

ELB(A): The English Language Book Club



Book list

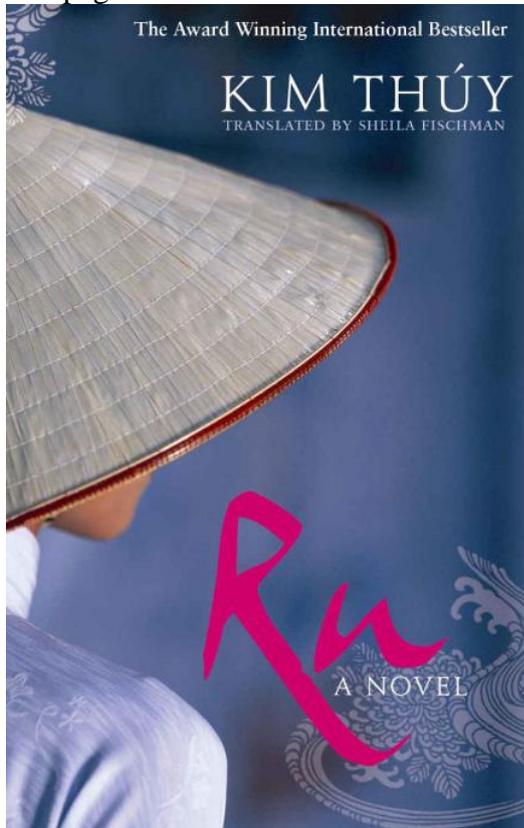
fourth season
(2016-2017)

All books are maximum 400 pages and are also available on Kindle.

20 September (John)

Ru by Kim Thúy (2010)

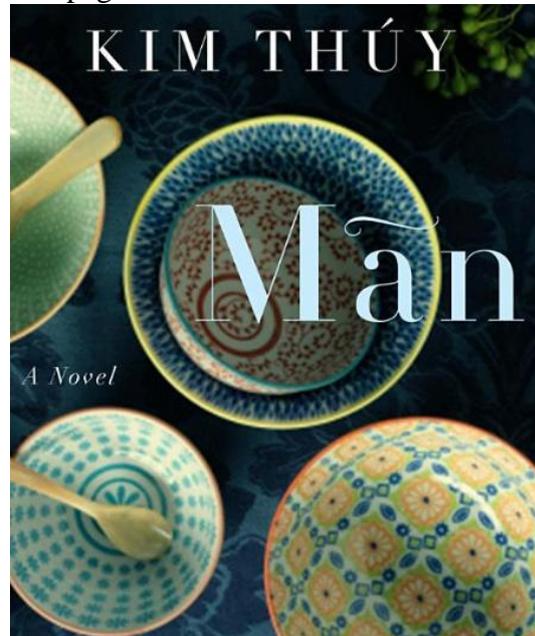
141 pages



The novel's title, *Ru*, has meaning in both Kim's native and adoptive languages: in Vietnamese, ru is a lullaby; in French, a stream. And it provides the perfect name for this slim yet potent novel. With prose that soothes and sings, *Ru* weaves through time, flows and transports: a river of sensuous memories gathering power. It's a classic immigrant story told in a breathtaking new way.

Mãn by Kim Thúy (2013)

160 pages



MAMAN AND I DON'T look like one another. She is short, I am tall. Her complexion is dark, my skin is like a French doll's. She has a hole in her calf and I have a hole in my heart. me
~
mothers

My first mother, the one who conceived me and gave birth to me, had a hole in her head. She was a young adult or maybe still a little girl, for no Vietnamese woman would have dared carry a child unless she had a ring on her finger.

My second mother, the one who plucked me out of a vegetable garden among the okra, had a hole in her faith. She no longer believed in people, especially when they talked. And so she retired to a straw hut, far from the powerful arms of the Mekong, to recite prayers in Sanskrit.

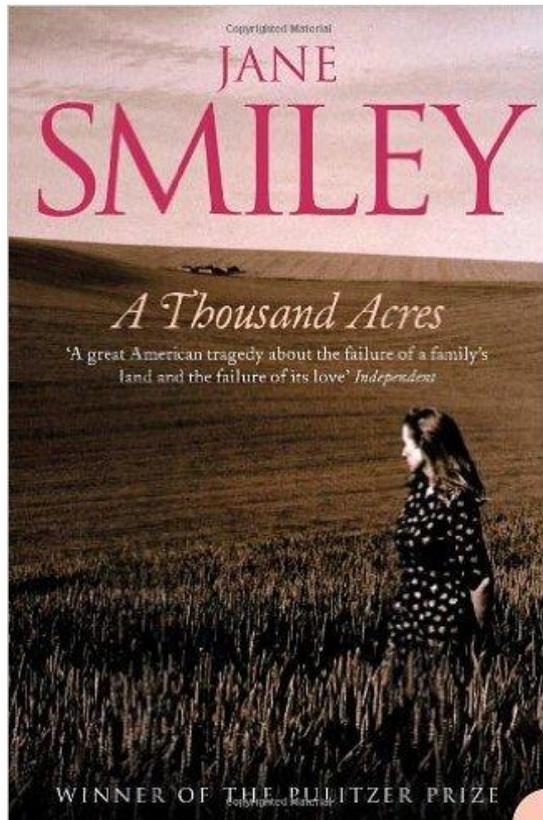
Mãn has three mothers: the one who gives birth to her in wartime, the nun who plucks her from a vegetable garden, and her beloved Maman, who becomes a spy to survive. Seeking security for her grown daughter, Maman finds Mãn a husband--a lonely Vietnamese restaurateur living in Montreal. Thrown into a new world, Mãn discovers her natural talent as a chef. Gracefully she practices her art, with food as her medium.

Kim Thúy writes short books so we will read both books at the same time. Note: she is coming to the Gothenburg Book Fair in September.

A Thousand Acres

by Jane Smiley (1992)

400 pages



1

AT SIXTY MILES PER HOUR, you could pass our farm in a minute, on County Road 686, which ran due north into the T intersection at Cabot Street Road. Cabot Street Road was really just another country blacktop, except that five miles west it ran into and out of the town of Cabot. On the western edge of Cabot, it became Zebulon County Scenic Highway, and ran for three miles along the curve of the Zebulon River, before the river turned south and the Scenic continued west into Pike. The T intersection of CR 686 perched on a little rise, a rise nearly as imperceptible as the bump in the center of an inexpensive plate.

From that bump, the earth was unquestionably flat, the sky unquestionably domed, and it seemed to me when I was a child in school, learning about Columbus, that in spite of what my teacher said, ancient cultures might have been onto something. No globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of the universe. Certainly, Zebulon County, where the earth *was* flat, was one spot where a sphere (a seed, a rubber ball, a ballbearing) must come to perfect rest and once at rest must send a taproot downward into the ten-foot-thick topsoil.

Larry Cook's farm is the largest in Zebulon County, Iowa, and a tribute to his hard work and single-mindedness. Proud and possessive, his sudden decision to retire and hand over the farm to his three daughters, is disarmingly uncharacteristic.

Ginny and Rose, the two eldest, are startled yet eager to accept, but Caroline, the youngest daughter, has misgivings. Immediately, her father cuts her out.

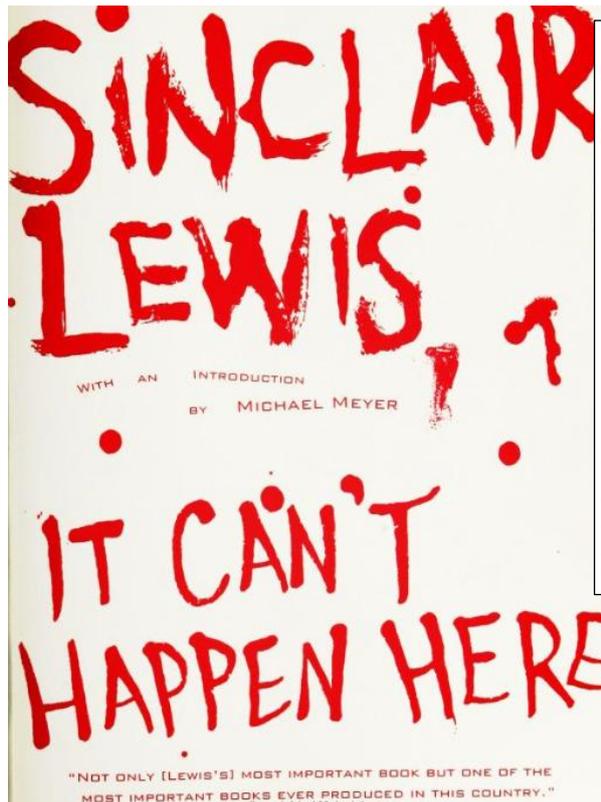
In this novel, Jane Smiley transposes the King Lear story to the modern day, and in so doing at once illuminates Shakespeare's original and subtly transforms it. This astonishing novel won both of America's highest literary awards, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics' Circle Award.

15 November (Birger)

[It Can't Happen Here](#)

by Sinclair Lewis (1935)

c.395 pages (374 pp or 416 pp)



ONE

The handsome dining room of the Hotel Wessex, with its gilded plaster shields and the mural depicting the Green Mountains, had been reserved for the Ladies' Night Dinner of the Fort Beulah Rotary Club.

Here in Vermont the affair was not so picturesque as it might have been on the Western prairies. Oh, it had its points: there was a skit in which Medary Cole (grist mill & feed store) and Louis Rotenstern (custom tailoring—pressing & cleaning) announced that they were those historic Vermonters, Brigham Young and Joseph Smith, and with their jokes about imaginary plural wives they got in ever so many funny digs at the ladies present. But the occasion was essentially serious. All of America was serious now, after the seven years of depression since 1929. It was just long enough after the Great War of 1914–18 for the young people who had been born in 1917 to be ready to go to college . . . or to another war, almost any old war that might be handy.

"The novel that foreshadowed Donald Trump's authoritarian appeal."—Salon

This is a cautionary tale about the fragility of democracy, an alarming, eerily timeless look at how fascism could take hold in America. Lewis wrote it during the Great Depression, when Americans were watching Hitler's aggression but assuring themselves that "it can't happen here".

It juxtaposes amusing political satire with the chillingly realistic rise of a President who foments fear and promises drastic economic and social reforms while promoting a return to patriotism and "traditional" values. He curtails women's and minority rights and the liberal press, with his ruthless paramilitary force enforcing "necessary but painful steps" to restore American power.

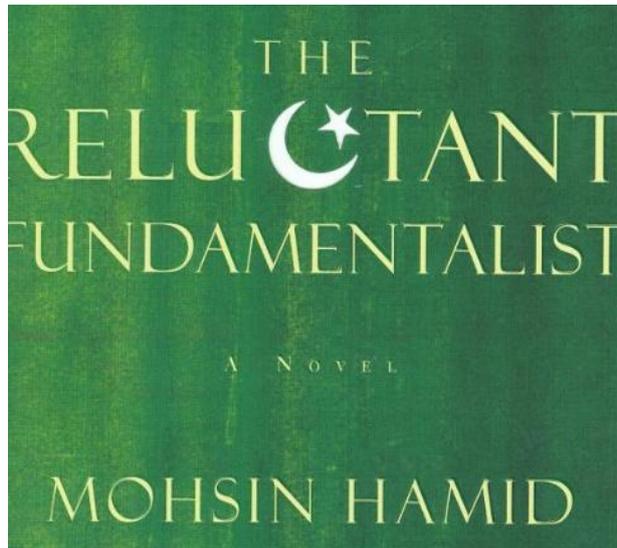
It Can't Happen Here remains uniquely important, a shockingly prescient novel that's as fresh and contemporary as today's news.

17 January (Anne)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist

by Mohsin Hamid (2007)

224 pages



1.

EXCUSE ME, SIR, but may I be of assistance?

Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services.

How did I know you were American? No, not by the color of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier. Nor was it your dress that gave you away; a European tourist could as easily have purchased in Des Moines your suit, with its single vent, and your button-down shirt. True, your hair, short-cropped, and

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, deals with the confluence of personal and political themes in the person of Changez, a young Pakistani.

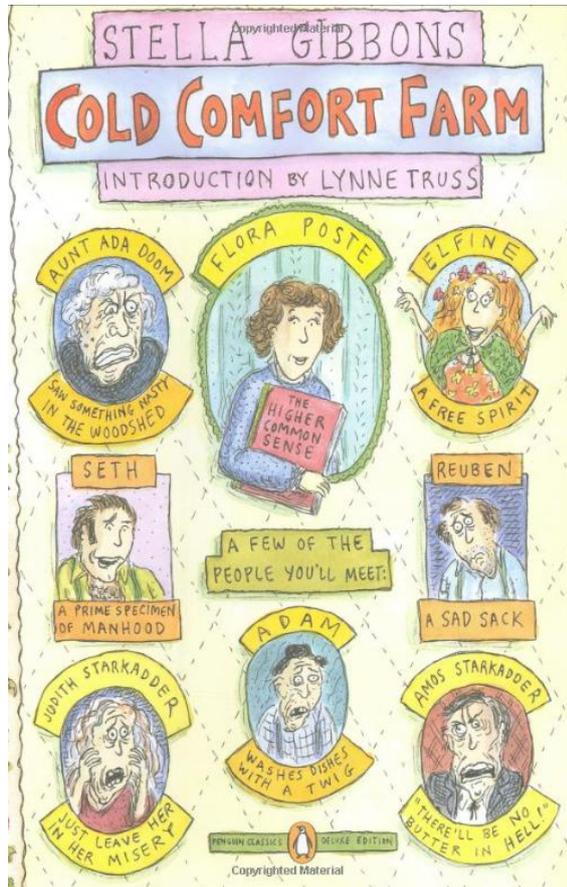
Told in a single monologue, the narrative never flags. Changez is by turns naive, sinister, unctuous, mildly threatening, overbearing, insulting, angry, resentful, and sad. He tells his story to a mysterious American who sits across from him at a Lahore cafe. Educated at Princeton, employed by a first-rate valuation firm, Changez was living the American dream, earning more money than he thought possible, caught up in the New York social scene and in love with a beautiful, wealthy, damaged girl, Erica, but she is emotionally unavailable, endlessly grieving the death of her lifelong friend and boyfriend, Chris.

21 February (Jean)

Cold Comfort Farm

by Stella Gibbons (1932)

233 pages



CHAPTER I

THE education bestowed on Flora Poste by her parents had been expensive, athletic and prolonged; and when they died within a few weeks of one another during the annual epidemic of the influenza or Spanish Plague which occurred in her twentieth year, she was discovered to possess every art and grace save that of earning her own living.

Very probably the funniest book ever written
-- **Sunday Times**

Screamingly funny and wildly subversive --
The Guardian

One of the finest parodies in English...a wickedly brilliant skit -- **The Guardian**

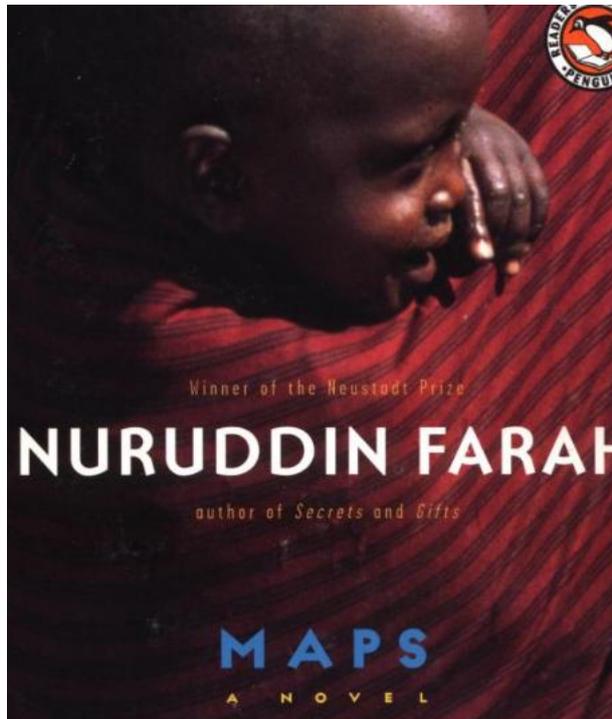
In Gibbons's classic tale, first published in 1932, a resourceful young heroine finds herself in the gloomy, overwrought world of a Hardy or Bronte novel and proceeds to organize everyone out of their romantic tragedies into the pleasures of normal life. Flora Poste, orphaned at 19, chooses to live with relatives at Cold Comfort Farm in Sussex, where cows are named Feckless, Aimless, Pointless, and Graceless, and the proprietors, the dour Starkadder family, are tyrannized by Flora's mysterious aunt, who controls the household from a locked room. Flora's confident and clever management of an alarming cast of eccentrics is only half the pleasure of this novel. The other half is Gibbons's wicked sendup of romantic clichés, from the mad woman in the attic to the druidical peasants with their West Country accents and mystical herbs.

21 March (Laura)

Maps

by Nuruddin Farah (1986)

259 pages



This first novel in Nuruddin Farah's Blood in the Sun trilogy tells the story of Askar, a man coming of age in the turmoil of modern Africa. With his father a victim of the bloody Ethiopian civil war and his mother dying the day of his birth, Askar is taken in and raised by a woman named Misra amid the scandal, gossip, and ritual of a small African village. As an adolescent, Askar goes to live in Somalia's capital, where he strives to find himself just as Somalia struggles for national identity.

CHAPTER ONE

§ I

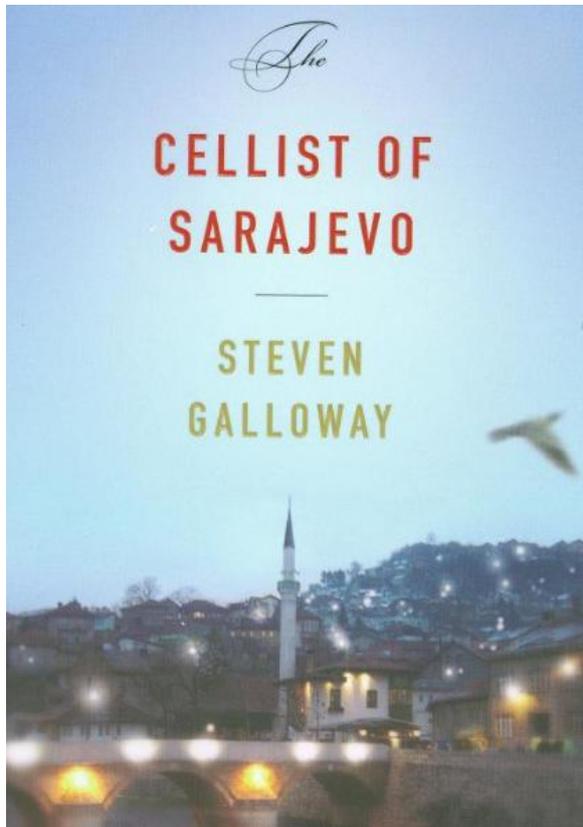
You sit, in contemplative posture, your features agonized and your expressions pained; you sit for hours and hours and hours, sleepless, looking into darkness, hearing a small snore coming from the room next to yours. And you conjure a past: a past in which you see a horse drop its rider; a past in which you discern a bird breaking out of its shell so it will fly into the heavens of freedom. Out of the same past emerges a man wrapped in a mantle with unpatched holes, each hole large as a window — and each window large as the secret to which you cling as though it were the only soul you possessed. And you question, you challenge every thought which crosses your mind.

18 April (Ankur)

The Cellist of Sarajevo

by Steven Galloway (2008)

235 pages



A spare and haunting, wise and beautiful novel about war and the endurance of the human spirit and the subtle ways individuals reclaim their humanity.

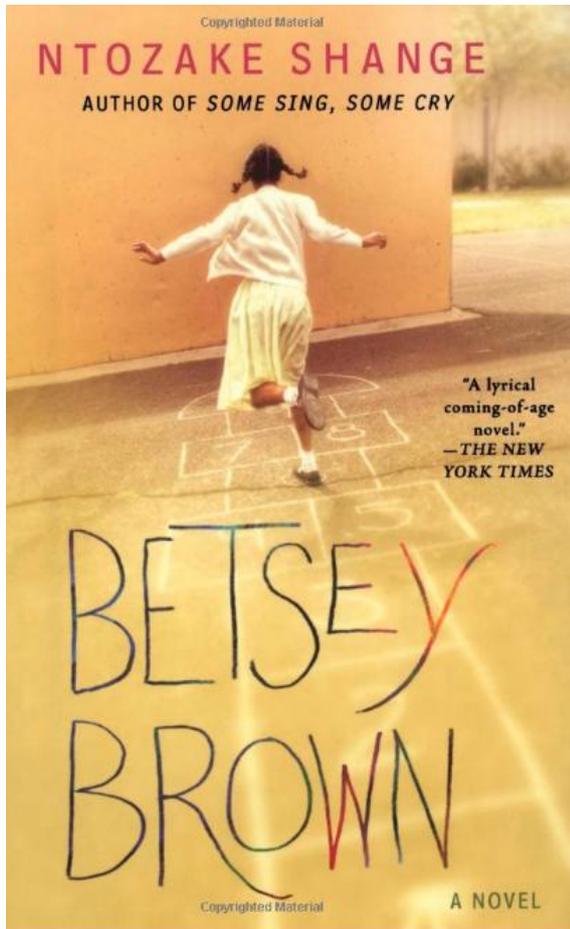
In a city under siege, four people whose lives have been upended are ultimately reminded of what it is to be human. From his window, a musician sees twenty-two of his friends and neighbours waiting in a breadline. Then, in a flash, they are killed by a mortar attack. In an act of defiance, the man picks up his cello and decides to play at the site of the shelling for twenty-two days, honouring their memory. Elsewhere, a young man leaves home to collect drinking water for his family and, in the face of danger, must weigh the value of generosity against selfish survivalism. A third man, older, sets off in search of bread and distraction and instead runs into a long-ago friend who reminds him of the city he thought he had lost, and the man he once was.

It screamed downward, splitting air and sky without effort. A target expanded in size, brought into focus by time and velocity. There was a moment before impact that was the last instant of things as they were. Then the visible world exploded.

Betsey Brown

by Ntozake Shange (1985)

212 pages



"Betsey Brown is a joy to read. Every sentence seems filled with a delicate, jubilant, sly, comical, musical brio. The energy, good humor, imagination and joie de vivre make this novel a refreshing exception to most contemporary fiction."

—Phillip Lonare

I 

THE SUN HOVERED BEHIND A PINK HAZE THAT ENGULFED all of St. Louis that Indian summer of 1959. The sun was a singular preoccupation with Betsey. She rose with it at least once a week. She'd shake Sharon or Margot outta they beds and run to the back porch on the second floor to watch the horizon set a soft blaze to the city. Their house allowed for innumerable perspectives of the sun. From the terrace off Betsey's room, where she was not 'sposed to stand, she could see the sun catty-cornered over the Victorian houses that dotted the street, behind maples and oaks grown way over the roofs of the sleeping families.

Praised as "exuberantly engaging" by the *Los Angeles Times* and a "beautiful, beautiful piece of writing" by the *Houston Post*, acclaimed artist Ntozake Shange brings to life the story of a young girl's awakening amidst her country's seismic growing pains. Set in St. Louis in 1957, the year of the Little Rock Nine, Shange's story reveals the prismatic effect of racism on an American child and her family. Seamlessly woven into this masterful portrait of an extended family is the story of Betsey's adolescence, the rush of first romance, and the sobering responsibilities of approaching adulthood.