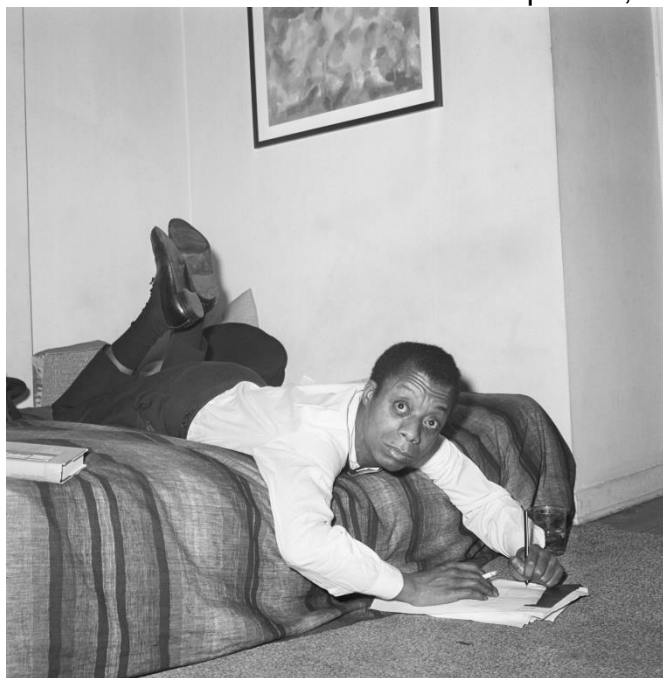


[Radclyffe Hall](#)

and meets a number of key figures.

- **Virginia Woolf (1882–1941).** Virginia Woolf is well known for her innovative literary style and for covering the universal themes of love, loss, sexuality and identity. Many of her works reflect her views on gender and sexuality but *Orlando* (1928) is perhaps her most well-known work. In her ground-breaking novel her narrator, the poet Orlando, changes sex from male to female. She remains biologically female but dresses as both a man and a woman, and engages in a number of different relationships as she travels through 300 years of English history
- **Patricia Highsmith (1921–1995).** Highsmith is perhaps best known for her 'Ripley' novel, but she was an extremely prolific and versatile writer, with a huge number of her short stories and novels being adapted into films and TV series. Most of Highsmith's adult relationships were with women and a number of her novels and short stories have either implicit or explicit same sex-relationships. Her novel *The Price of Salt* (1952), which was published under a pseudonym, was made into the film *Carol* in 2015 and focuses on Carol, who leaves her husband and embarks on an affair with Therese.

- **James Baldwin (1924–1987).** James Baldwin's work focuses on acceptance, identity, sexuality and race. Many of his novels and essays discuss the role of African-Americans in society and their struggle against prejudice. His most famous novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) extends these themes to homosexual and bisexual men, and how they are treated as outsiders in society. His collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) is a fascinating insight into how his views on race, sexuality and integration were ahead of their time. Many of his works have been adapted for TV and film. The most recent being *If Beale Street Could Talk*, which was nominated for several awards in 2019.



James Baldwin

- **Thom Gunn (1929–2004).** Thom Gunn was an openly gay poet who wrote extensively about his sexuality, and love and mortality. His most famous collection of elegiac poetry *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) focuses on the AIDS crisis.

2000s texts and writers

- **Alan Hollinghurst (1954).** Many of Hollinghurst's novels have homosexual protagonists and narrators, many of them are coming-of-age novels that tackle homophobia, racial and class prejudice. *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) charts the life of Will, a privileged gay aristocrat who reassesses his life after he befriends an elderly homosexual, Charles, and begins a relationship with Arthur. *The Line of Beauty* (2004) is set in the 1980s and explores themes of homophobia, promiscuity and politics.
- **Carol Ann Duffy (1955).** Duffy's collection of 52 poems *Rapture* (2005) is a very personal work charting a love affair from beginning to end. Her collection *Love Poems* (2012) is, perhaps, less personal but addresses a number of similar themes as *Rapture* and shows love in all its guises.



Jackie Kay and Carol Ann Duffy

- **Jackie Kay (1961).** Jackie Kay's work is covered the Contemporary Black British Literature guide that is part of the [Contemporary Black British Writing Resources](#) available on our website (NB: you need an Edexcel Online login to access the guide). Her novel *Trumpet*

(1998) tells the story of a black trumpeter in the 1950s who is revealed as a biological woman after his death.

Kay's autobiography *Red Dust Road* (2011) is a touching recollection of her journey in discovering her true self and her birth parents.

- **Emma Donoghue (1969).** Donoghue is perhaps best known for *Room* (2010), but her earlier novels *Stir-Fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995) focus on same-sex relationships and how they are perceived and accepted in Irish society. Donoghue has also written two non-fiction studies on the history of lesbianism *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668–1801* (1993) and *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature* (2010).
- **Kate Tempest (1985).** Tempest is a performance poet and writer. Her collections of poetry *Let Them Eat Chaos* (2015) and *Brand New Ancients* (2013) comment on society and sexuality. They are very personal, as well as referring to myth and legend.



Kate Tempest

LGBTQ+ inclusion is an important part of the work we do at Pearson. We have been working with Stonewall for a number of years on projects around LGBTQ+ inclusion in education. Pearson sponsored the [Creating An LGBT– Inclusive Curriculum – A guide for Secondary Schools](#) and following this created a set of editorial guidelines around LGBT inclusion for their learning resources and qualifications.

Images acknowledgements

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1) *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Rita Mae Brown (1973)

Rita Mae Brown's novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, was considered controversial as it explicitly explored lesbianism and lesbian relationships.

Rubyfruit Jungle is a semi-autobiographical novel that follows Brown's own life from her early youth to moving to the city to pursue her dreams.

The narrator, Molly Bolt, is introduced to the reader as a strident and opinionated girl who has a difficult and confrontational relationship with her adopted family, especially her mother Carrie. We follow Molly's life through her difficult childhood and her early sexual experiences with her friend Leroy, and then her first same-sex relationship with the head cheerleader Carolyn.

After the death of her father Carl, who she was close to, Molly works hard at school to escape her life and family. She is rewarded with a full scholarship to the University of Florida. When the relationship with her alcoholic room-mate Faye is revealed, Molly is expelled from college and moves to New York.

She arrives penniless and must sleep in a car with Calvin, who introduces her to his friends and ways she can get find a job and an apartment. She begins a relationship with Holly and when this ends, she manages to earn enough money to start a film course at New York University by taking a job at a publishing house. After an affair with a female writer and her teenage daughter, Molly refocuses her energy on her studies and goes home to film her stepmother as the subject of her film. She graduates with honours from university but struggles to make it as a woman in the film industry. The novel ends on a positive note as she is determined to strive and keep fighting for recognition.



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Key themes of the novel

- **Sexuality and identity** – Molly's coming of age and her sexual experiences with both men and women are very much at the centre of this novel. Brown describes Molly's encounters and does not shy away from the details of her sexual encounters as they form her identity and her actions. Sexuality and, more specifically, lesbianism, are important in the novel but it is closely linked to identity. We learn early in the novel that Molly is an adopted child and is unsure of her heritage and parentage, and therefore must create her own identity. Molly recognises that it is important that she comes out and is honest to herself and others but she also talks about how her sexuality is just one facet of herself. She is keen to underline and encourage others to recognise that she is a well-rounded and complicated woman who is also a lesbian.
- **Gender roles and expectations** – the novel's portrayal of gender roles and expectation is closely linked to the ideas around sexuality and identity. Molly is

not only fighting against society in terms of her sexuality but also in terms of her gender. All the women in the novel are in one way or another controlled either by men or by societal expectations. Molly is constantly told as a child that she cannot be a doctor as she is a woman and her work at both her film school and the publishing house is side-lined to make way for the work of men. The other female characters in the novel, from Carolyn (the cheerleader who Molly has an affair with) to Faye (her room-mate), all try to move away from their 'set' gender roles but are pulled back in by societal and cultural expectations.

- **Nature and innocence** – the first part of Molly's story is set in Pennsylvania, as she lives there with her family. The story is rich in description of the countryside (and the forest in particular) and of her first experiences with men and women. Her early sexual experiences in the novel are in Pennsylvania and her hometown and these are in stark contrast to her descriptions of sex and relationships in New York. Towards the end of the novel, when she returns home to her family to make a film, we can see that Molly is more relaxed and it gives her a new sense of purpose for when she does return to the city.



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Literary features that shape meaning

- **Use of language and rich descriptions** – the novel is an interesting blend of language contrasts. In some places, the prose and the dialogue is stark and basic, and Brown uses simple, uncomplicated language, particularly in dialogue, to get across her ideas and perspectives to the reader immediately. By contrast, some of the descriptions of the countryside, her emotions at being alone in the forest and her first reactions to New York are highly detailed.
- **Autobiography and narrative form** – *Rubyfruit Jungle* is essentially an autobiography of Brown's early life and experiences, told through Molly Bolt, the narrator of the story. The story is told in the first person and is written in the past tense, as with most autobiographical stories, which allows the reader to follow the narrator's life as it happens. Brown alters the form on occasion for effect and to highlight some particularly harrowing and personal moments. There are times, for example in Chapter 1, where Brown uses the present tense and the novel takes on a stream of consciousness as we follow Molly's thought process in the present rather than as memory. The novel also takes large leaps in time. We move quickly through Molly's life and nothing is dwelt on or pondered on for too long as (just like in real life) Molly must keep on fighting and move on with her life.
- **Humour and intellect** – although Brown's novel tackles several key and important issues around society's treatment of same-sex relationships and women, Molly is a humorous narrator who engages the reader. As a strong and opinionated woman, she has developed a keen sense of humour and wit to help deflect from her difficult life and situation. Molly is clever and sharp, and she uses

this to her advantage. At school, she uses her humour to win over the more popular students and to fit in. As she grows older, and her views become more strident and controversial, she dilutes them with a disarming joke. Her humour also underlines her intelligence when she jokes about marriage or money, as she often makes comment on politics and the societal pressure she is battling.

Context

- **Historical context** – the novel was published in the early 1970s and was a breakthrough novel for lesbian and feminist issues. Brown depicts America from the 1950s to the 1970s in her novel and shows how people in small town and rural America struggled to prosper and had to deal with a great deal of poverty. Her portrayal of New York in the 1970s is fairly bleak, with its obsession with money and personal gain.
- **Social and cultural context** – all the key themes in the novel are linked in one way or another to the social and cultural context of the novel. The novel explores how women in particular were treated in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and how they struggled to succeed in the workplace. Brown also focuses on the treatment of the homosexual and lesbian communities of America in the city and how same-sex relationships were spoken about and regarded.
- **Writer's own life** – Brown is well known as a campaigner and activist for equality and the rights of women, and the LGBTQ+ community. She has written several non-fiction texts and articles about her views, and has been deemed a controversial figure by some academics. She clearly uses Molly and the other characters in her novel to reflect her own views and struggles.



Critical interpretations

There are many critical essays focusing on autobiographical and semi-autobiographical literature that are published in various journals. If students can gain access to an academic library then such journals may be found there. Other sources include:

- David Bergman. 'The Gay Writer in New York' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 218–234
- Annamarie Jagose, 'Debating Definitions: The Lesbian in Feminist Studies and Queer Studies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd (Cambridge, 2015), pp.32–44
- Monica B. Pearl, 'Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd (Cambridge, 2015), pp.169–187

- *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Rita Mae Brown (Picador, 2015). This edition contains an introduction written by Brown
- Rita Mae Brown discusses her life and work in this [interview](#).

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- *The Price of Salt* (1952), Patricia Highsmith. Highsmith's novel is set in the 1950s in Manhattan and follows the life of a young girl called Therese as she meets and falls in love with a married woman called Carol.
- *Coal* (1976), Audre Lorde. This collection of poems was written by Lorde in 1976. All the poems focus on key elements and emotions in Lorde's life but Section I focuses primarily on her personal struggles as a black lesbian poet at the same time that Brown was writing *Rubyfruit Jungle*.
- *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), Edmund White. White's semi-autobiographical story focuses on the life of a nameless narrator as he discovers his sexuality in 1950s America (see page 11 of this guide).
- *Under the Udala Trees* (2016), Chinelo Okparanta. Okparanta's novel follows the life of a young girl growing up in war-torn Nigeria and discovering her own identity (see page 43 of this guide).
- *Dreams of a Common Language* (published 1993), Adrienne Rich. This collection of poems was also written at the same time as *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Rich explores, as does Brown in her novel, the key themes of coming out and identity.
- *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), Danez Smith. Smith won the 2019 Forward Poetry prize. This collection of poetry powerfully confronts racism and bigotry in America today and discusses the same struggle for acceptance as Rita Mae Brown in the 1970s.

The following coursework pairings may be more appropriate for students studying A level Language and Literature

- *Red Dust Road* (2011), Jackie Kay. Kay's autobiography recounts her life as she grew up with her adoptive family in Scotland. It follows her early life and reveals her journey to find her birth parents in Nigeria.
- *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* (2012), Jeannette Winterson. This autobiography by Winterson outlines her early life growing up in Accrington with her adoptive parents. Like Brown's narrator, she is trying to carve out her identity on her own and explore her sexuality (see page 35 of this guide).

2) *A Boy's Own Story*, Edmund White (1983)

Like *Rubyfruit Jungle*, this is a semi-autobiographical novel and this is the first of three novels that chart the life of a young boy into adulthood.

A Boy's Own Story is narrated by a 40-year-old, unnamed narrator who is recounting his early sexual experiences, as well as his rather difficult home and school life, in 1950s America.

The novel starts on boat trip with the narrator's father and the sons of family friends, Peter and Kevin. The 14-



year-old narrator is initially jealous of the instant rapport Kevin has with his difficult and prickly father but the two strike up a friendship in the room they share at night. Kevin and the narrator have sex, and this ignites strong feelings in the narrator, which he spends the rest of the novel discussing and trying to escape from.

The novel is non-linear in structure in places and we move from this incident and go back a few years but then go forward again to hear about his parents' divorce, his relationships and incidences with his needy mother and spiteful sister. The narrator becomes increasingly pre-occupied with his burgeoning homosexuality and investigates ways to 'cure' himself. He persuades his father that he should move schools and begin therapy. This has no effect and the novel ends with the narrator beginning to accept who he is after he has sex with one of his teachers, Mr. Beattie.

Key themes of the novel

- **Homosexuality and identity** – unlike other 'coming of age' novels, *A Boy's Own Life* does not focus solely on the development of a specific relationship; rather the focus is on the discovery of the narrator's sexuality through a number of encounters. His first sexual experience with Kevin is explicitly recounted as a physical act and an emotional epiphany. Other acts with men and women are similarly recounted and explored but we, as readers, are not drawn into these personal relationships. The novel investigates, perhaps more deeply, the idea of identity and how that is shaped in the narrator. He often refers to what he considers are 'masculine' or 'feminine' qualities and how his more feminine qualities are stopping him being accepted by his male peers and becoming a powerful man. The narrator's accounts of his experiences with his family, as well as friends, health professions and other acquaintances, are just as important in understanding who he is. There is very much an overarching sense of a teenage boy struggling to come to terms with adolescence and the kind of adult he will be.

- **Relationships and family** – the narrator begins the novel by talking at length about his relationship with his father and his father's rather eccentric and controlling behaviour. This is an important relationship in the novel and his father's actions and reactions are significant. Equally as important is his rather dysfunctional relationship with his mother which, along with his unsupportive sister, causes him to want to move to boarding school and shape his own life and experiences.



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- **Shame and isolation** – many of the narrator's thoughts and feelings are expressed throughout the novel. He struggles with his homosexual attraction and feels an overwhelming sense of shame. This shame stems not only from his own actions but from the knowledge that homosexuality was illegal in the 1950s. He is reluctant to call himself a homosexual (even though he does acknowledge that he wants to be loved by men) and seeks the advice of a therapist and a priest to help stop him having these feelings. As a nameless narrator, we also feel his sense of isolation as he seems to be experiencing all of this alone, with uncaring parents and very few true friends.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Narrative form** – by using a nameless narrator (and not naming any locations and places), White allow the reader to explore the narrator's life through an anonymous lens. The first-person narrative, along with the use of foreshadowing, jumps back and forth in time and allows the narrator to recount an important story and then go back and reassess why and how that event might have occurred. White appears to mirror the Bildungsroman style narrative as the protagonist embarks on a journey of self-discovery.
- **Autobiographical** – *A Boy's Own Story* is often described as 'semi-autobiographical'. Although the narrator refers to himself in the first person and is Edmund White himself, we, as readers, read the novel as a story and a work of fiction. The narrative is not linear and therefore has a literary fiction style rather than a more traditional autobiography linear in approach. The rich descriptions and characterisations ensure that the prose style is more fiction in tone than non-fiction.
- **Long sentences and descriptive language** – part of the style of the narration is that we follow the narrator's thoughts and feelings. White uses long and complex sentences to give the novel a feeling of stream of consciousness, as if the young narrator is trying to make sense of everything. His prose is littered with hyphens to lengthen the sentences and add new thoughts. There are some colourful and imaginative descriptions of people and places as White combines metaphors and similes to create a rich exploration of the narrator's feelings for his situation.

- **Explicit descriptions and language** – while the novel contains a great deal of lyrical and vivid imagery, it is also lauded for its unflinching and graphic descriptions of sex and sex acts. The 15-year-old narrator uses a number of colloquialisms but is also explicit when describing body parts and functions. This can shock the reader but also shows the reality of sex and provides an interesting contrast with the more crafted and adult descriptions in the novel.

Context

- **Historical context** – the novel is set in the 1950s at a time when homosexuality was illegal and seen by many as an act against God. This is reflected in the



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shame that White feels for his actions and his feelings, and his need to become 'normal'. White describes his experiences of talking to a priest and a therapist, both of whom tell him that his behaviour is 'unnatural' and should be stopped. The fact that homosexuality was seen, and dealt with, as a mental illness is quite shocking to the modern reader. Writing in the 1980s, White can take a step back and see how wrong these

attitudes were and how they did not help him as a young boy discovering his sexuality and identity. He can also show his readers how far attitudes to homosexuality have come but also how much further they need to progress.

- **Social/contemporary context** – *A Boy's Own Story* is considered by many critics to be a key and seminal work in the history of the portrayal of same-sex relationships and love in literature. As well as the portrayal and discussion of same-sex relationships, it is important to consider the outdated and narrow ideas about masculinity and femininity in the novel. The narrator talks the reader through a 'quiz' about how a man should light a match, look at his nails and roll his eyes. Although this is told, in part, to amuse the reader, it highlights the 1950s attitudes towards gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are enhanced by the narrator's portrayal of his parents' relationships and his relationship with them.
- **Writer's own life** – Edmund White is a well-known and well-regarded writer whose novels and non-fiction books focus primarily on gay issues and characters. He first came to prominence in the late 1970s when he co-authored with Charles Silverstein, a non-fiction book entitled *The Joy of Gay Sex*. As well as his three semi-autobiographical novels about his life from the 1950s to the 1990s, White has also written about the social and health issues affecting gay men around the world.

Critical interpretations

There are many critical essays focusing on autobiographical and semi-autobiographical literature that are published in various journals. If students can gain access to an academic library then such journals may be found there. Other sources include:

- *New York Times* [review](#) from 1982
- Andrew Weber, 'Psychoanalysis, homosexuality and modernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 34–49
- David Bergman, 'The Gay Writer in New York' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 218–234
- *A Boy's Own Story*, Edmund White (Picador Classic, 2016). This edition includes a very useful introduction to the novel and the work of White by Alan Hollinghurst, as well as an endnote by Edmund White himself
- [A Boy's Own Story Reader's Guide](#)
- an [interview](#) with Edmund White posted in 2018.

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- Other novels by Edmund White, such as *The Beautiful Room is Empty* (1988) and *The Farewell Symphony* (1997). These two texts are the second and third novels in a trilogy and continue the story of the narrator from the 1950 and 1960s (*The Beautiful Room*) and through the 1960s to the 1990s (*The Farewell Symphony*).
- *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), James Baldwin. James Baldwin's novel, like White's *A Boy's Own Story*, is semi-autobiographical. It tells the story of 14-year-old John Grimes and how his life is shaped by his relationship with his family and the church. Grimes also embarks on a complex relationship with Elisha, a male member of the congregation.
- *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), André Aciman. This coming-of-age novel follows the relationship between Elio and Oliver (see page 31 of this guide).
- *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012), Emily M. Danforth. Danforth's novel is listed as Young Adult but tackles several very adult themes. Cameron is a young lesbian who is sent away to a conversion therapy centre by her aunt. Danforth's treatment of young love, identity, same-sex relationships and attitudes to homosexuality has obvious links to White's novel
- *Kumukanda* (2017), Kayo Chingonyi. Chingonyi's debut collection of poetry explores identity and his relationship with his family, as well as the experiences from his youth that have shaped him.

The following coursework pairings may be more appropriate for students studying A level Language and Literature course

- *Christopher and his Kind* (1976), Christopher Isherwood. This memoir by Christopher Isherwood charts his life and sexual awakening. He recounts how he went from being ashamed of his homosexuality to accepting who he was and how this became a very important part of his life and identity.

- *My Lives* (2006), Edmund White. This memoir by White recounts his life in his 'own' words. As with *A Boy's Own Story*, it is non-linear and is split into sections such as 'my mother' 'my father' and 'my shrinks', which allows for some interesting character and thematic comparisons between the two works.
- *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* (2012) Jeannette Winterson. This autobiography by Winterson (see page 35 of this guide for more details) outlines her early life growing up in Accrington with her adoptive parents. Like White's narrator, she is trying to carve out her identity on her own and explore her sexuality.

3) *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg (1993)

The critically acclaimed *Stone Butch Blues* was written by Leslie Feinberg, a transgender political activist and writer, and recounts the life of Jess Goldberg who struggles to find her identity and a place in society. This novel and Feinberg's non-fiction text, *Transgender Warriors*, are widely seen by many critics as being instrumental in bringing both the terminology and awareness of gender studies into the mainstream consciousness.

The novel opens with a letter from Jess to her ex-lover, Teresa. This heartbreaking letter, which Teresa will never receive as Jess does not know where she lives, sets the themes of love, identity and struggle, which are revealed as Jess tells her story.

Jess's life story is told in the first person, in a linear narrative. She recounts her early days and life in a working-class Jewish family in upstate New York in the late 1940s. Her childhood and adolescence are dominated by everyone asking 'Are you a boy or a girl?' and this is a question that follows her for her whole life.

After a violent gang rape forces her to leave home and school, she fends for herself and finds a new family among her co-workers in the factory and in the gay bars of Buffalo. Here, she finds her identity as a butch lesbian but has to endure horrendous



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physical and sexual violence, and prejudice from the local police. While working at the factory she becomes active in the unions and for the rights of workers.

As she becomes more secure in her sexuality and gradually learns to let her guard down in relationships, she becomes increasingly uncomfortable in her body. She decides to take male hormones and has surgery to remove her breasts. While, initially, she is pleased when she 'passes' as a man, this leads to her feeling alienated and an outsider.

She decides to stop taking the hormones and moves to New York. She becomes close to Ruth, who is also bi-gendered and the two forge a relationship, which is sealed when Ruth looks after Jess after she is attacked.

By the end of the book, Jess is middle aged and working for workers' and union rights. Despite all the violence and prejudice in her life, Jess is now positive and empathetic to the

rights of anyone who has been deemed to be 'lesser' than others in society and vows to fight for them.

Key themes of the novel

- **Gender, self and identity** – this is a fundamental and multi-layered theme in the novel. As a butch lesbian, Jess instantly identifies with other butch lesbians and takes on their culture by dressing in more masculine clothing and forging relationships with femmes (who are lesbians who take on more traditionally feminine traits). As the book progresses, Jess realises that gender does not have to define your identity or your sexuality. As she has the physical attributes of both men and women, she decides that she is neither a 'he' nor a 'she' and although she is unsure of who she is, she knows that it is real and authentic.
- **Work, class and equality** – when Jess begins to work in the larger factories, there is a small group of other butches who work there too. This gives them independence as they are able to provide for themselves and their partners. Although they face prejudice and sabotage from the male workers, they rise above it and this makes them stronger. When Jess hears that the local steel works have 50 jobs for women, she jumps at the chance, as she can be part of a union that allows her a pension and job security after 90 days of working. However, the steel works give the women the worst jobs and they are either fired or leave before the 90 days are up. These experiences in the factory allow Jess to see how class, as well as gender, have a big impact on your choices and options. The factory workers are never afforded the same securities and rights as the permanent employees, and have to fight together against closures and 'scab' workers being brought in to break strikes.
- **Prejudice** – as with identity, this is a multi-layered theme in the book. There are brutal incidents of prejudice against the gay community in bars. They are beaten and raped by the police who see their lives as a threat to the status quo. There are also the everyday prejudices of a society in which homosexuality is still illegal. Jess talks about how she is reluctant to use public toilets or to go and get a suit fitted in a department store, as she is stared at or reported to security. When Jess and Ruth go out in New York, they are cautious about sitting in a bar but then they remember how the black community overcame such prejudices.



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Jess is forced to face her own prejudices when two butch lesbians in the bar begin a relationship. She is against this as she feels that they should not be together but later sees how she is being as prejudicial as others in society. This ties in with the theme of gender and equality in that no one should impose their ideas about gender onto anyone else – everyone should be able to make their own choices and decisions based on who they really are.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **First person narrative** – as this is a coming-of-age novel, it is appropriate that Feinberg allows her narrator to tell the story in her own voice. The structure is linear, as it starts from Jess' early life through to her middle age in New York. There are some large time leaps, as Jess selects the key moments in her life. The events at the beginning, with the letter to Teresa, are out of sequence but we can see how it all connects and what the references mean when Jess begins to tell us later in the novel about her relationship and love for Teresa.
- **Gender terminology** – Feinberg's use of 'butch' or 'femme' to describe the two different groups of lesbians she encounters in the bars in the 1950s may seem rather harsh and prejudicial. Feinberg uses these terms as they were used at the time but also to highlight how even a group seen as 'outsiders' still have rules and factions. When Jess decides to change her physical appearance it enables her to confront her own prejudices and how she and others refer to the LGBTQ+ community.
- **Language and imagery** – the language in the novel is sparse and conversational. Feinberg deliberately writes in a straightforward manner, as Jess is from a working-class background and her voice is clear and to the point. This ensures that the story, prejudices and messages are also clear and to the point. There is some imagery and more layered descriptions when Jess talks about nature and the natural landscape, which allows her (and the reader) time for reflection.
- **Multiple characters** – to reflect the pace of Jess' life and her different experiences, there are a lot of characters and key figures in the novel, none of whom are seen through the whole narrative. We are introduced to Ed, Toni and Angie at the bar; then Duffy and the workers in the factory. As Jess moves around

from bar to bar and job to job, the key characters change as this is Jess' story and she needs to be the main focus. We see how she matures and her 'stone' exterior melts and changes as the love and camaraderie from others helps her grow as a person.

Context

- **Attitudes to homosexuality** – Feinberg's novel is set between the late 1940s until the 1980s. Jess is sent to a mental institution by her parents in an attempt to 'cure' her and Feinberg shows the homophobic and violent attitudes of the police towards the homosexual community. Jess also refers to Stonewall and takes part in the Gay Pride parade and fights for LGBTQ+ rights towards the end of the novel.



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- **Politics and workers' rights** – Feinberg also refers to the factory workers and the rights of the working classes. Set in the factories in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the novel discusses unionisation and how the factory workers' jobs were increasingly put at risk with few rights and lack of job security.

The workers are seen as commodities rather than as individuals and they are not respected (or even recognised) as people with needs and values.

- **Feinberg's own life and experiences** – although *Stone Butch Blues* does have some parallels with Feinberg's own life, it is not an autobiography. Feinberg took on many temporary jobs in factories to make ends meet and suffered the same prejudices in terms of her sexuality, her transgenderism and her views and values as Jess. There are many interesting articles about Feinberg and her activism. *The Advocate* published a moving [obituary](#) by her wife, Minnie Bruce Pratt in 2014.

Critical interpretations and other useful sources

There are many critical essays that focus on transgender narratives and literature published in various journals. If students can gain access to an academic library then such journals may be found there. Other sources include:

- the website set up by the Leslie Feinberg estate contains a lot of Leslie's writings and coverage of the novel. The website has a free [PDF version](#) of the novel, which is difficult to find in print, go to
- *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg (Beacon Press, 1997)
- *Dissenting Fictions: Identity and Resistance in the Contemporary American Novel*, Cathy Moses (Bloomsbury, 2000)
- Heather Love, 'Transgender Fiction and Politics' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 148–165.
- Monica B. Pearl, 'Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd (Cambridge, 2015), pp.169–187.

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- *Giovanni's Room* (1956), James Baldwin. This seminal late work is set in Paris and deals with themes such as identity, gender, bisexuality and the dangers of being seen as an outsider.
- *Conundrum* (1974), Jan Morris. Morris travelled to Morocco to undergo sexual reassignment surgery in 1972 and her autobiography tells the story of her transition.
- *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Loude. This collection of essays and poems by Loude cover all the themes and issues that Feinberg covers in *Stone Butch Blues*. Loude looks at sexism, homophobia, racism and class, and how we should embrace our differences to bring about a change in society.
- *Gender Outlaw* (1994), Kate Bornstein. Bornstein's autobiography describes her journey from a heterosexual man to a gay woman. Like Feinberg, she questions societal notions of male and female. There is an interesting YouTube [interview](#) with both Feinberg and Bornstein in 1996.
- *The Danish Girl* (2000), David Ebershoff. This fictionalised account of Lili Elbe, the first person to undergo sex-reassignment surgery, focuses on the emotions of Lili, her struggles with her true identity and how she fits into society.
- *Drag King Dreams* (2006), Leslie Feinberg. Feinberg sets her later novel in post-9/11 America. The narrator, Max Rabinowitz, is a middle-aged lesbian bartender who begins to revisit her activist beliefs when her friend is found murdered.

- *Rotterdam* (2016), Jon Brittain. This play follows the relationship of Alice and Fiona, and the complex decisions they have to make when Fiona reveals she has always identified, and wants to live, as a man. The discussions about gender, sexuality and forging an identity could be compared with Jess' journey of self-discovery, the impact it has on her life and her relationships with others.



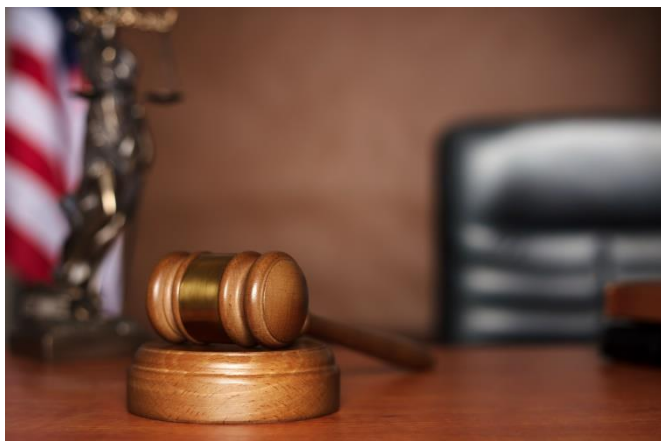
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4) *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, John Berendt (1994)

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil is the debut novel from the journalist and writer, John Berendt. It follows the real trials of Jim Williams, who is accused of murdering his lover, Danny Hansford, in 1981 and is tried for the crime a record four times.

The novel opens with John and how he made the decision to move from New York to Savannah for a short time and ended up staying for much longer than he thought. The book is split into two parts. In part 1, we are introduced to Jim Williams, a wealthy antiques dealer who lives in Mercer House. Berendt also describes the lives of other key people in Savannah, such as the Lady Chablis, who is the local drag queen and entertainer, Joe Odom, a partying and piano player conman, Luther Driggers, the local inventor and many, many more. The first part of the novel ends with the news that Jim Williams has been arrested for murder.

Part 2 starts with the first trial of Jim. Williams always maintained it was self-defence, as Danny fired at him first but we can see through Berendt's retelling of the gossip



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around town, that many think there is more to it than that. After the jury in the first trial finds him guilty, he is released on bond pending an appeal and resumes his life. When evidence of prosecutorial misconduct is discovered, a new trial is ordered. During this time, Williams and Berendt visit the spiritualist, Minerva, and she advises him about how to put a curse on the prosecutor in his retrial. When Williams is found guilty

again, he is transferred to 'the pod' in prison while his mother moves into his home and Berendt and Lady Chablis attend the debutante ball. Over two years later, Williams is released when the Georgia Supreme Court overturns his conviction. Just before the unprecedented third trial for murder, Williams calls Berendt to his house and admits that Danny did not fire on him and that he will tell the lawyer this. When his lawyer arrives with news of evidence that could exonerate him, Williams keeps quiet and Berendt is left feeling he knows more than he should. The third trial ends in a mistrial and the fourth trial (which makes legal history) acquits Williams of the murder. Williams holds one of his famous Christmas parties and everything returns to 'normal'. The text ends with Berendt telling us that on January 14th, less than a month after the party, Williams collapses and dies in the same spot where Danny's body was found eight years earlier.

Key themes of the novel

- **Identity and illusion** – Berendt introduces his readers to a myriad of characters, all of whom have an illusionary identity. The main characters all have elements of their personality and nature that they choose to hide from themselves and others. For example, Jim Williams is well known as a ‘bachelor’ (a euphemistic term for homosexual) but keeps his relationship with Danny hidden from view. He is a sociable and respectable man in public but has a secret private life, which is only really revealed throughout the court case. Likewise, the gregarious and humorous Joe Odom longs to be rich and well connected but is forced to move from expensive house to expensive house as he is in debt. The visitors he takes on guided tours of his wonderful house are none the wiser and believe he is this wealthy and charming musician. Lady Chablis is perhaps the most honest about her identity. We know from the outset that she was born as a man but takes regular injections of hormones to become more feminine. She represents the more outlandish and unconventional side of Savannah and is someone who is trying to show their true self to the world.

- **Savannah** – one of the major themes of the novel is actually the setting of Savannah. Berendt almost slips into becoming a travel writer at points, as he describes the rich history of the place, the buildings and the people. It is impossible to read this novel and not come away with a strong impression of the setting and how it is so important to the people and the



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events that take place.

Early in the novel, we are told how Savannah is an oasis and isolated from everywhere else, and this isolation is reflected in the eccentric and eclectic nature of the unique characters and tales that Berendt includes. The history of the place is interweaved into the old-fashioned and traditional values of a number of its residents, and we can see some of the racial and societal prejudices stem from the history of the city and its residents' reluctance to update not only the buildings but also their views.

- **Conformity, wealth and tradition** – throughout the novel there are myriad references to society and how people should behave in polite society. As mentioned above, Savannah is built on a rich tradition and many of the characters in the novel are anxious to keep these traditions intact. We hear about Williams' conflict with Lee Adler from the historical society, as they have opposing views on the Savannah Landmark Rehabilitation Project. Williams also perpetuates the traditional view that wealth equates to status and importance, and is always seeking ways to show how rich he is. His parties are lavish affairs and the people of Savannah are judged to have worth and social standing if they are invited to these parties.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **First person narrative** – the novel is related solely through the voice of the journalist, John Berendt. He posits himself as an impartial observer to the bizarre turn of events but he cannot help but become personally invested in them, as he has become friends with a lot of the key players. The reader should question the reliability of Berendt as a narrator, how he has portrayed certain individuals and when he has decided to tell their stories to help the flow of his narrative.
- **Narrative form** – this novel (much like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which can be chosen as a prescribed text for the A level literature qualification) is a 'true story' and Berendt's work is classed as non-fiction. However, the structure and the overall narrative read as if it were fiction, as it has a linear narrative and well-placed chapters to ensure that the reader can follow the story and see the significance of certain details and events. Berendt splits his work into two parts and names his chapters after a quotation or reference of a line in that chapter. The overall form is important to consider as it has elements of literary journalism and/or literary non-fiction, and the final 'afterword' at the end pulls the reader back to reality as Berendt gives his summary of events.
- **Imagery and descriptions** – as Berendt is writing a non-fiction piece, some of his descriptions and narratives can be quite direct and simplistic, as he is attempting to convey real life events to the reader. However, a lot of his descriptions of places and people are very rich and imaginative. He describes minor characters (such as the man who walks an imaginary dog and the shop attendant with an eye patch) in great detail. He is also careful to include some specific southern dialect when he recounts the words of his characters, to remind his readers that they are in Savannah.
- **Humour** – although the main story of a brutal murder is quite grisly, the novel does have a lot of humour through anecdotes about the characters (Joe Adler's and Lady Chablis' tales of their lives). Berendt also deliberately plays up some episodes such as his night out with the outrageous Chablis and his visit to Minerva, and is keen for the reader to see the absurd and humorous side of these tales.



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Context

- **Social context** – this novel is steeped in cultural and social context. Set in Savannah in the 1980s, there is evidence of the old traditional views and values. Jim Williams keeps his homosexual life to himself, as he worries about his reputation, and many of the characters are prone to making homophobic and/or racially insensitive comments when they are talking to Berendt. Lady Chablis, the local drag queen, is the antithesis of this and revels in her outlandish and anti-establishment behaviour.

- **Money and power** – a strong theme in the novel is that money and social status are important. Jim Williams is released on bail several times and allowed to continue his everyday life, even though he has been arrested for murder. It is clear in the novel that the judicial system favours the rich and the powerful. The whole societal make up of Savannah is hierarchical and social standing is everything. The establishment or ‘old money’ families hold a lot of the power and the big houses, and are resistant to any change or efforts to create jobs and housing for those less fortunate than them.
- **Real events/historical context** – it is easy to forget that the trial of Jim Williams, and the characters that Berendt presents, were real. There have been a number of articles and interviews with some of the key players and it is interesting to see how much (or how little) Berendt has added or omitted to ensure that his narrative remains engaging.

Critical interpretations and other useful sources

There are many critical essays which focus on literary non-fiction or literary journalism, in journals. If students can gain access to an academic library then such journals may be found there. Other sources include:

- a [review](#) of the novel from *The Independent* newspaper (1994)
- a BBC Radio 4 [interview](#) with John Berendt
- a [discussion](#) of literary fact and fiction in *The Guardian* newspaper (2011)
- a journal [article](#) on literary journalism by Richard Lance Keeble
- interesting background reading on the case, found in a book written by the assistant district attorney about the case: *Lawyer Games: After Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, Dep Kirkland.

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Tennessee Williams. The southern setting and the conflict between the private identity and the public persona provide interesting comparisons with the themes of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.
- *In Cold Blood* (1966), Truman Capote. Like Berendt, Capote claims he is writing non-fiction but uses a number of fiction and non-fiction structures. Both Berendt and Capote write about a murder and the subsequent trial, and both become personally involved with the accused.
- *Tales of the City* (first in the series published 1978), Armistead Maupin. This collection of stories from Maupin was first published as a weekly column in a newspaper. His sense of humour and ability to introduce many different, yet interweaving, characters and stories is similar to Berendt.
- *Talking Heads* (1987), Alan Bennett. Bennett’s collection of monologues from a number of different characters and perspectives would be an interesting comparison with some of the views and attitudes expressed in Berendt’s novel.

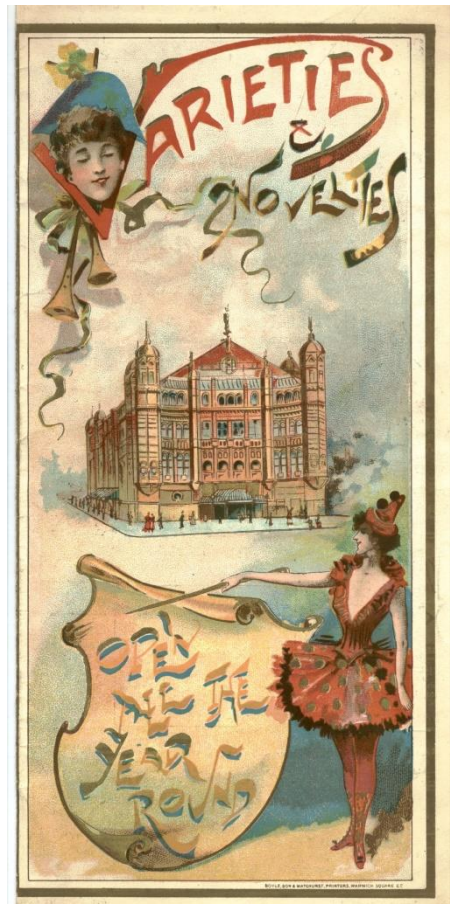
5) *Tipping the Velvet*, Sarah Waters (1998)

Sarah Waters' debut novel *Tipping the Velvet* follows the life of Nancy (known as Nan) Astley. Told from Nan's perspective, this coming-of-age novel is split into three separate and distinct parts.

Part 1 focuses on Nan's early life as an oyster girl in Whitstable and how she falls in love with Kitty, a male impersonator in a music hall. The two young women then move to London where they appear on stage together but their sexual and working relationship is shattered when Kitty becomes engaged to Walter, their manager.

In Part 2, Nan must branch out on her own and, after a brief stint working the streets of London as a 'male' prostitute, she lives with Diana, a wealthy and sexually adventurous woman who dresses Nan as a boy.

After this relationship ends badly, Nan is once more back out on the streets and moves in with Florence, who she had met before she lived with Diana. Nan's life takes on more meaning as she becomes involved in the socialist movement and works with Florence to improve the lives of others. Nan confesses all her previous encounters and experiences to Florence, who accepts her, and the two confess their love for one another. Kitty reappears at the end of the novel and asks Nan if they can continue their affair in secret. Nan refuses as she no longer wants to hide who she is and decides to pursue a life with Florence and her family.



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Key themes of the novel

- **Lesbianism and sexual discovery** – a major theme of this novel is obviously the focus on the lesbian protagonists and their lives. The title, *Tipping the Velvet*, is an obscure Victorian reference to oral sex and the novel focuses almost exclusively on same-sex female relationships. Nan is young and naïve at the start of the novel and, although she is in a relationship with a local boy, she is instantly drawn to Kitty. She hides the nature of her relationship with Kitty from her family and they shun her when they eventually find out. Her sexual journey is one of the main themes of the novel as she discovers her sexuality with the controlling and adventurous Diana and her friends. She eventually finds herself with Florence and the novel ends happily.
- **Gender** – closely linked to the theme above is the theme of gender. This story is told through the eyes of a female narrator and most of the characters are female. Although the relationships are generally between women, there is a blurring of gender roles as Nan often dresses as a boy or a man and fools both men and women with her disguises. Another interesting relationship to consider is the one between Nan and Diana as, although they are both women, Diana arguably takes the stereotypical 'male' dominant role in that Nan is shut in her house all day and

her main job is to keep Diana happy. As Waters is writing a novel set in the late 1800s in the late 1990s, the portrayal of gender and gender roles is an interesting one to consider in this novel.

- **Victorian London** – as with many traditional Victorian novels, such as *Oliver Twist* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,



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the setting of London is important. Most of the novel is set in several intricately and lavishly described settings, such as the music halls, the seedy London streets, pubs, theatres and town houses. The settings mirror the moods and lives of the characters, and become a key theme of the novel.

- **Class** – again, as with many more-traditional Victorian novels, class and money are key themes in *Tipping the Velvet*. As Nan walks through London, Waters describes the poorhouses

and the poverty, and how the working classes are treated. Nan constantly struggles to move away from her working-class roots and her old life as an oyster girl in Whitstable and as a theatre worker (who were seen as lower class in Victorian society) often comes back to haunt her. The hypocrisy and decadence of the upper classes is also apparent, as Nan tells us about her sexual encounters with married men of all classes when she is posing as a rent boy. Diana and her upper-class Bohemian set appear to be more open and tolerant, as they describe themselves as ‘Sapphists’ but Diana constantly reminds Nan of her class and her lowly status.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Genre and conventions** – Waters cleverly uses two literary devices to establish her fiction in the 19th century. The novel follows some of the conventions of a *picaresque* novel. A picaresque novel traditionally follows an appealing protagonist from a lower class through their life and sees how they overcome adversity by using their wits. Another example of a female picaresque novel is *Vanity Fair* by William Thackeray, which follows the life of the charming but very ambitious Becky Sharpe. Waters goes against the device, as her heroine is not out to deceive or for personal gain but the journey of Nan does have some picaresque qualities. Waters also uses the device used by many Victorian novelists, notably Dickens, in writing her novel as a Bildungsroman novel. This style of novel is a ‘coming of age’ novel and follows the main character from their early life to adulthood. The three parts of Waters’ novel chart the different stages in Nan’s life and mirror the Bildungsroman and episodic novels of Dickens. Unlike Dickens and other 18th- and 19th-century novelists, Nan does not take a conventional path, as her tale does not end in heterosexual marriage.

- **Imagery** – Waters uses several key images and symbols throughout the novel, which help form the narrative and shape meanings. Nan is an oyster girl in Whitstable when we first meet her and oysters are referred to throughout the



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novel. They are cleverly used to remind Nan of her past (there is a crate of them at Diana's party) or to illustrate her sexual discovery. She teaches Kitty how to open an oyster and this is an allusion to her own sexual awakening. It is also important to focus on Waters' use of descriptive language. As readers, we get a real sense of the London streets and all the different people and characters. Many critics have focused on Waters' descriptions of clothes and costumes, and how this reflects the disjoint between outward appearances and feelings and emotions. Waters also cleverly uses Victorian language such as 'gay' or 'queer' to mean 'happy' or 'unusual' but, as modern readers, we can almost always use the more modern meaning of these words in our reading of the texts.

- **Tone and form** – the narrative form is important to consider when looking at how Waters shapes meaning in her novel. Part of the Bildungsroman convention is the first-person narrative and Nan's chatty and colloquial tone and style guides the reader through the three contrasting parts of her life. She often directly addresses the reader to ensure that we are following her story and narrative cues. The use of foreshadowing is important in the novel as Nan often refers to an incident before it happens and we, as readers, know that she is recounting the entire story of her life sometime after it has happened. Waters also alters Nan's language and tone in each part of the novel. In the first part, Nan's language is uncomplicated and bewildered. There are also lots of songs to break up the narrative and show the simplicity of her life in Whitstable and the entertainment in the music hall. By the second part, Nan's language is more explicit and coarser, and we can see how she has become hardened and more cynical. In part three, the tone is more measured and Nan is developing voice of her own.

Context

- **Literary context** – as mentioned above, Waters employs and subverts two narrative forms and styles to portray her more modern heroine. Rather than Nan struggling against adversity to find a husband or a socially acceptable way through life, Nan goes on an unashamed and sexually explicit journey, which is not shocking to modern readers. By writing this perhaps more modern love story as historical fiction, Waters can adopt a new history for Victorian lesbian women, as well as appealing to a more modern readership. Whereas Victorian novels may have sexual undertones or allusions, Waters is explicit in her portrayal of both same-sex and heterosexual acts and discussions.
- **Historical context** – Waters, as a Victorian literature scholar, is very aware of the tone and historical setting of the Victorian era. Within her novel, she uses accurate Victorian language and conventions, as well as including several literary

historical references. When Diana is talking to her friends, she mentions novels such as *Dorian Gray* and the works of Walt Whitman, while also referring to the politics of the time. Nan and Florence also become involved in politics, as they attend the Socialist Party rally.

- **Contemporary/social context** – even though *Tipping the Velvet* is a Victorian novel in terms of historical and literary context, Waters is a modern LGBTQ+ writer, writing about current issues. Nan's struggle to find her sexual and gender identity, her 'toxic' relationship with Diana and her increasingly liberal politics are all modern topics that have relevance in today's society. The class divide in a major city is also a contextual discussion point.

Critical interpretations

There are many critical essays that focus on queer and lesbian literature in various journals. If students can gain access to an academic library then such journals may be found there. Other sources include:

- Jodie Medd, 'Encountering the past in recent lesbian and gay fiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 167–184
- Emma Parker, 'Contemporary Lesbian Fiction: Into the Twenty-First Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd (Cambridge, 2015), pp.204–218
- Sarah Waters [interview](#) about *Tipping the Velvet* for the BBC World Book Club
- information about Sarah Waters and her novels on the British Council [website](#).

Possible coursework pairings and other novels to consider

- Other Waters novels. There are some interesting parallels to be made with *Tipping the Velvet* with *Affinity* (1999) or *Fingersmith* (2002). All three novels focus on female characters and relationships in Victorian times, dealing with sexual identities, Victorian society and gender stereotypes.
- *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), Charles Dickens. These episodic, linear, first-person narrative novels by Dickens are set at least partially in London and have a male, more traditional Bildungsroman hero.
- *Jill* (1884), Amy Dillwyn. This novel follows the life of Jill, a gentlewoman who dresses as a maid and runs away to London. This daring novel, written 100 years before *Tipping the Velvet* discusses same-sex desire and is an interesting (and at times amusing) tale of an unconventional woman.
- *The Master* (2004), Colm Tóibín. Like *Tipping the Velvet*, *The Master* is historical fiction. It follows the life of the novelist Henry James at the end of the 19th century as he moves to Rye in Sussex to escape public life. Both novels have narrators looking back on their lives and show how a modern novelist uses the past to discuss sexuality, identity and memories.
- *The Sealed Letter* (2008), Emma Donoghue. Like Waters, Donoghue sets her novel in Victorian England. It is a fictionalised account of the famous Codrington adultery case and deals with women's rights, gender roles and feminism in Victorian England.

6) *Call Me by Your Name*, André Aciman (2007)

This evocative coming-of-age novel about the relationship between the young Elio Perlman and research student Oliver in Italy in the summer of 1983, has recently



been turned into a film with the screenplay winning an Oscar for James Ivory.

Aciman's novel is split into four parts. The first three parts follow the thoughts and feelings of Elio, a 17-year-old boy who lives in Italy with his parents. When Oliver, a 24-year-old research student, stays with them for six weeks to assist Elio's father, Elio becomes increasingly obsessed with

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the attractive and elusive Oliver. Through an intense narrative, Aciman reveals how the relationship develops and the emotions that Elio experiences through each week. The third part of the novel ends with Oliver leaving Elio to return to America after they have a weekend together in Rome.

The last, very short, part of the novel, titled 'Ghost spots' reveals, again through Elio's narrative, that Oliver married on his return to the US. Elio also tells the reader that he and Oliver have met over the last 20 years. At their last meeting, Elio admits his jealousy of Oliver's wife and family, and Oliver reveals that he has followed Elio's career and remembers everything about their time together. They both talk about how many people live parallel lives, one based in reality and the other based on a fantasy that can never be fulfilled.

Key themes of the novel

- **Love and relationships** – this is a key theme of the novel, as Aciman allows his 17-year-old narrator, Elio, to talk directly to the reader about all his thoughts and feelings as he explores his sexuality. The main relationship is Elio and Oliver, and the initial awkwardness and missed opportunities, coupled with the obvious joy the two feel when they are finally with each other, ensures that the reader feels fully involved and invested. There is always a sense of time running out and transience, as we know from the start that Oliver is going back to America in six weeks, which intensifies their feelings for each other. There are other important relationships in the novel that allow the reader to see the other facets of the characters of Elio and Oliver. Oliver develops a touching relationship with Vimini, a 10-year-old girl with leukaemia. We learn that he writes to her after he leaves and that he is very upset when he learns she has died. Another important relationship is the familial one between Elio and his parents. He is close to them both and they trust him, which allows him to have open and honest conversations with them. His father's confession about feelings for another man when he was a similar age to Elio is an emotive and important part of the novel, and foreshadows a conversation that Elio and Oliver have later in life about parallel lives and reality vs fantasy.

- **Obsession and shame** – as the book is written solely from Elio's perspective and almost takes the form of a diary at points, the reader can see Elio's obsession as he follows Oliver's every move. As they are in adjoining rooms, Elio lays awake at night thinking he can hear Oliver's footsteps. He thinks about him all the time and what he might be doing or thinking. As readers, there are times when this feels very uncomfortable, as we begin to see how obsessed he really is, for example when he begins to call Oliver's clothes by affectionate nicknames or when he begins to see how Oliver's swimming trunks reflect his mood for the day. Elio, as a 17-year-old boy, is obviously unsure of his feelings and what he 'should' be doing, which leads to him feeling ashamed of his thoughts and actions. Interestingly, as Elio has grown up in a progressive and liberal household, Elio's shameful feelings do not stem from the fact that he is obsessing about a man, just that he is being controlled and sent mad by his thoughts of love for another person.
- **Academia and learning** – the novel is set against a backdrop of learning, reading and culture. Elio is a quiet, solitary boy who is always reading and talking about what he has read and learned. He is musical and often rewrites music, and looks at scores while Oliver is swimming or sunbathing. Elio's father is a professor and Oliver is there to assist him with his book. Oliver is writing a book about Heraclitus (a Greek philosopher who wrote about time and how everything is in a



state of constant change, which is a key theme in the novel). Throughout the book, Elio writes Italian and German phrases, as well as quoting writers and poets. There are also a lot of references to Greek and Roman myths and gods, which adds to the richness of the imagery. When Elio and Oliver explore their feelings at Monet's Berm, this adds to the romanticism of the novel and their relationship

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Motifs and imagery** – Aciman writes using a rich and imaginative vocabulary, with several key images and motifs appearing throughout the book. As well as the many references to time and how it both stands still and moves at an alarming pace, there are also a number of key symbols throughout the book to help shape the meaning and key themes. The references to the Star of David pendant that Oliver wears, brings a religious theme to the book. Elio and Oliver are Jewish, and Oliver's pendant reminds Elio of his familial roots, and provides him with another connection to Oliver. There is also the image of 'billowy', the shirt that Oliver frequently wears, and how Elio has named it to illustrate Oliver's personality. Aciman focuses on Oliver's clothing to show Elio's growing obsession – we learn about the condition of his shoes and his feet, as well as how Elio notices the colour of Oliver's swimming trunks.

Another key image is fruit, there are lots of references to peaches and apricots. The family all eat the local produce but the peach takes on a huge significance as Elio feels extreme shame after he ejaculates into one. When Oliver eats this peach, Elio is initially appalled but then sees how this has brought them closer together and that Oliver is trying to make him feel better about his actions and burgeoning sexuality.



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- **Narrative structure** – the narrative structure, which is almost a stream of consciousness from Elio, allows us as readers to follow his every mood and thought. Aciman very cleverly gets into the head of a young, angst-ridden young man and shows how even the smallest thing can spark worries and concerns for the narrator. Consequently, we can feel sympathy for Elio, as he is clearly very lonely, which makes him an unreliable narrator, and we are never sure if what is happening is true or just a figment of his over-active imagination. The narrative is largely linear and set over six weeks in the summer but there is foreshadowing and abstract thoughts, which add to the almost dream-like quality of some of Elio's descriptions. The narrative structure also covers a relatively short space of time (six weeks) for the first three parts of the novel and then, in part 4, covers at least two decades. This compression of the years in part 4 allows the reader to see how important those six weeks were to Elio and Oliver, as they are described in so much detail.
- **Repetition and italics** – Aciman uses a lot of repetition in the novel to create character and effect. The first word of the novel, *Later!*, comes from Oliver and is repeated throughout as it becomes a standing joke for the family. Just by saying that one word, Aciman creates a care-free character who is comfortable in his own skin. Both Elio and Oliver say their own and each other's names frequently, which cements their love for each other as well as going back to the title of the book (and the last words of the novel). Aciman uses italics throughout the novel to show where Elio is emphasising certain words or phrases and also to add another layer of internal thought. There are a lot of italics when Elio is writing (and re-writing) his note to Oliver, and this allows the reader to see how Elio is struggling with his own intellect and inner feelings.

Context

- **Historical context** – although the book is set in the early 1980s, many critics of both the book and the film have commented on the lack of reference to the AIDS epidemic that was occurring at the time. Although Aciman does not refer to the epidemic, it is perhaps this lack of historical context that is intriguing. As it is set in almost an idyllic, dream-like world of Elio, it shows a same-sex love story free from the concerns of the 'real' world.

- **Social/religious context** – Elio and his family are Jewish but do not necessarily talk about it or have religion at the centre of their lives. Oliver is much more comfortable with his religion and wears his Star of David with pride. However, both Elio's father and Oliver ultimately let their faith and their family control their desires. Elio's father admits that he did not pursue his feelings for another man (and is very accepting of Elio's relationship with Oliver, even though he acknowledges that other parents would hope it would go away) and Oliver follows family convention by marrying a woman on his return to America.

Critical interpretations

There are many critical essays that focus on the recent film of the novel. Many of these essays refer in detail to the novel. Other articles about the novel and film include:

- an interesting [discussion](#) about homosexuality and Jewishness in the book and the film (2017)
- a *New York Times* [review](#) of the novel (2007)
- the film magazine *Little White Lies*, dedicated a whole edition to the film and this is an [article](#) about the book
- Hugh Stevens, 'Normality and Queerness in Gay Fiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 81–96
- Richard Canning, 'The Literature of AIDs' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 132–147.

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- *Sonnets* (1609), William Shakespeare. Like Aciman, Shakespeare uses time, nature and classical allusion to describe the agonies of obsessive love. Many of the sonnets also have a homoerotic subtext.
- *Maurice* (1971), E. M. Forster. The novel was actually written in 1913–1914 (and revised in 1932 and 1959–1960) and was published posthumously. Forster's well-known novel about Maurice Hall and his love affair with a young gamekeeper, Alec Scudder, is a 'coming of age' novel about same-sex love. Forster's portrayal of homosexuality at a time when it was illegal in the UK makes this novel an interesting comparison to *Call Me by Your Name*.
- *Angels in America – Part 1* (1991), Tony Kushner. Like Aciman, Kushner sets his work in the 1980s but, unlike Aciman, makes reference to the AIDs crisis. Useful comparison could be made here, as well as the wider themes such as Judaism, love, sexual obsession and societal conventions.
- *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), Jamie O'Neill. O'Neill's novel about the relationship between Jim and Doyler, is set in Dublin during the Easter Rising. The novel is a stream of conscious narrative and follows the relationship of the two men who know, ultimately, that they could not be together.
- *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Alan Hollinghurst. Hollinghurst's novel follows the life of Nick Guest. It is set in 1980s England and refers to the politics and issues of the time. Like Aciman, Hollinghurst uses imagery and motifs to shape his characters and themes.

7) *Why Be Happy When You Could be Normal?*, Jeanette Winterson (2011)

Jeanette Winterson's autobiographical novel can be seen as the 'silent twin' to her debut novel, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, which was a fictionalised version of her life.

Written in the first person, Winterson's autobiography recalls her early life growing up in a small house in Accrington with her adoptive parents and ends with her meeting her birth mother.



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The book is split into 15 non-linear chapters, with a coda at the end. The first part of the book looks at Winterson's harsh upbringing with her unhappy, deeply religious adoptive mother who often beats her and locks her out of the house. Winterson is denied any comforts and often goes hungry, but she seeks refuge in the local library and begins

to read every book in the fiction section – without telling her mother

who would not approve. In the opening few chapters, Winterson talks a lot about identity and how her adoption made it very difficult for her to know her own personality as well as love and trust others.

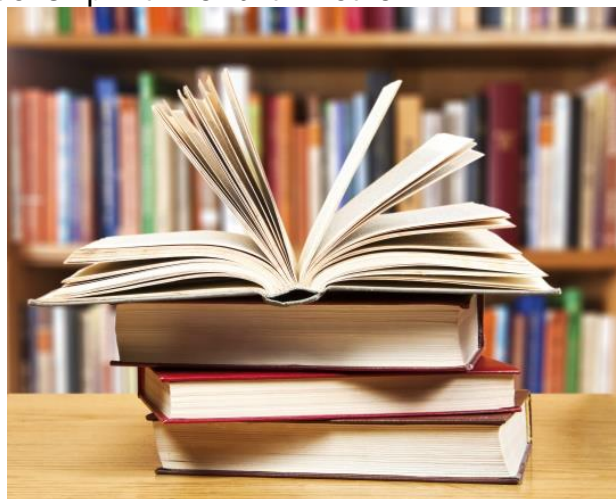
The book goes on to describe the rest of her life. She talks about her relationship with Mrs Winterson (her adoptive mother) and how they grew up in extreme poverty. She gains her A levels and falls in love with a girl, Janey, while at sixth-form college. When her mother finds out, she is forced to leave home and lives out of her car until her English teacher, Mrs Ratlow, takes her in and encourages her to apply to Oxford. Jeanette loves living in the world of learning of Oxford. She talks openly throughout the book about the breakdown of her relationships, the death of her father and her battles with depression. The last section of the book focuses on how she tracks down her birth mother and meets her.

Throughout the book, Winterson goes off on tangents and talks about her own writing process, her relationships and her love of literature. The book ends rather abruptly and open-endedly, as Winterson admits that she has no idea what will happen next in her life.

Key themes of the novel

- **Identity and self** – this is a key theme and concern in Winterson's book. From the very beginning she discusses how, as an adopted child, she is self-invented and how it always feels like something is missing. Winterson talks openly and frankly about her struggles to find herself in life and how she has battled with depression and an inability to trust others who might love her. She learns to construct and create her own identity; firstly through her love of her home town of Manchester and then through her love of literature. As she grows older and succeeds as a writer, she begins to shape her identity as a feminist, a working-class woman and a lesbian.

- **Loss and love** – early in the book, Winterson's relationships are tinged with loss and loneliness. She has a difficult relationship with her mother whose extreme religious beliefs make her cold and paranoid. Winterson gradually learns to love and meets Janey at college, which causes her to lose her home as her mother casts her out. Later in the book, we learn that the break up of her long-term relationship causes her to suffer from depression. Winterson is honest about her anxiousness and failure in relationships, as well as her need to be alone at times, but there is a lot of hope and optimism. She has learned to see love as a central, driving force to all humanity, which can enable us to be happy, despite the loss and the hurt. It is her relationship with Susie at the end of the book that gives her the confidence to seek out a new relationship with her birth mother.
- **Literature and mythology** – literature and learning are two key themes in the book. Literature is an escape for Winterson and she regularly refers to certain writers by name and how they have influenced her. She uses a lot of literary allusion to describe her writing style and process, as well as referring to several Greek and Roman myths to underline and enhance the meanings of her stories and observations.



Literary features that shape meaning

- **First-person narrative and tone** – as this is an autobiographical work, Winterson has chosen to write it in the first person. She is writing as an adult and recalling incidents from her youth. This allows us as readers to experience the key incidents of her life from her perspective and follow her inner monologues. The overall tone of the work is an important feature. The writing is personal and Winterson is brutally honest in places. There are some lyrical and intense descriptions, which give this autobiographical work a literary feel in places. Although the reader is left in no doubt that this is a personal work, Winterson's voice and literary allusions allow us to feel that these are shared experiences.
- **Poetic and literary allusions** – this very personal work allows Winterson to talk about her love of literature. There are quotations from a number of different writers and allusion to classical myth. These show not only Winterson's passions and provide a different voice in the personal writing but also allow Winterson to show how her struggles are universal. This is underlined by her frequent use of 'we' rather than 'I' and allows her readers to connect to her and recognise their own lives in her novel.
- **Narrative structure** – as with many of Winterson's works, she plays with the traditional narrative structures. The first two thirds of the book move around her life and do not follow a linear structure, which is the more traditional structure for an autobiographical work. This structure adds to the lyrical and personal tone, and reflects how we remember our lives in isolated incidents rather than in a clear sequence. Interestingly, the last part of the novel is more linear, as Winterson takes the brave step to find her birth mother. This change in narrative structure is deliberate and is marked by a one-page 'intermission'. This more traditional structure allows the reader to feel suspense and see how this part of Winterson's

journey is resolved. The coda at the end adds to the pathos of the novel and pulls together the themes of love, loss and identity, and how our journey never ends.

- **Symbolism** – Winterson uses motifs and symbols throughout her novel to underline the key themes of religion, loss, love and identity. For example, she uses her mother's Royal Doulton china as a symbol for love and happiness. Her mother, who did not allow herself any indulgences, kept this Royal Doulton china out of reach and behind a glass case in the house, and this is one of the many images and symbols Winterson uses to show how she felt that happiness and love were out of her reach as an adopted child.

Context

- **Social** – Winterson refers to her working-class town and her life in Manchester as the adopted daughter of a poor working-class family. She also talks about how she felt at home intellectually but felt socially out of place when she went to Oxford.
- **Religion** – Winterson's mother was a devoutly religious woman and their entire lives revolved around her religion. Winterson shows both the good and bad that religion can create. Although this devout life causes a lot of misery in her household, it does allow Winterson to experience love and compassion from some of the church goers. She recognises that faith and religion provide a release from everyday life and foster a sense of community.
- **Sex and relationships** – the attitude of her family to her same-sex relationships provides the title for the novel and underlines the attitudes to sex and sexuality. Her mother and father's relationship is repressed and her mother often warns her about sex and sees it as taboo. Winterson is thrown out of the house when she comes out to her parents, reflecting the attitudes at the time to same sex-relationships and sexuality.



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Critical interpretations and other useful sources

There are many critical essays in journals that focus on autobiography and modernism. If students can gain access to an academic library then such journals may be found there. Other sources include:

- *Jeanette Winterson: The Essential Guide*, Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds (Vintage, 2003)
- *Jeanette Winterson: A Contemporary Critical Guide*, edited by Sonya Andermahr (Bloomsbury, 2007)
- a [review](#) of *Why be Happy When You Can be Normal?* from the *London Review of Books* (2012)
- [an interview](#) with Winterson from the Hay Festival in 2012 (NB: requires a subscription to view)

- Monica B. Pearl, 'Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd (Cambridge, 2015), pp.169–187.

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- Winterson's other works, especially *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *The Passion* (1987) and *Written on the Body* (1992), would make good companion pieces for discussion with *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* in terms of subject matter and narrative structure.
- *A Boy's Own Story* (1983), Edmund White. White's semi-autobiographical story focuses on the life of a nameless narrator as he discovers his sexuality in 1950s America (see page 11 of this guide).
- *Hood* (1995), Emma Donoghue. Donoghue's work is heavily influenced by James Joyce's *Ulysses* in terms of narrative structure. It tells the story of the relationship between Pen and Cara, whose 13-year relationship is cut short when Cara is killed in a car accident. Like Winterson's novel, it explores societal and religious reactions to same-sex relationships and includes a number of interesting narrative structures.
- *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity* (2009), edited by Michael Carter. These 12 stories for young adults written by 12 different LGBTQ+ writers, talk about finding identity and overcoming adversity to discover your true self.
- *Red Dust Road* (2010), Jackie Kay. Kay's autobiography recounts her life as she grew up with her adoptive family in Scotland. It follows her early life and reveals her journey to find her birth parents in Nigeria.
- *The Bricks that Built the Houses* (2016), Kate Tempest. In her debut novel, the poet Kate Tempest explores the importance of a home and roots. Her poetry, particularly *Hold Your Own* and *Brand New Ancients*, also explores the same themes of relationships, gender and self. Like Winterson, Tempest's work has allusions to mythology, as well as exploring different narrative structures and voices.

8) *Mr Loverman*, Bernardine Evaristo (2013)

Bernadine Evaristo's novel, *Mr Loverman*, introduces readers to Barry, a 74-year-old Antiguan man as he decides to let his wife, and the world, know that he has been in a relationship with Morris, his childhood friend, for 60 years.

The novel is set primarily in London and told mainly through the voice of Barry (or Barrington) Walker. We are introduced to his whole family, he is married to Carmel and has two children, Donna and Maxine. Carmel has always been suspicious of his late nights and drinking but she has no idea that he is having an affair with Morris, a man he went to school with in Antigua.



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When Carmel returns to Antigua after her father's death, Barry must decide if he wants to continue his life as a closeted homosexual or come out and embrace his relationship with Morris. The novel follows his journey as he makes his decision. Although the novel does deal with serious issues such as racial and religious intolerance, post-natal depression and the

breakup of a marriage, Barry is a good-humoured and slightly eccentric narrator, and the novel manages to blend humour with serious issues and concerns.

Key themes of the novel

- **Identity** – this is a key theme in the book and is an interesting and rich element to explore. Barry and Morris are closeted homosexuals and have gone to great lengths to conceal their 'real' identities from their family and friends for many years. Similarly, Carmel, Barry's wife, has also concealed her identity as a woman with needs and sexual feelings, and is portrayed as a stereotypical nagging wife by her husband. It is not until we hear about her life in her own words that we see how she has suffered throughout her marriage and has a very different identity to the God-fearing, nagging and scornful wife.
- **Caribbean cultural stereotypes** – Barry, Morris and his wife Carmel are from Antigua and have lived in London for many years. Through conversations with their friends and Carmel's church group, we can see how their Antiguan culture and strict upbringing still influences their world views. Carmel and her friends are religious and there is enormous cultural pressure to get married and have children. They talk about their families back home and frown upon anyone who does not follow the conventional



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'rules'. Their views on homosexuality stem from this religious view and Barry, although he has been in a same-sex relationship all his adult life, refuses to admit that he is homosexual. The stereotypical views of the older Caribbean communities are enhanced by their use of slang and patois when they are talking to each other.

- **Gender roles** – the novel is fascinating in its portrayal of male and female gender roles. Although the illicit and loving relationship between Barry and Morris is at the heart of the novel, the other relationships are extremely conventional. It is also surprising perhaps that it is often Barry who perpetuates these traditional roles with his views. He has a very traditional view of marriage and is misogynistic, believing that Carmel should do his washing, frequently referring to her as 'wifey' rather than her first name. We also see how the couple are physically violent with each other and learn that Carmel's father beat her mother, and how this behaviour has perpetuated through the generations.
- **Education and learning** – Barry is a self-taught man and the book is littered with both literary and classical quotations and allusions. Barry is adamant that he is not seen as an ill-educated man as many other immigrants have been. Barry is often quoting Shakespeare or describing relatively ordinary scenes in this life with allusions to Greek and Roman gods. Both of Barry's children, and his grandson, have been encouraged to get an education and to 'better' themselves and move on in society. Barry is now a successful man who owns several properties and he is keen for his family and children to continue his success.
- **Age and relationships** – as Barry is coming to a crossroads in his life at the age of 74, the book focuses on the nature of relationships in older age and how they are perceived and talked about in society. Barry and Morris often refer to their younger lives and how they have changed physically but that their feelings for each other have not. The book also explores younger relationships, as we see how Barry interacts with his children and grandson, Daniel. Barry embarrasses himself when his grandson comes to stay with him but this allows him to open up to Maxine about his sexuality. One of the more amusing moments in the book is when Barry and Morris go with Maxine to a gay club and they are welcomed into an environment they had avoided due to their age.



Literary features that shape meaning

- **Voices** – although the novel is written predominantly from Barry's perspective, Evaristo is careful to include the voice of Carmel, his wife. In five distinct chapters, called 'songs', while Barry's chapters are called 'the art of...', Evaristo crafts a fascinating and heartbreaking character. In these songs, Carmel is allowed her own, distinct voice as the chapters have no punctuation and are the most inner thoughts of Carmel. In these chapters, she tells the reader about her confusion on her wedding night and her move to London. She also talks about her post-natal depression and her affair with a man from work. She tells the reader how close she was to leaving her husband but how her faith and her upbringing held her back. By including this new and very different voice, which is in stark contrast to

Barry's strident, funny and opinionated narrative, Evaristo allows her main female character a unique and memorable role in the novel.

- **Slang, italics, derogatory language and patois** – Evaristo uses a great deal of London slang in the dialogue of her characters, particularly the younger characters, to show how they are part of the fabric and culture of the city. She uses a lot of italics to emphasise certain words and phrases (especially in Barry's speech) to allow the reader to pause and see the double meaning or the irony in the words. Many of the characters use derogatory or inflammatory language to describe race or homosexuality, which really shocks the reader but, in some cases, this is how Evaristo wants the reader to see the engrained prejudice in her characters. The use of patois is also a deliberate move from the novelist to illustrate that, even though her characters are 'Londoners', they have not forgotten their roots and are comfortable with their past and present.
- **Flashback and memory** – as well as the distinct chapters of 'songs' from Carmel, Evaristo allows the reader to learn about the past lives of the characters through Barry's memories and reminiscing. Through these memories, we learn about the prejudices the characters have faced for their race, sexuality and gender, as well as allowing the reader to see how past experiences have shaped the characters.

Context

- **Literary context** – many critics and reviewers have referred to this novel as an example of post-colonial literature, as the characters are from the Caribbean. This is an interesting element to consider, as Evaristo does focus on the traditions and generational views of the Caribbean community and the difficulties both Barry and Carmel had when they first arrived in London.
- **Historical context** – the use of flashback and memory allows the reader to see the prejudice surrounding homosexuals and the black community in 1960s and 1970s London. It is also important to remember that homosexuality was, and still is, illegal in some Caribbean countries (this is a useful background [article](#) to reference from 2018).
- **Contemporary/social context** – the discussions in Barry's house with Carmel's church friends and his conversations with his children all highlight the social/contemporary context of the novel. The older women have set and 'straight' views about women and same-sex relationships, whereas Maxine and Donna are much more vocal about their individual rights and the rights of others. Barry and Morris are still held back by convention, their responsibilities and the views of society but they are both prepared to become more open about their lives.



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- **Writer's own life** – Evaristo was born in London and has a British mother, and a Nigerian father who migrated to London in 1949. She is a campaigner and activist for the inclusion of writers of colour and has spoken on the issues. Her [website](#) outlines her biography, her influences and links to reviews and articles about *Mr Loverman*.

Critical interpretations

There are many critical essays in journals that focus on post-colonial literature and students are encouraged to use a search engine in an academic library for access to them. Other sources include:

- Hugh Stevens, 'Normality and queerness in gay fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 81–97
- Kathryn Bond Stockton, 'The queerness of race and same-sex desire', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 116–131
- a review of *Mr Loverman* in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2013
- BBC [interview](#) about Black History in Literature with Evaristo.

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Walt Whitman. Although this is a large collection of poetry, a comparison with key poems that focus on Whitman's coming to terms with his sexuality would provide an interesting comparison with *Mr Loverman*.
- *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Tennessee Williams. There are some good parallels here with the relationship between Brick and Maggie's lives, and the relationship between Barry and Carmel.
- *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Samuel Selvon. This well-known novel about the Windrush generation arriving in the UK in the 1950s picks up on the main themes of race, gender and acceptance in society in *Mr Loverman*.
- *Burnings* (2010), Ocean Vuong. Like *Mr Loverman*, Vuong's poetry focuses on life as an immigrant from another country and the acceptance of his own homosexuality.
- *Or You Could Kiss Me* (2010), Neil Bartlett. This play, set in 2036 in Port Elizabeth, sees two men looking back on their lives and how they can say goodbye to each other after a lifetime together. Like *Mr Loverman*, this play looks at love between two older men and how they fall and stay in love with each other.
- *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Chinelo Okparanta. Although Okparanta's novel is about a young girl coming out in Nigeria, the cultural and religious imagery used by the writer has parallels with Evaristo's novel (see page 43 of this guide).
- *Less* (2017), Andrew Sean Greer. This novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 2018 and follows a 50-year-old gay writer as he embarks on a literary tour. Like *Mr Loverman*, it looks at the themes of same-sex relationships and ageing with pathos but also with humour.

9) *Under the Udala Trees*, Chinelo Okparanta (2015)

Chinelo Okparanta's debut novel focuses on the life of Ijeoma, a young Christian Igbo girl whose meeting with Amina, a Muslim Hausa girl, during the Nigerian-Biafran war, sets her on a road to self-discovery.

Okparanta's novel begins with a description of a Nigerian village before the war 'barged in' in the late 1960s. In the first part of the novel Ijeoma, the narrator, tells the reader about her father's death and how she and her mother struggled for survival, both physically and psychologically. By the end of part I of the novel, Ijeoma has been sent away to another village to live with a grammar school teacher and his wife so that her mother can begin to find a new place for them to live and so that she can have an education.



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In parts II and III, Ijeoma recounts her life living with the teacher and how she becomes closer to a young Muslim girl, Amina. When Amina and Ijeoma are caught in an intimate situation together, Ijeoma must return to her mother, who takes it upon herself to re-educate her daughter and forces her to read aloud from the Bible with her. During this time, Ijeoma and her mother are beginning to get back on their feet, as her mother owns a small shop and Ijeoma helps her run it.

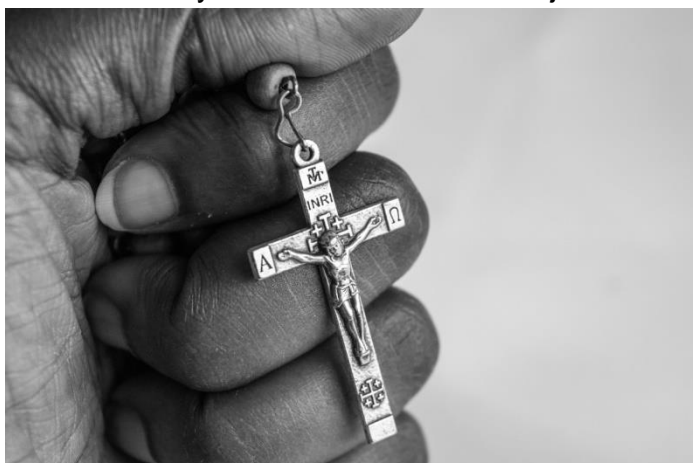
As the book progresses through Ijeoma's school life and early adulthood, she is under pressure from her mother and the church to get married. She meets and falls in love with Ndidi who introduces her to other lesbians who socialise in secret. When one of these clandestine social functions is raided and several women are beaten and killed, Ndidi advises Ijeoma to marry and try to have a relationship with a man, as her mother wishes. Ijeoma marries a childhood friend, Chibundu, and they have a child together. The book closes with Ijeoma leaving her husband and returning to her mother with her daughter. The epilogue, written in 2014, allows Ijeoma to explain to the reader what became of her and her daughter after she had left her husband.



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Key themes of the novel

- **Religion and duty** – from the outset of the novel, we are made aware that Ijeoma and her family are devout Christians. Ijeoma often alludes to Bible stories and



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there are many scenes throughout the novel that are set in the church, with Ijeoma and her mother seeking solace and advice from the pastor. Even in the height of war, everyone attends church, as it gives them an anchor. The novel is littered with religious references and there are several prayers, hymns and sermons recited. This focus on religion (both Christian and Islam) in society creates a

sense of duty to both God and the family in Ijeoma as her mother believes she cannot love and support a child who goes against God's wishes. As a consequence, both Amina and Ijeoma feel they have to marry men and fulfil their duty as a wife and a mother.

- **Bigotry and intolerance** – the themes of bigotry and intolerance are linked closely to religion and duty in the novel. There are several instances of bigotry. The first, and perhaps most apparent, one is the attitude towards same-sex relationships in the novel. As homosexuality is illegal in Nigeria, homosexuals are beaten and, in some cases, killed by the army. As well as being illegal, it is also seen as an act against God that can be 'cured' by Bible reading and brain washing, and Ijeoma is punished in this way by her mother. As well as the bigotry and intolerance towards same-sex relationships, the novel is set during the civil war of Nigeria, causing tension and intolerance between the state of Biafra and the government of Nigeria. We also see how different religions are wary of each other, as Ijeoma is warned against a friendship with Amina as she is a Muslim and a Hausa.
- **Love and identity** – despite all the battles against intolerance and bigotry in the novel, there is a strong sense of a woman falling in love and finding her own voice and identity. Ijeoma is a compelling and calm voice, who tells the reader about her life and how she falls in love with Amina and Ndidi. We follow her struggle against her duty to her family and her faith to find true love and deal with her feelings. The over-riding sense of the novel is that, even in the darkest places against a backdrop of war and struggle, love is a strong force and it is important to know who you are and where you fit into the world in which you live.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Hymns and songs** – the novel is written primarily in continuous prose but there are a number of key instances where Ijeoma uses local songs and hymns to either comfort herself or to control her feelings. Okparanta often includes the song or hymn in its original language, with the translation into English afterwards, as if Ijeoma is aware that her story is being read by a number of different audiences and people. This interspersing of songs and religious verses allows the reader to

see how ingrained religion and tradition is in the lives of the people of Nigeria and the risk that Ijeoma is taking by going against these traditions.

- **Images of war and nature** – Okparanta has set her novel during a time of extreme tumult in Nigeria. The opening chapters of the book include descriptions of war, concrete walls and barbed wire, as the villages try to protect themselves. There are also some disturbing descriptions of violence and dead bodies, as well as the physical effects of starvation on the people caught in the conflict. Against all this ugliness, Okparanta is careful to also include the beauty of nature in Nigeria. The novel has many references to the local wildlife and scenery, which allows the reader, and the people caught up in the war, some respite and to see the beauty of the world.
- **Stories within stories** – Ijeoma is a highly intelligent and well-read young woman. When she is recounting the story of her life, she often includes local folklore, fairy stories and Bible stories to highlight her point or to draw an analogy with her situation. Early in the novel, she recounts the folklore her father has told her about war and great warriors, which allows the reader to see how close she was to her family and how proud she is of him and her country's brave heritage. It is also a clever device by Okparanta to remind the reader that Ijeoma is a young girl whose mind is full of stories.
- **First person narrative** – as with many 'coming of age' novels, the narrative is told in the first person throughout so the only voice we hear is that of Ijeoma. As she is a calm and intelligent narrator, the reader tends to see her as reliable. The narrative is largely linear although there are some jumps back and forth in time, with some small elements of foreshadowing. The translation of songs and hymns into English is also a reminder that Ijeoma is aware of her reader and is telling the story on her own terms through her perspective. The short epilogue at the end finishes the story with the summing up of the last 30 years to tie up the loose ends and allow the reader some closure.

Context

- **Historical context** – there are many references throughout the novel to the civil war in Nigeria in the late 1960s, when the state of Biafra, which represented the Igbo people, fought with the central government of Nigeria, as they felt they could no longer co-exist with Nigeria. The Igbo people suffered terribly from starvation and persecution during this war and Biafra eventually re-joined Nigeria in 1970. Okparanta includes a map of Nigeria at the start of her novel to show the reader the different regions of the country in the late 1960s and allows us to understand the historical context of the start of her novel.



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- **Social/cultural context** – religion plays a large role in the lives of the characters of the novel. Ijeoma and her family are very religious. The novel has several Bible references, especially around the sin of same-sex relationships and the virtues of marriage. Ijeoma is told by her mother and the pastor that women are incomplete if they do not marry and that it is their social and religious duty to produce heirs and extend the family. The strong religious overtones of the novel underline the gender stereotypes in Nigerian society of the time, in that women are expected to raise children and stay at home and that men are also expected to marry and have children, and go out to work to support their families.
- **Illegality of same-sex relationships** – the novel is set in 1960s Nigeria, with the epilogue taking us to almost the present day. Nigeria is still one of the few countries in the world where same-sex relationships are illegal, therefore all Ijeoma's relationships with women are kept secret. The epilogue underlines this as she admits that, even though she has reconnected with Ndidi, they do not live together and must lead separate lives to avoid suspicion.

Critical interpretations

There are many critical essays that focus on post-colonial literature, in various journals. If students can gain access to an academic library then such journals may be found there. Other sources include:

- Kathryn Bond Stockton, 'The queerness of race and same-sex desire', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, edited by Hugh Stevens (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 116–131
- Shamira A. Meghani, 'Global Desires, Postcolonial Critique: Queer Women in Nation, Migration and Diaspora', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd (Cambridge, 2015), pp.60–78
- *The Guardian* newspaper [review](#) of the novel from 2015
- [interview](#) with the writer from 2017.

Possible coursework pairings and other works to consider

- *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), Rita Mae Brown. Brown's ground-breaking novel tells the story of Molly Bolt, a strident and intelligent woman who fights for her rights for a career and being a lesbian in American society (see page 7 of this guide).
- *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Wole Soyinka. This play looks at a true incident in Nigerian history, when a horseman of a Yoruba king was prevented from committing suicide. The play looks at Nigerian tradition and lore, as well as the importance of duty.
- *A Boy's Own Story* (1983), Edmund White. White's semi-autobiographical story focuses on the life of a nameless narrator as he discovers his sexuality in 1950s America (see page 11 of this guide).
- *The Famished Road* (1991), Ben Okri. Okri's novel is often described as magical realism and follows the life of a spirit boy who stands by his mother and father. The novel focuses on key themes such as Nigerian life and politics, religion and family duty.
- *Half a Yellow Sun* (2006), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Like Okparanta, Adichie is a Nigerian writer. *Half a Yellow Sun* is also set during the Nigerian civil war and follows the fortunes of several Nigerians from different perspectives. Adichie's

other novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), would also provide interesting comparisons and parallels.

- *Mr Loverman* (2013), Bernardine Evaristo. Evaristo's portrayal of the relationship between 74-year-old Barry and his childhood friend, Morris, has strong parallels with *Under the Udala Trees*, as both writers use local dialect and religious images, and discuss cultural and social taboos (see page 43 of this guide).

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