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

**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 vamping into the voices and stories of war criminals who, 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 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 great aunts, 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 glorious inventiveness 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 ecstacy 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**


Dittelesen’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 recapture art and life. Yet for all the dramatic twists of her life, these books together project a stunning clarity, humor and candor.


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 mourning, earnest corrective, willful ignorance and blatant distortion.


The book expands on her acclaimed 2018 series for “The Times” about Dasani Coates, a homeless New York schoolgirl, and her family. Over the years following her subjects in their daily lives, through shelters, schools, courthouses and welfare offices, the book is a searing account of one family’s struggle with poverty, homelessness and addiction.


Examining the racial and social complexities of Texas, her home state, Gordon-Reed reads authors 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.


Here, in her first novel, she distills the story of one family’s struggle with poverty, homelessness and addiction.

**处置 things right**

**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 on Sunday, December 12.