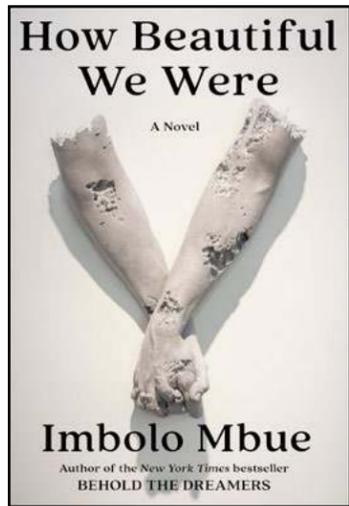


# New York Times 10 Best Books of 2021

The following list is an abridged version of the New York Times 10 Best Books of 2021. Authors across the world have utilized ample time from home to publish books during the pandemic. With both fiction and nonfiction selections, this list can serve as a gift guide for the bookworms in your life looking for the most contemporary literature choices.

To view the entire list and description of the books, visit [Nytimes.com/2021/11/30/books/review/best-books-2021.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/books/review/best-books-2021.html)?

## FICTION



**How Beautiful We Were**, by Imbolo Mbue, Random House.

Mbue's sweeping and quietly devastating second novel begins in 1980 in the fictional African village of Kosawa, where representatives from an American oil company have come to meet with the locals, whose children are dying because of the environmental havoc (fallow fields, poisoned water) wreaked by its drilling and pipelines. Through the eyes of Kosawa's citizens young and old, Mbue constructs a nuanced exploration of self-interest, of what it means to want in the age of capitalism and colonialism.

**Intimacies**, by Katie Kitamura, Riverhead Books.

In Kitamura's fourth novel, an unnamed court translator in The Hague is tasked with intimately vanishing into the voices and stories of war criminals whom she alone can communicate with; falling meanwhile into a tumultuous

entanglement with a man whose marriage may or may not be over for good. Kitamura's sleek and spare prose elegantly breaks grammatical convention.

**The Love Songs of W.E.B. DuBois**, by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. Harper/HarperCollins

The first novel by Jeffers, a celebrated poet, is many things at once: a moving coming-of-age saga, an examination of race and an excavation of American history. It cuts back and forth between the tale of Ailey Pearl Garfield, a Black girl growing up at the end of the 20th century, and the "songs" of her ancestors, Native Americans and enslaved African Americans.

**No One Is Talking About This**, by Patricia Lockwood. Riverhead Books.

Lockwood first found acclaim as a poet on the internet, with gloriously inventive and ribald verse. Here, in her first novel, she distills the pleasures and deprivations of life split between online and flesh-and-blood interactions, transfiguring the dissonance into art. The result is a book that reads like a prose poem, at once sublime, profane, intimate, philosophical, hilarious and, eventually, deeply moving.

**When We Cease to Understand the World**, by Benjamin Labatut. Translated by Adrian Nathan West. New York Review Books.

Labatut expertly stitches together the stories of the 20th century's greatest thinkers to explore both the ecstasy and agony of scientific breakthroughs: their immense gains for society as well as their steep human costs. His journey to the outermost edges of knowledge offers glimpses of a universe with limitless potential underlying the observable world.

## NON-FICTION

**The Copenhagen Trilogy: Childhood; Youth; Dependency**, by Tove Ditlevsen. Translated by Tiina Nunnally and Michael Favala Goldman. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Ditlevsen's gorgeous memoirs, first published in Denmark in the

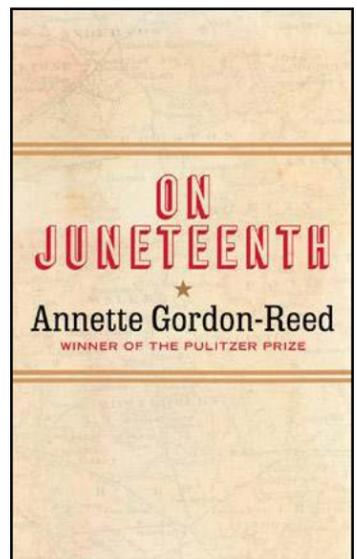
1960s and '70s and collected here in a single volume, detail her hard-scrabble upbringing, career path and merciless addictions: a powerful account of the struggle to reconcile art and life. Yet for all the dramatic twists of her life, these books together project a stunning clarity, humor and candidness.

**How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America**, by Clint Smith. Little, Brown & Company.

For this timely and thought-provoking book, Smith, a poet and journalist, toured sites key to the history of slavery and its present-day legacy. Smith holds up a mirror to America's fraught relationship with its past, capturing a potent mixture of good intentions, earnest corrective, willful ignorance and blatant distortion.

**Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival and Hope in an American City**, by Andrea Elliott. Random House.

The book expands on her acclaimed 2013 series for "The Times" about Dasani Coates, a homeless New York schoolgirl, and her family. Elliott spent years following her subjects in their daily lives, through shelters, schools, courtrooms and welfare offices. The book is a searing account of one family's struggle with poverty, homelessness and addiction.



**On Juneteenth**, by Annette Gordon-Reed. Liveright Publishing.

Exploring the racial and social complexities of Texas, her home state, Gordon-Reed asks readers to step back from the current heated debates and take a more nuanced look at history. Such a perspective comes easy to her because she was a part of history – the first Black child to integrate her East Texas school. On several occasions, she found herself shunned by whites and Blacks alike, learning at an early age that breaking the color line can be threatening to both races.

**Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath**, by Heather Clark. Alfred A. Knopf.

It's daring to undertake a new biography of Plath, whose life, and death by suicide at 30 in 1963, have been thoroughly picked over by scholars. Determined to rescue the poet from posthumous caricature as a doomed madwoman and Clark aims to "reposition her as one of the most important American writers of the 20th century." Clark, a professor of poetry in England, delivers a transporting account of a rare literary talent enlivened throughout by quotations from Plath's letters, diaries, poetry and prose.



## Doing things right



Photo courtesy of Berkeley Symphony

**Nigel Armstrong (left), Emanuela Nikiforova, Ivo Bokulic, and Isaac Pastor-Chermak performed a stirring concert at the Piedmont Center for the Arts on Sunday, December 12**

By Joseph Gold

The Berkeley Symphony does things right, and much of the credit must go to Artistic Director Rene Mandel. Their ongoing series of chamber music concerts, now in its ninth year at the Piedmont Center for the Arts, is a perfect example.

All seemed calm on the surface in advance of Berkeley Symphony musicians' opening chamber music concert of the 2021-22 season. And then I was informed of some heroic performances. A couple of the performers who were originally announced to play the concert had to cancel due to schedule conflicts. In ordinary times that might spell disaster, and usually the concert might be canceled. But it wasn't. The substitute players played heroically.

*Winter* from Antonio Vivaldi's ubiquitous *Four Seasons* served as a perfect warm up. That did not prepare the large and enthusiastic audience who had come on a cold and very wet Sunday afternoon for the surprise that awaited them. After the Vivaldi, guest violinist Nigel Armstrong strode to the stage and delivered Brian Nabors' *Theme and Variations for Solo Violin*. His bow jumped over the strings like a graceful kangaroo, and there were other spectacular techniques as well. Armstrong made the difficult look like child's play. His bow skipped along the string like a smooth stone skittering across the surface of a lake. That's called a flying staccato.

Not only that but Nabors' composition calls for bowed notes to be combined with Pizzicato notes played simultaneously. Paganini invented this technique, but composer Brian Nabors gave it a 21st

century touch. If it was difficult and virtuosic. What made it all the more interesting was that it was played with consummate ease.

Immediately after the solo piece, Armstrong was joined by violinist Emanuela Nikiforova, violist Ivo Bokulic, and cellist Isaac Pastor-Chermak.

They wowed the audience with a new piece, Jessie Montgomery's string quartet entitled *Voodoo Dolls*. This was really scary stuff. It reminded me of the mythical labyrinth of Knossos. You know the story... a labyrinth is constructed to encage the minotaur, a beast of great ferocity. This ferocious beast is slain by the hero Theseus. All of these visions were exemplified in the performance.

I took the opportunity to look at the musical score. It was terrifying to say in the least. The performance was heroic – to say the least.

To conclude the program the ensemble performed Claude Debussy's evocative String Quartet. If the performance had been recorded, it could be aired on any radio station with success. I, for one, would have preferred a more French interpretation. It was the case of a wonderful musical group playing a wonderful French composition. The only thing missing was the evocation of the muse of Debussy.

In culinary terms, a comparison might be made by serving Beef Stroganoff and calling it, with a French accent, *boeuf aux sauce St-rue gran Oeuf* and served on Sevres porcelain. The concept of playing in a variety of national styles is often relegated to the history books. What we heard on Sunday was an entirely modern concept...and spectacularly so.

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