



Kentucky Department for
Libraries and Archives



INSTITUTE of
Museum and Library
SERVICES

SPECULATIVE FICTION

Readers' Advisory

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1

How can I
recognize
speculative
fiction?

2

How can I
understand why
readers love
speculative
fiction? (What
are the appeal
characteristics?)

3

What recently
published
speculative
fiction can I use
for Readers'
Advisory?

WHAT IS SPECULATIVE FICTION?

- Speculative fiction imagines worlds, circumstances, technologies, societies, creatures, or possibilities that differ from our accepted reality.
- Speculative fiction often delves into ‘**what if**’ scenarios.
- Speculative fiction can overlap with almost any other genre.
- Speculative fiction is for adults and teens and children.



APPEAL FACTORS AND GENRE CONVENTIONS

Speculative fiction spans across a range of genres, each with their own set of unique conventions, yet most speculative fiction texts share a few defining characteristics.

Let's take a look at some of them!

APPEAL FACTORS

ENGAGEMENT & ENJOYMENT

- Inherently engaging
- Features thrilling plots
- Rich world-building
- Captivating narratives

CRITICAL THINKING

- Frequently presents complex, thought-provoking themes and ethical dilemmas.
- Challenges readers to think critically about technology, morality, and the future.

FREEDOM TO IMAGINE

Speculative fiction gives readers permission to imagine possibilities:

- What if humans could live forever?
- What if magic existed?
- What if climate change radically changed civilization?
- What if you could communicate with aliens?
- What if history had gone differently?





APPEAL FACTORS

WORLD BUILDING

Characters venture into unknown realms or discover hidden aspects of their own world, pushing the boundaries of knowledge and experience.

WONDER

Imagining future societies shaped by advanced technology and scientific progress, often exploring the impact on humanity.

ESCAPISM

Questions about what it means to be human, including explorations of identity, consciousness, and the soul.

HIGH STAKES

Critiques of societal norms, government systems, and cultural practices, often through allegory or satire.

APPEAL FACTORS

BIG IDEAS

Speculative fiction can explore complicated questions:

- What makes us human?
- What would we sacrifice for survival?
- What happens when technology goes too far?

SOCIAL COMMENTARY

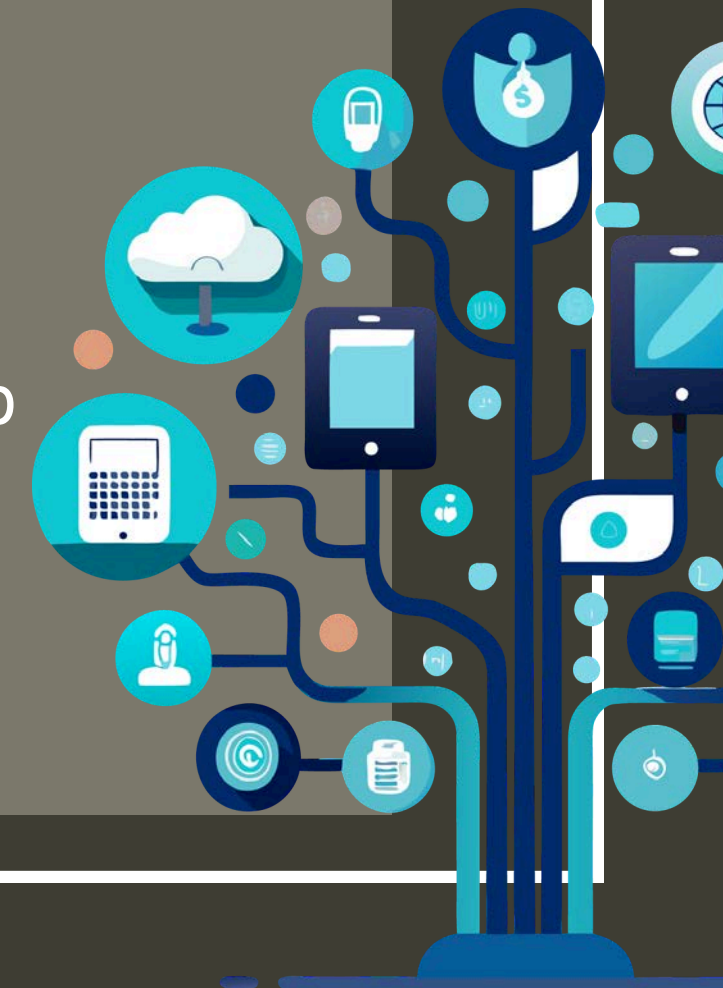
Speculative settings allow authors to examine real-world issues from a different angle:

- Gender
- Politics
- Climate change
- Colonialism
- Technology
- Artificial intelligence

EMOTIONAL ESCAPSIM

Despite all the fantastic elements, speculative fiction frequently centers on very familiar experiences:

- Love
- Grief
- Family
- Friendship
- Identity
- Belonging



SUBGENRES AND READERS' ADVISORY

Speculative fiction offers diverse storytelling possibilities through exploring a range of imaginative and thought-provoking scenarios through many different subgenres.

Let's look at a few of the most common subgenres!

Core Question: What could happen because of science, technology, or changes to society?

Common Elements:

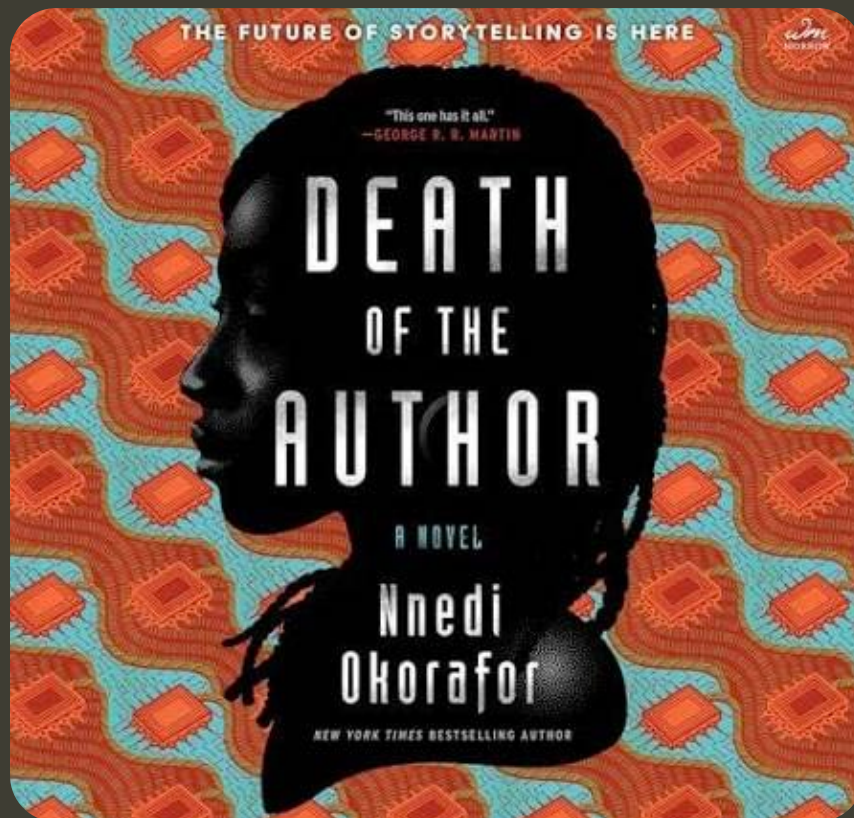
- Space travel
- Artificial intelligence
- Robotics
- Genetic engineering
- Advanced technology
- Alien civilizations

Appeal factors:

- Sense of wonder
- Exploration
- Big ideas
- Technology
- Problem solving
- “What if?” scenarios

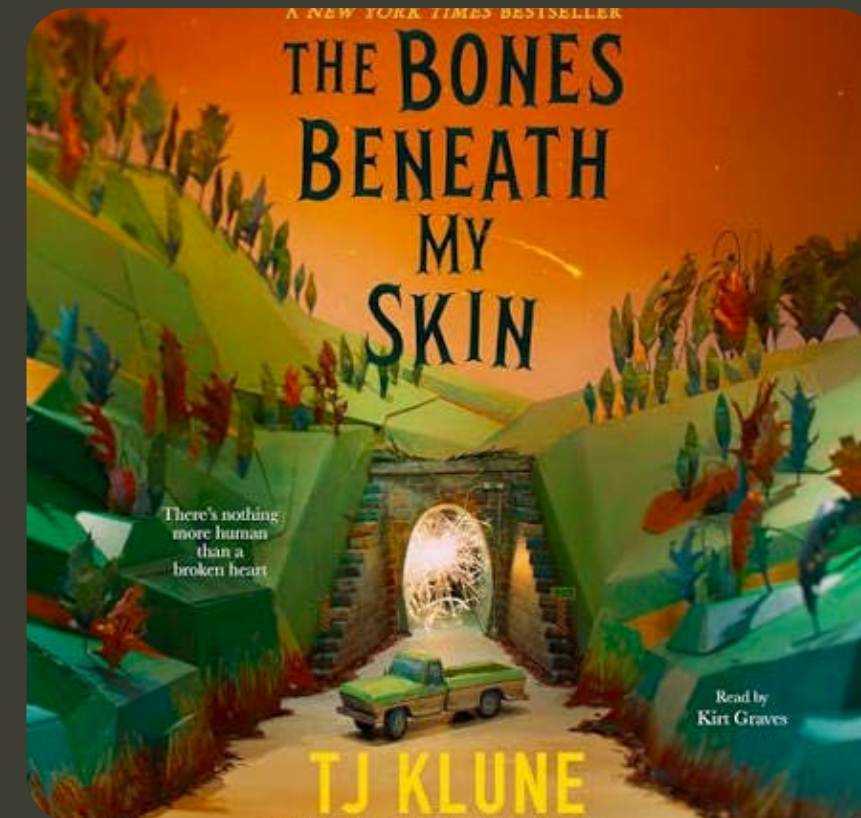
SCIENCE FICTION





Death of the
Author –
Nnedi Okorafor
(2025)

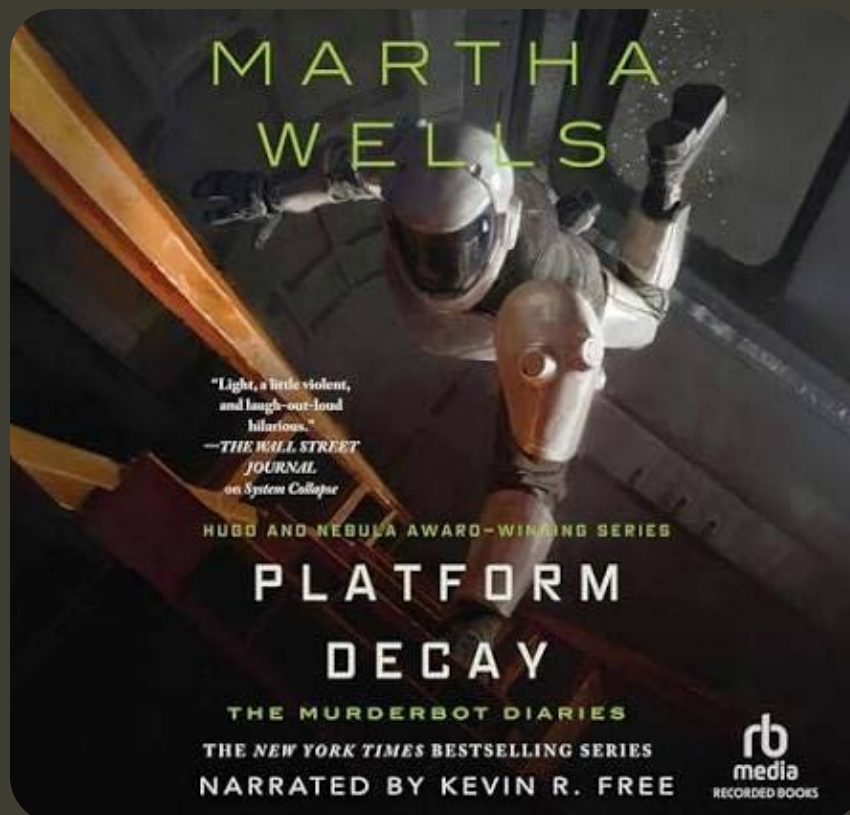
A novelist's story takes an increasingly strange turn as fiction, reality, technology, and questions of authorship begin to collide. Great for readers who enjoy literary science fiction and stories that play with narrative structure.



The Bones
Beneath
My Skin –
TJ Klune (2025)

A man hiding from his past discovers a mysterious young boy and his mother while traveling through the Pacific Northwest, leading to a much larger secret involving government experimentation and something decidedly not human.

SCIENCE FICTION: READERS' ADVISORY



Platform Decay – Martha Wells (2026)

Another entry in Wells's popular Murderbot universe, making it an easy recommendation for patrons already invested in the series. It continues the series' mix of artificial intelligence, action, humor, and questions about autonomy.



Boy 2.0 (#1) – Tracey Baptiste

Coal, a 13-year-old foster child, discovers that he can make his skin camouflage itself and, with the help of his best friend and his new foster siblings, sets out to uncover the mystery behind his ability. Their investigation leads to Mirror Tech, where Coal discovers secrets about his scientist mother, his past, and the dangerous origins of his powers.

SCIENCE FICTION: READERS' ADVISORY

Core Question: What if magic or impossible forces were real?

Common Elements:

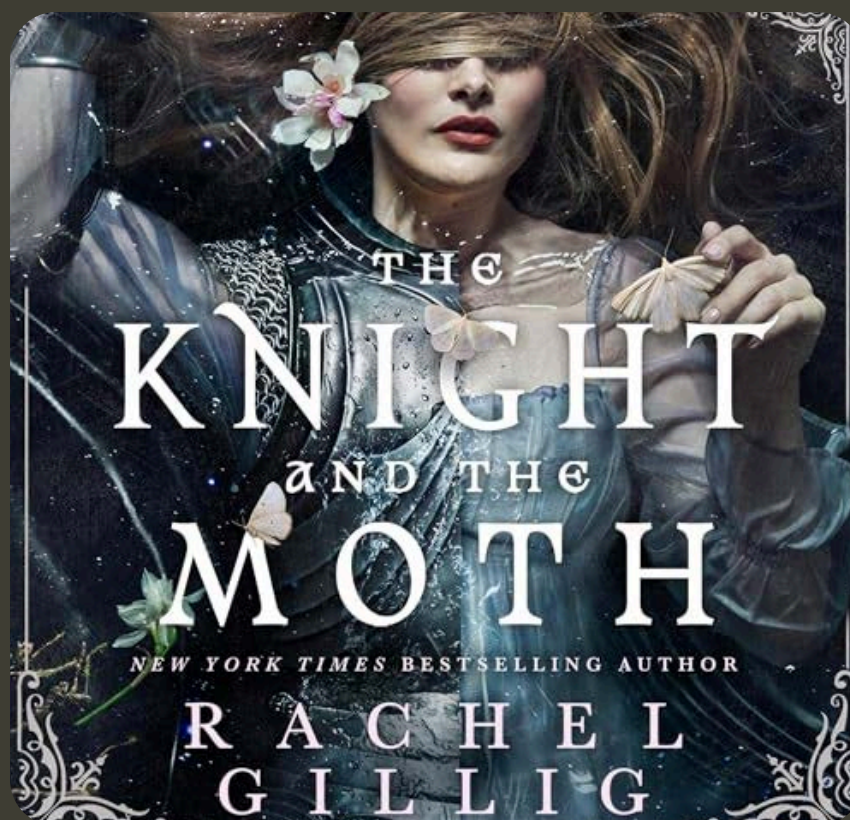
- Magic
- Gods
- Mythology
- Magical creatures
- Alternate worlds
- Prophecy
- Wizards/witches

Appeal factors:

- Escapism
- Wonder
- Adventure
- World-building
- Romance
- Good vs. evil
- Found family

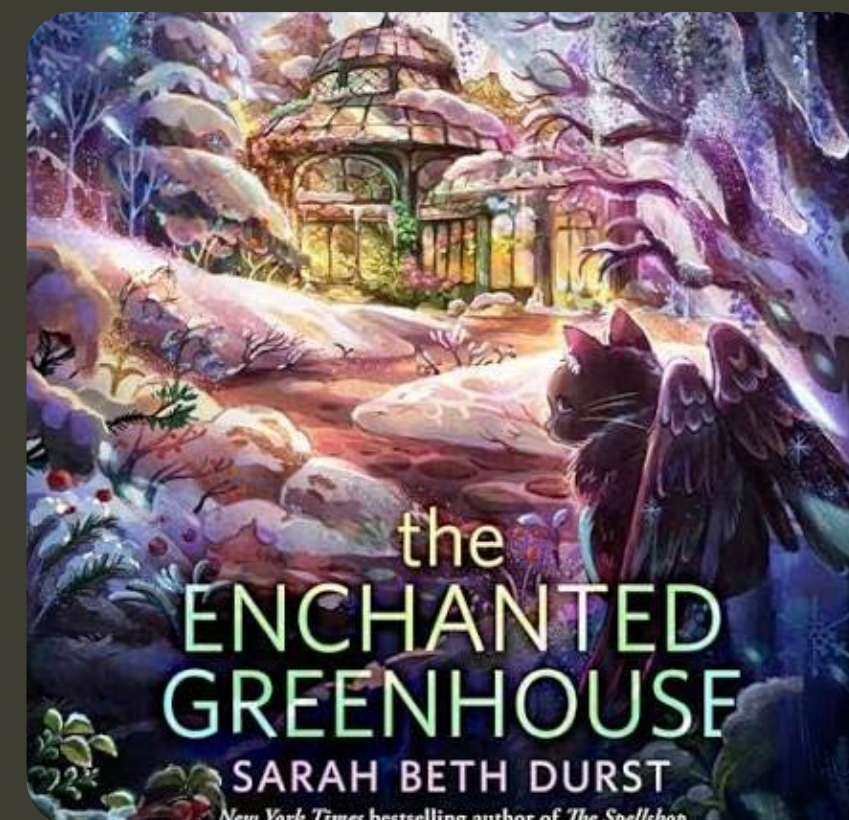
FANTASY





The Knight and
the Moth –
Rachel Gillig
(2025)

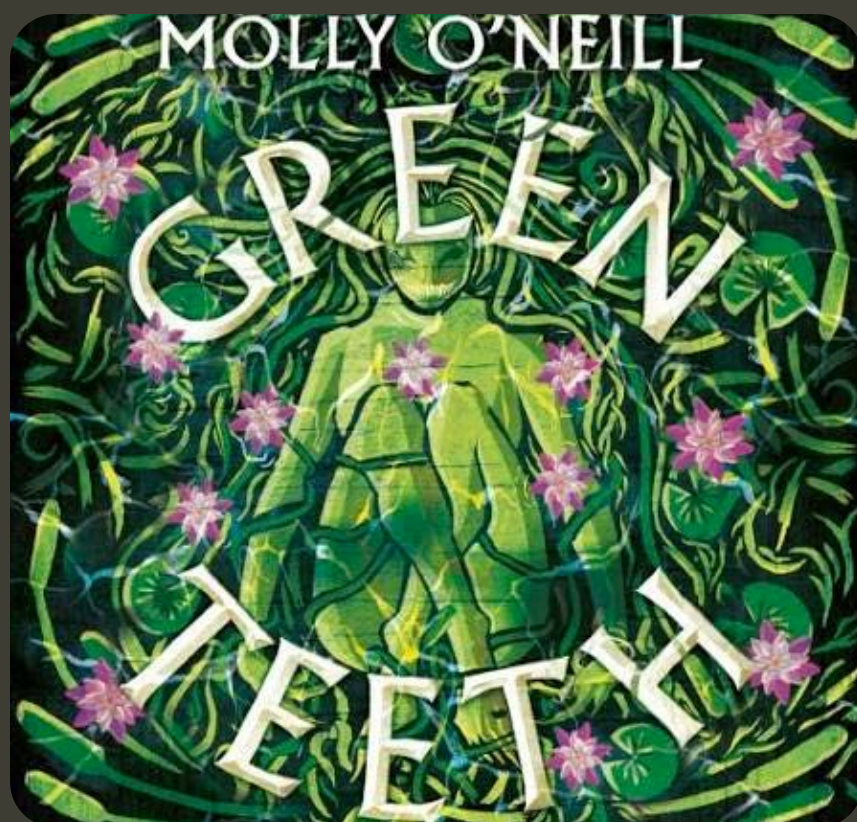
A fantasy romance set in a world shaped by mysterious divine Omens, where a fortune-teller who repeatedly drowns to receive visions becomes entangled in a dangerous mystery. Excellent for romantasy readers.



The Enchanted
Greenhouse –
Sarah Beth Durst
(2025)

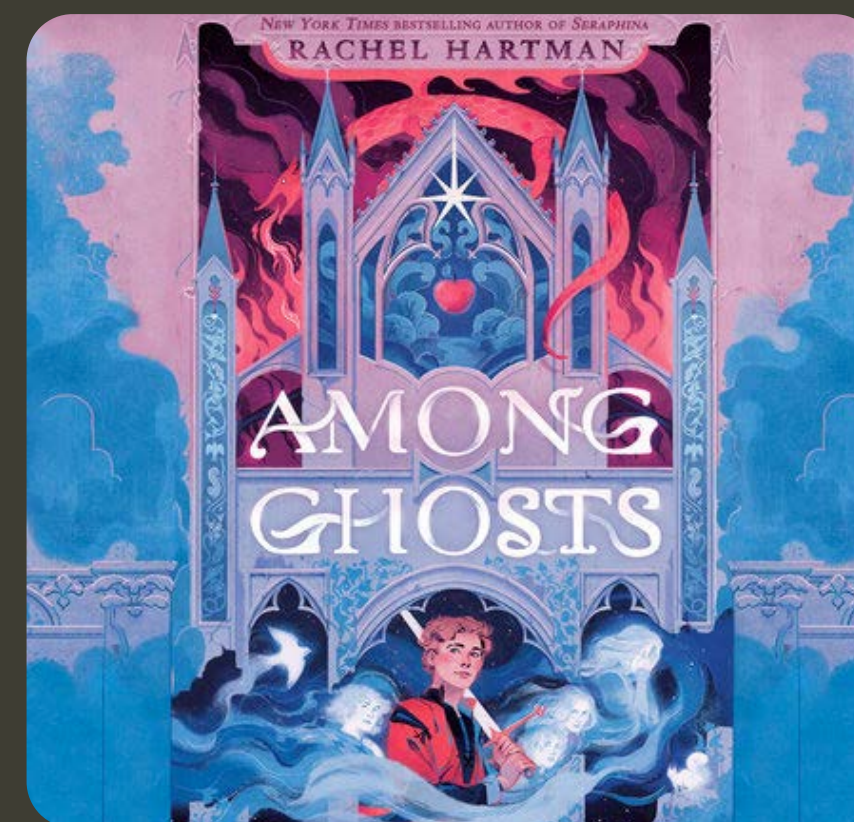
A gentle, magical fantasy centered on an enchanted greenhouse and the people drawn into its orbit. A good pick for readers looking for cozy fantasy, found family, and low-stakes magic.

FANTASY: READERS' ADVISORY



Greenteeth –
Molly O'Neill
(2025)

Jenny Greenteeth is a creature who lives in a lake and has never had much reason to care about humans—until a witch is thrown into her waters and Jenny decides to save her rather than eat her. Great for readers who enjoy folklore, humor, and cozy fantasy with a slightly darker edge.



Among Ghosts –
Rachel Hartman
(2025)

Thirteen-year-old Charl and his mother have built a safe life in the remote town of St. Muckle's, but their past catches up with them when a plague, murder, and dragon attack throw the town into chaos. Forced to flee to a haunted abbey, Charl encounters a mysterious nun, a group of ghosts, and the spirit of a murderous bishop as he fights to survive and reunite with his mother.

FANTASY: READERS' ADVISORY

Core Question: What if something frightening, disturbing, or impossible invaded our world?

Common Elements:

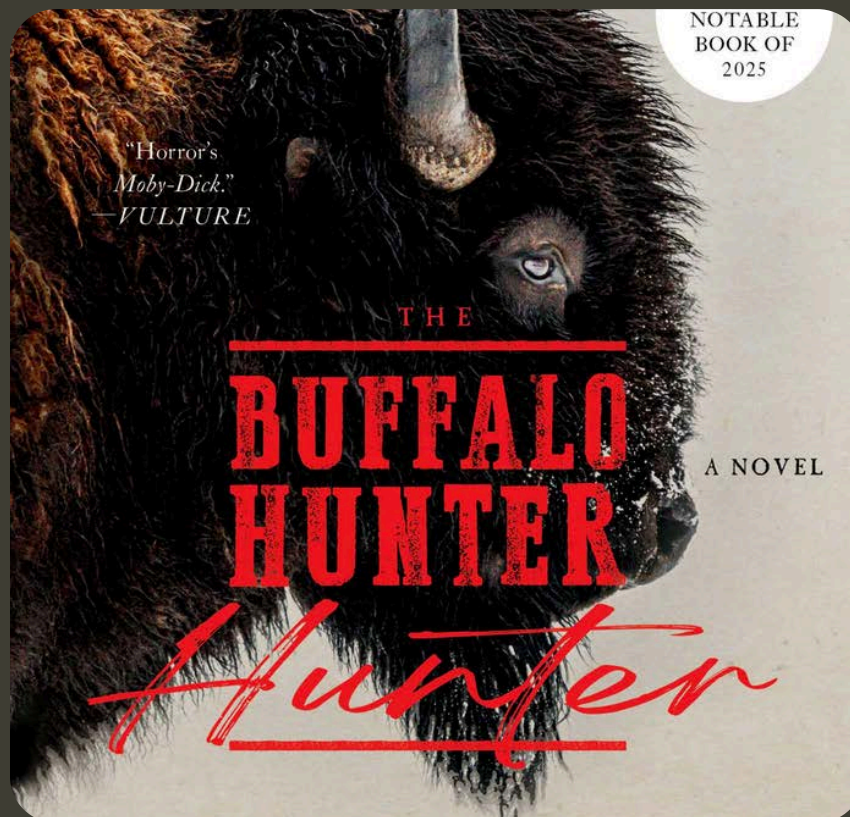
- Monsters
- Ghosts
- Demons
- Psychological terror
- Supernatural threats
- Folk horror
- Cosmic/eldritch horror

Appeal factors:

- Fear
- Suspense
- Adrenaline
- Catharsis
- Exploring taboo subjects
- Confronting fears safely

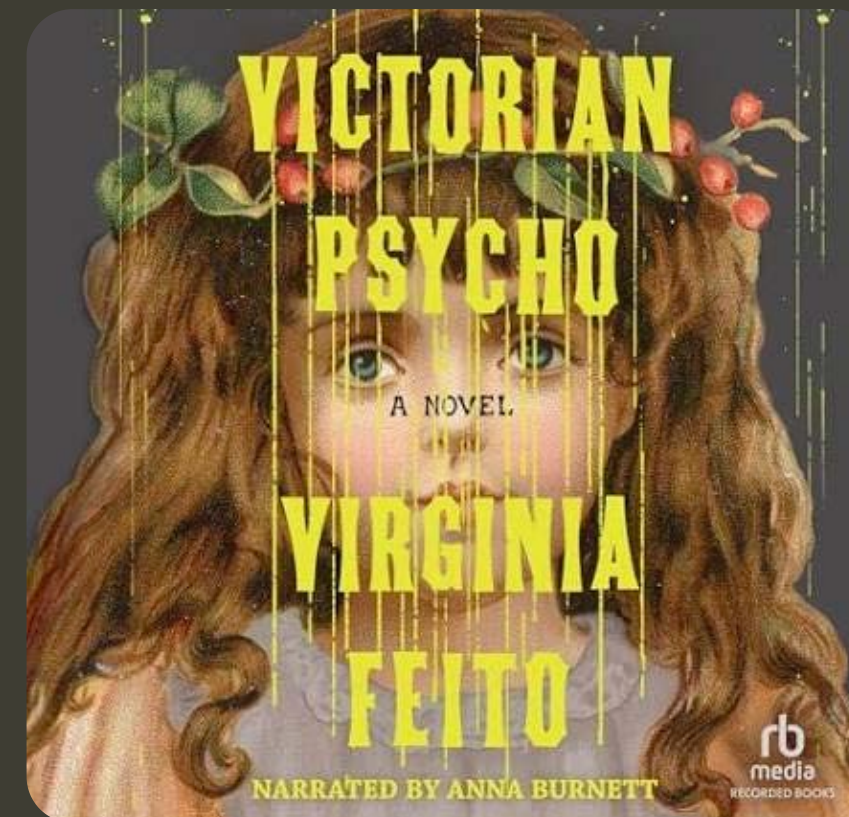
HORROR





The Buffalo
Hunter Hunter –
Stephen Graham
Jones (2025)

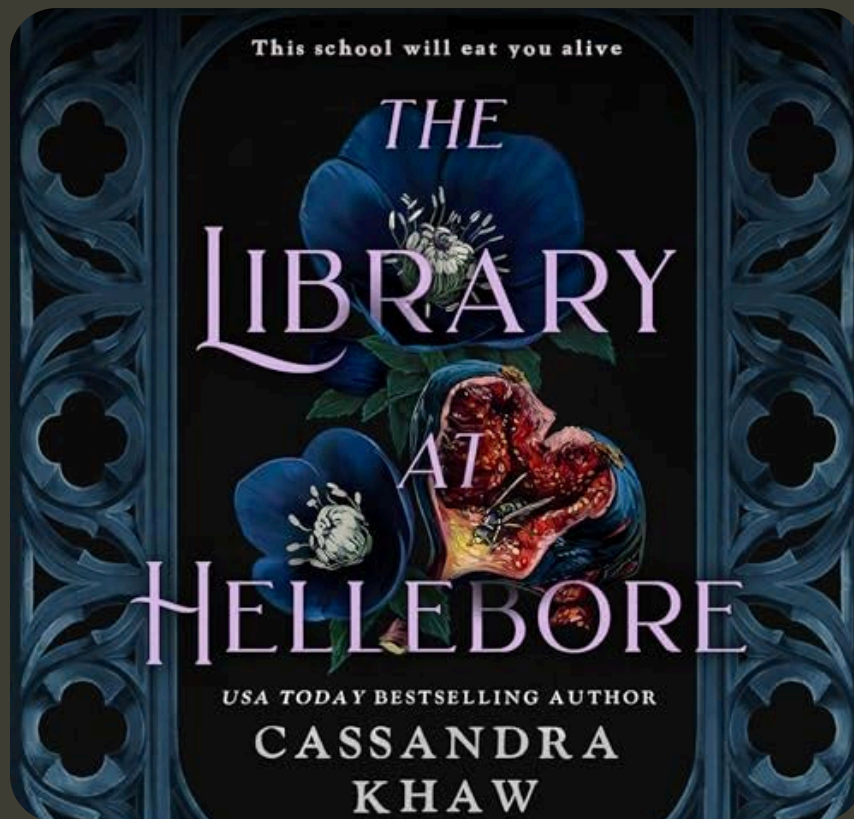
A historian discovers a diary containing the story of a Blackfeet vampire seeking revenge for atrocities committed against his people. The novel combines vampire horror with historical fiction and Indigenous history.



Victorian Psycho
– Virginia Feito
(2025)

A young woman begins work as a governess in a Victorian household, where the increasingly disturbing behavior of the people around her creates a darkly comic and unsettling psychological horror story.

HORROR: READERS' ADVISORY



The Library at
Hellebore –
Cassandra Khaw
(2025)

Alessa Li is forcibly enrolled at Hellebore Institute, a school for dangerously powerful supernatural beings. When the faculty at school suddenly turns on the students during graduation, Alessa and the survivors barricade themselves in the library and must work together to survive the nightmarish siege.



The House of
Quiet – Kiersten
White (2025)

A young woman becomes entangled in a creepy, mysterious situation involving an unsettling house and secrets that refuse to stay buried. A good choice for teens who like atmospheric Gothic horror and supernatural mysteries.

HORROR: READERS' ADVISORY

Core Question: What if something in society went terribly wrong (dystopian) or society experienced a catastrophic collapse (post-apocalyptic)?

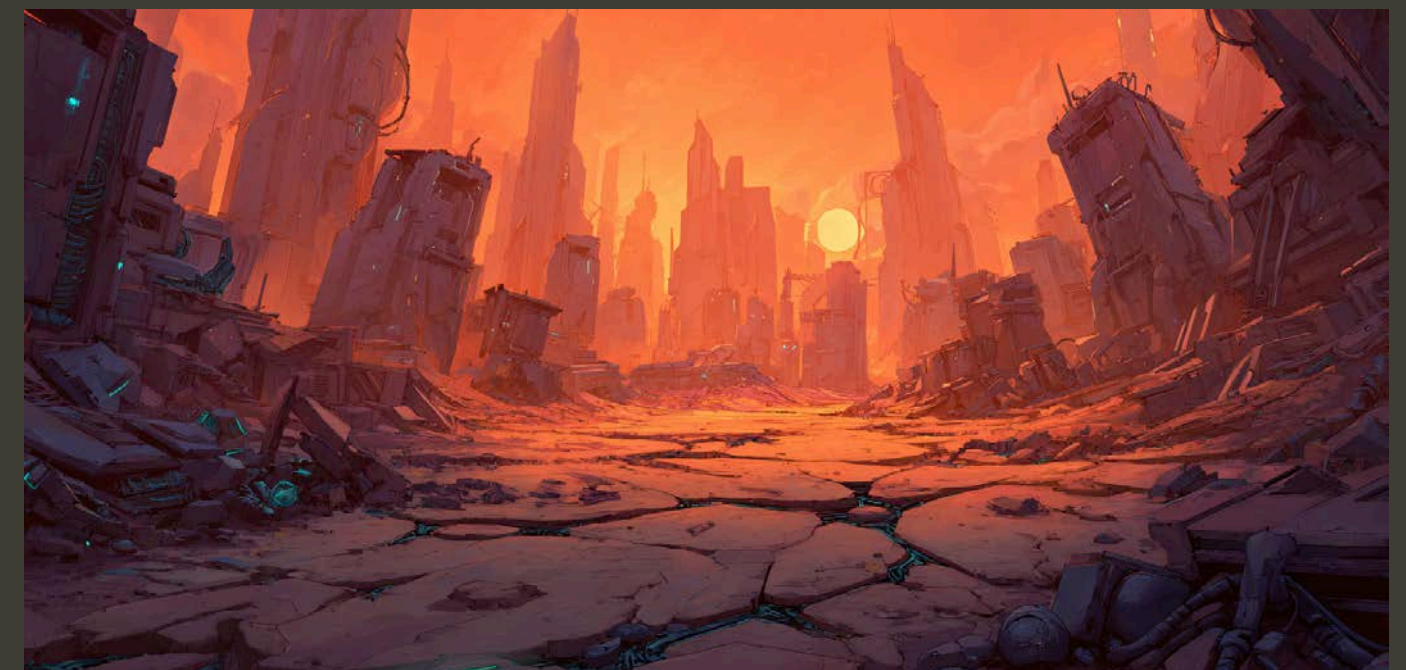
Common Elements:

- Government control
- Environmental collapse
- Social inequality
- Surveillance
- Disease
- War
- Resource scarcity
- Survival

Appeal factors:

- Survival
- Social commentary
- Rebellion
- Hope
- “Could this really happen?”

DYSTOPIAN & POST- APOCALYPTIC FICTION





Exit Party – Emily
St. John Mandel
(2026)

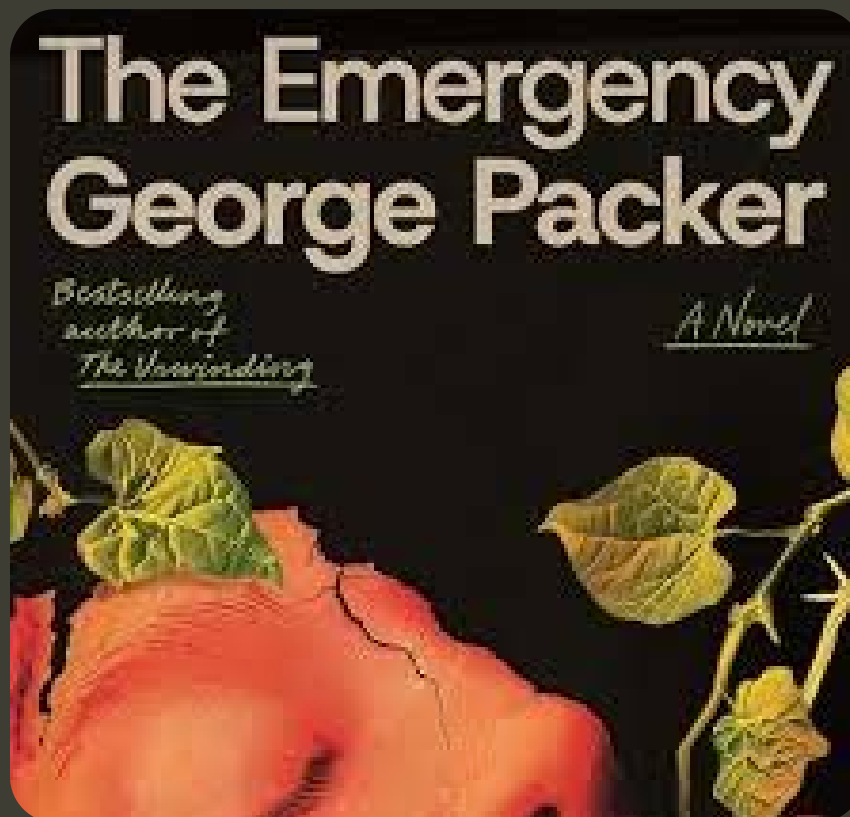
Set in 2031 after the collapse of the United States, this novel follows Ari Waker as she navigates a fractured America while strange doppelgängers and parallel realities begin appearing. Good for readers who like literary post-apocalyptic fiction, political dystopias, and Station Eleven-style explorations



All Better Now –
Neal Shusterman
(2025)

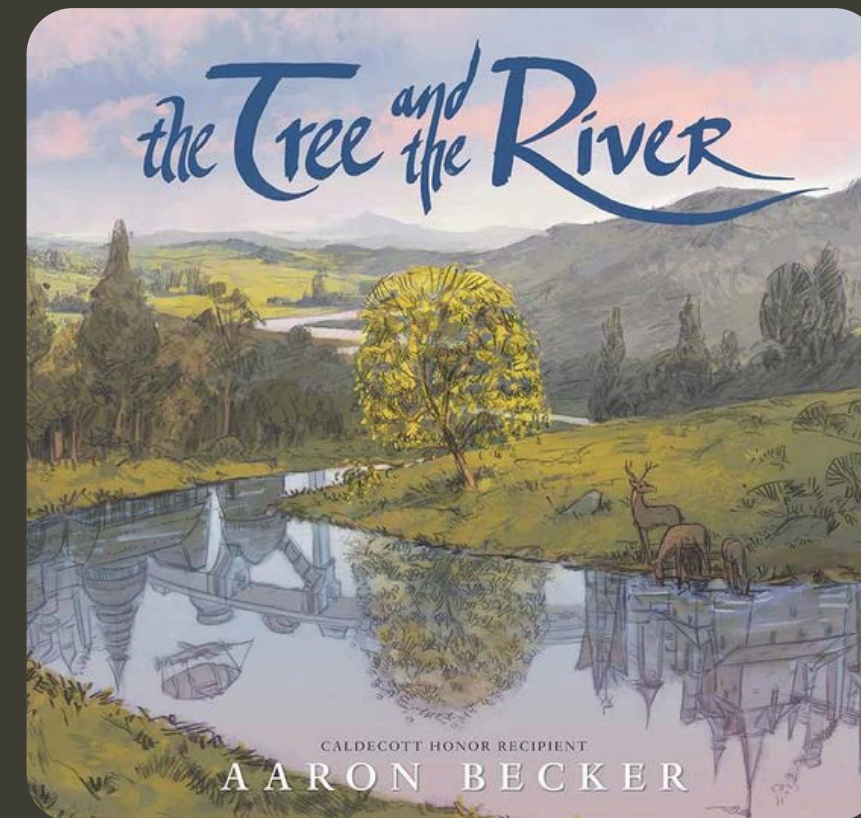
A mysterious illness spreads around the world, but instead of killing people, it makes those infected unusually happy and cooperative. The novel explores what happens when humanity suddenly loses some of the characteristics—ambition, anger, competition—that have shaped civilization.

DYSTOPIAN & POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION: READERS' ADVISORY



The Emergency – George Packer (2025)

The Emergency is George Packer’s account of America’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, examining how the crisis exposed weaknesses and inequalities in the country’s political and social systems. It will appeal to readers who prefer their dystopian fiction grounded in recognizable problems rather than distant futuristic worlds.



The Tree and the River - Aaron Becker

This wordless picture book follows a civilization that grows from a small rural settlement into a sprawling industrial city, ultimately devastated by environmental destruction and flooding. As nature begins to recover, a new generation offers a hopeful glimpse of renewal and a chance to rebuild.

DYSTOPIAN & POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION: READERS' ADVISORY

Core Question: What if history had happened differently?

Common Elements:

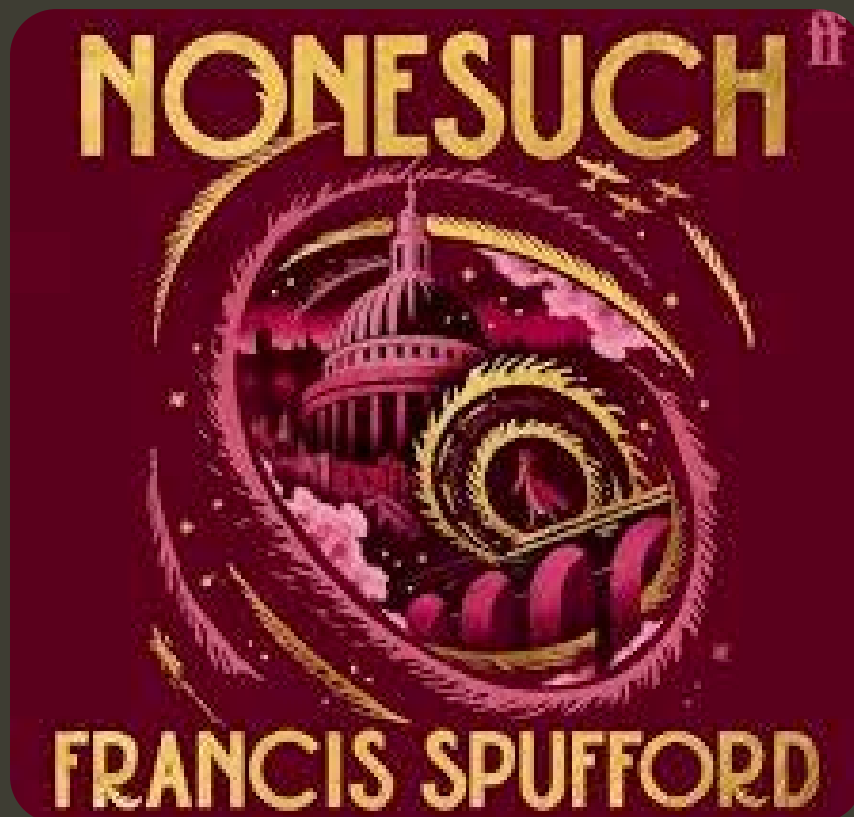
- A different side wins a war
- A historical figure makes a different decision
- An empire survives
- A technology appears earlier
- A historical event never happens

Appeal factors:

- History
- What-if scenarios
- Political intrigue
- Familiar-but-different worlds
- Intellectual curiosity

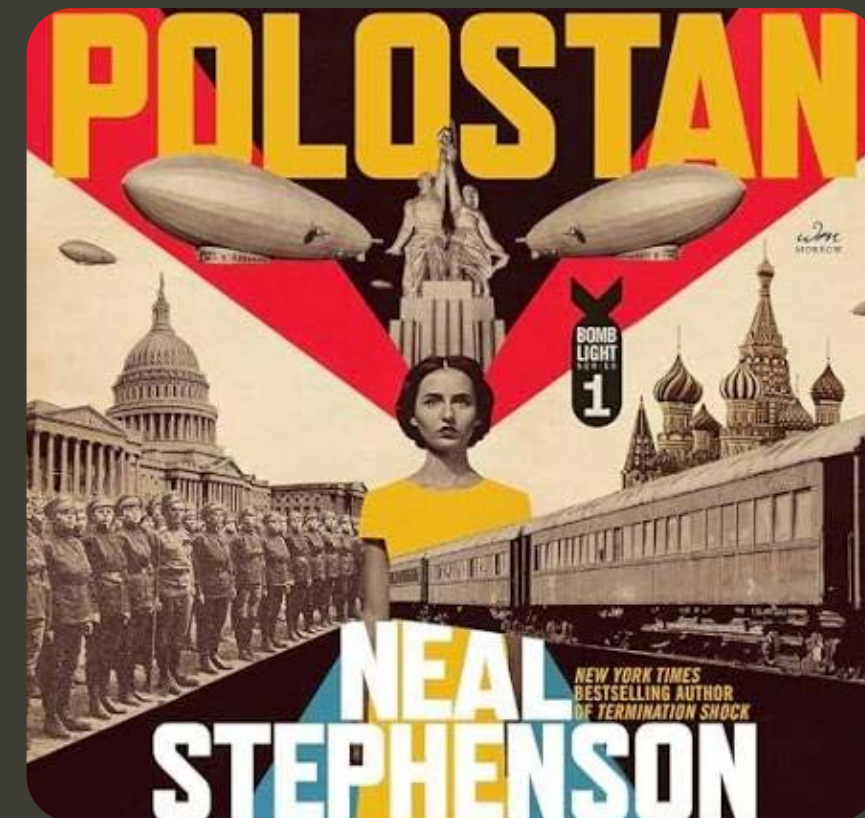
ALTERNATIVE HISTORY





Nonesuch –
Francis Spufford
(2026)

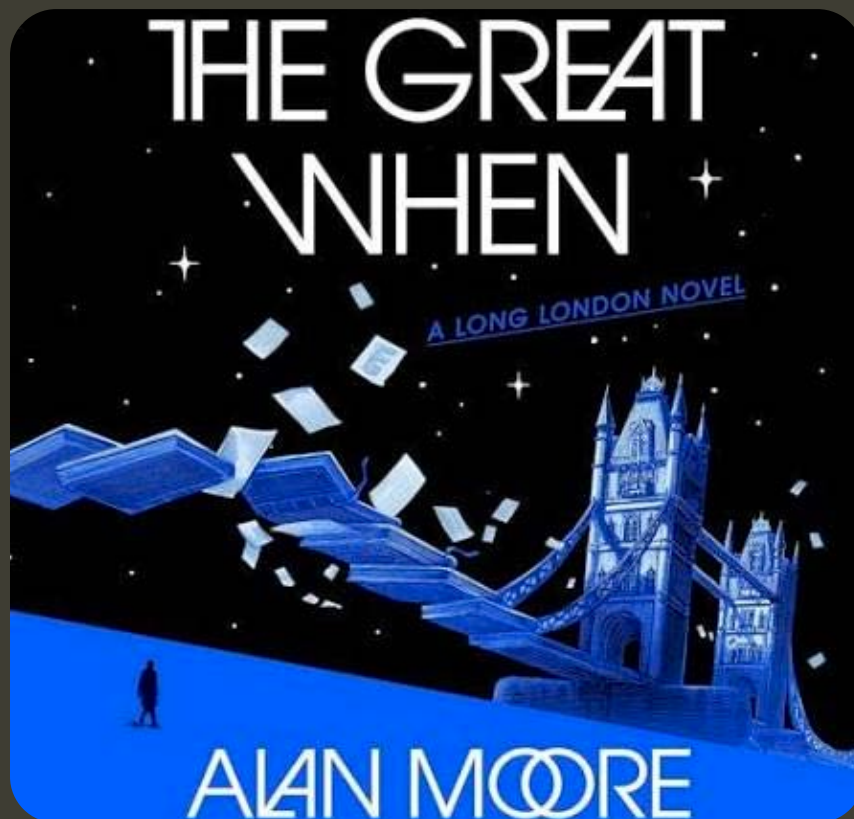
During the London Blitz, Iris Hawkins discovers that magic, time travel, and an alternate reality are real—and that someone intends to use them to change the course of World War II. A terrific recommendation for readers who enjoy historical fiction with fantasy, time travel, and alternate-history elements.



Polostan – Neal
Stephenson
(2024)

Set during the turbulent early twentieth century, the novel follows Dawn Rae Bjornberg from the American West to revolutionary Russia and eventually into espionage. Particularly good for readers who enjoy political intrigue, international espionage, and historical fiction.

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY: READERS' ADVISORY



The Great When – Alan Moore (2024)

In postwar London, an 18-year-old bookseller, Dennise, discovers a book that shouldn't exist and is pulled into a magical version of London existing beyond ordinary time and space. This is a good choice for readers who like alternate history mixed with occult fantasy and mystery.



Westfallen: Into the Fire - Ann Brashares

Three friends remain trapped in an alternate present-day America where the Axis won World War II and must find a way to restore history to its original course. As they investigate the timeline's origins, they attract the attention of powerful forces determined to keep this dark version of history intact.

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY: READERS' ADVISORY

Core Question: What if history had happened differently?

Common Elements:

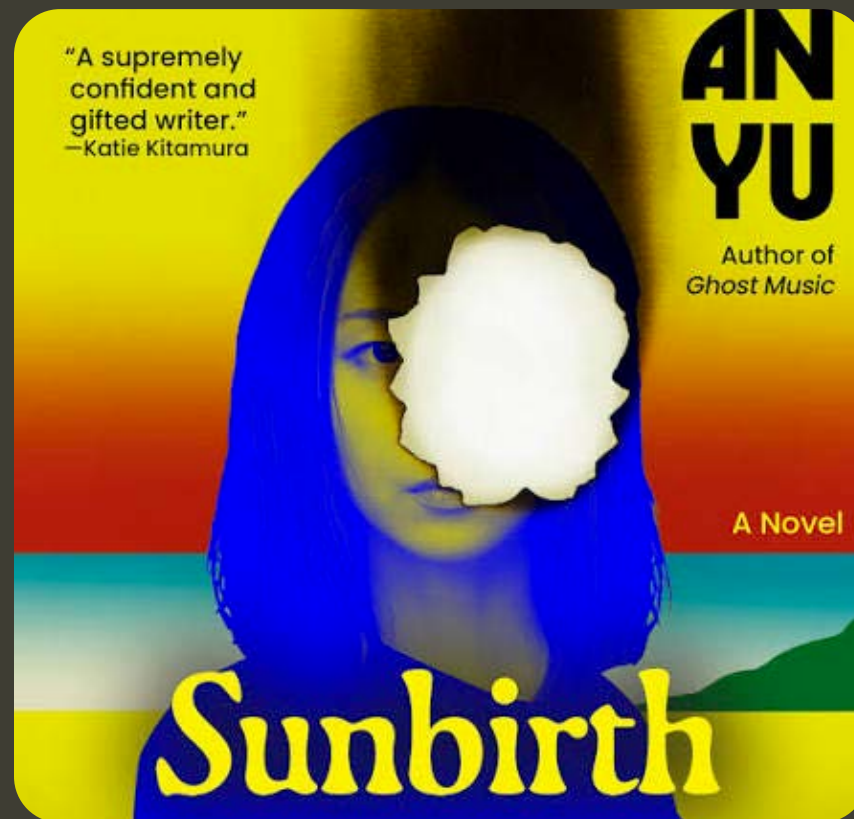
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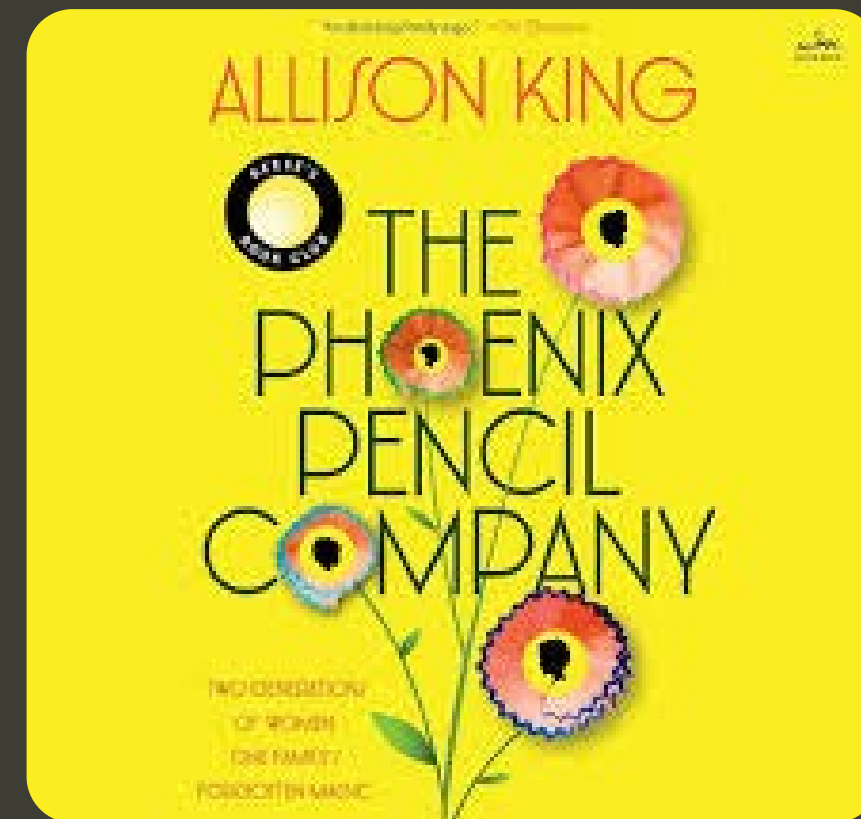
MAGICAL REALISM





Sunbirth – An Yu (2025)

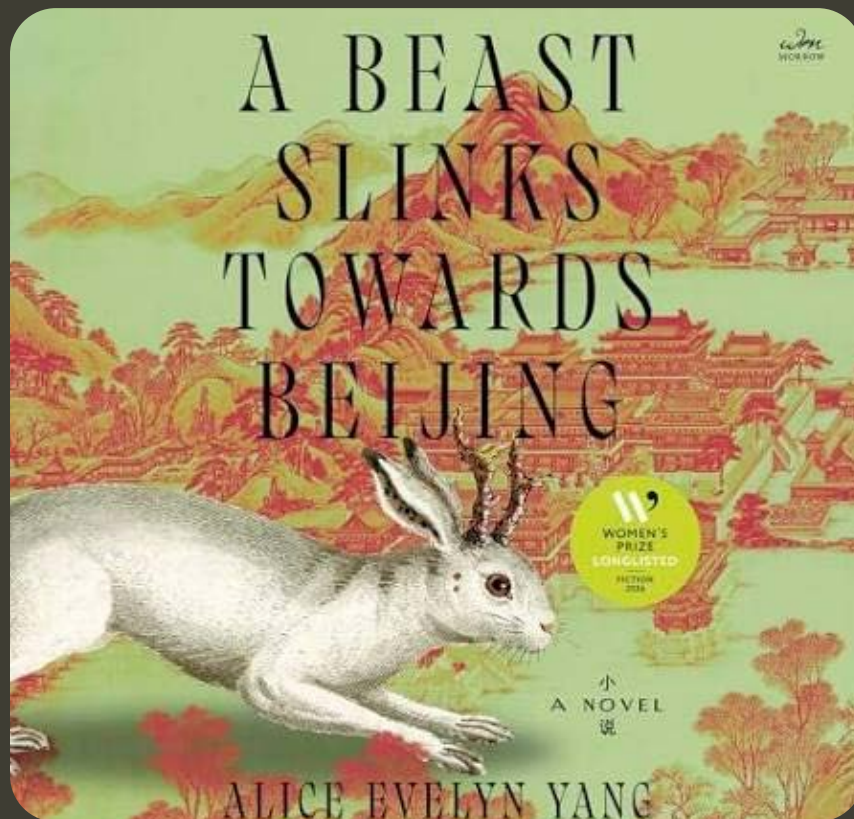
This is a surreal novel set in Five Poems Lake, where the sun has been fading, causing freezing temperatures and potential extinction. As villagers transform into “Beacons” with miniature suns for heads, two sisters investigate while seeking answers about their father's death from twelve years prior.



The Phoenix Pencil Company – Allison King (2025)

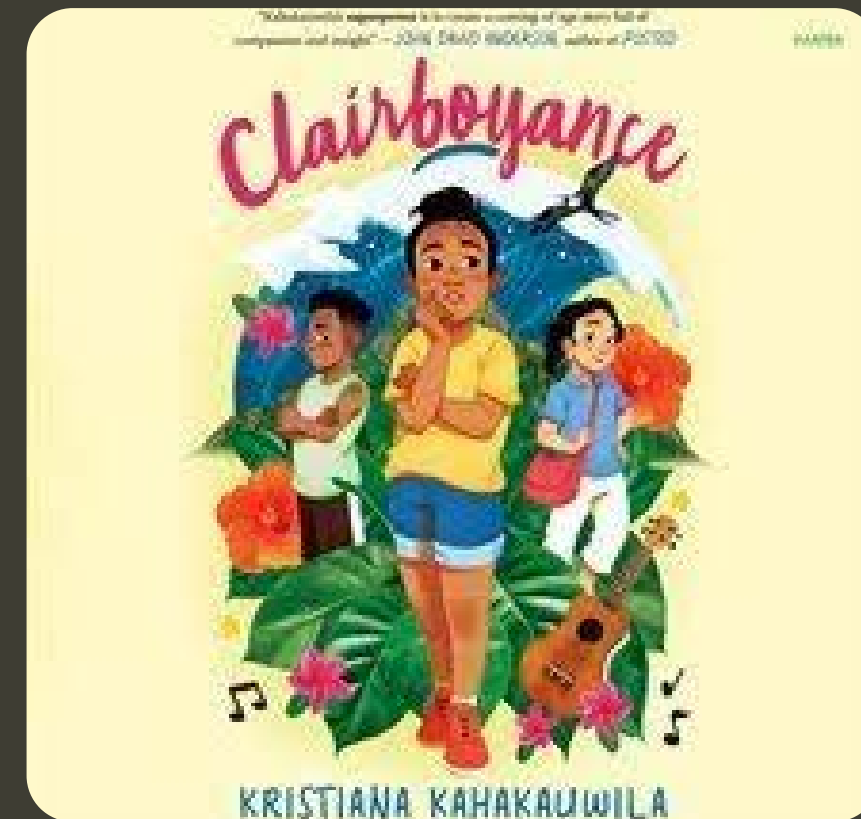
This historical novel incorporates magical elements as its characters confront family history, loss, and the mysterious legacy of a pencil company. Good for readers who want historical fiction with just a touch of the impossible, rather than a fully fantastical world.

MAGICAL REALISM: READERS' ADVISORY



A Beast Slinks Toward Beijing – Alice Evelyn Yang (2026)

This multigenerational magical-realist family saga centers on Qianze, whose estranged father returns with a mysterious prophecy and a violent past. Spanning the Japanese occupation of China, the Cultural Revolution, and the present, the novel incorporates folklore and supernatural elements to examine colonialism, generational trauma, and the haunting effects of history.



Clairboyance – Kristiana Kahakauwila

When she attains the ability to hear what boys are thinking, Clara hopes her newfound powers will reverse her ex-best friend's betrayal but ends up making a mess of everything and must fix her mistakes as she tries to figure out old friendships and new ones.

MAGICAL REALISM: READERS' ADVISORY

SELLING SPECULATIVE FICTION (R.A)

A PATRON DOESN'T NECESSARILY HAVE TO SAY: "I WANT SCIENCE FICTION."

"I want something like The Hunger Games, but for adults."

Look for:

- Dystopian
- Survival
- Rebellion
- High stakes
- Political oppression

"I want a romance, but I want something more than kissing."

Look for:

- Romantasy
- Paranormal romance
- Time travel
- Magical realism
- Science fiction romance

"I don't like scary horror. I just want something creepy."

Look for:

- Gothic
- Dark fantasy
- Supernatural mystery
- Folk horror
- Atmospheric horror

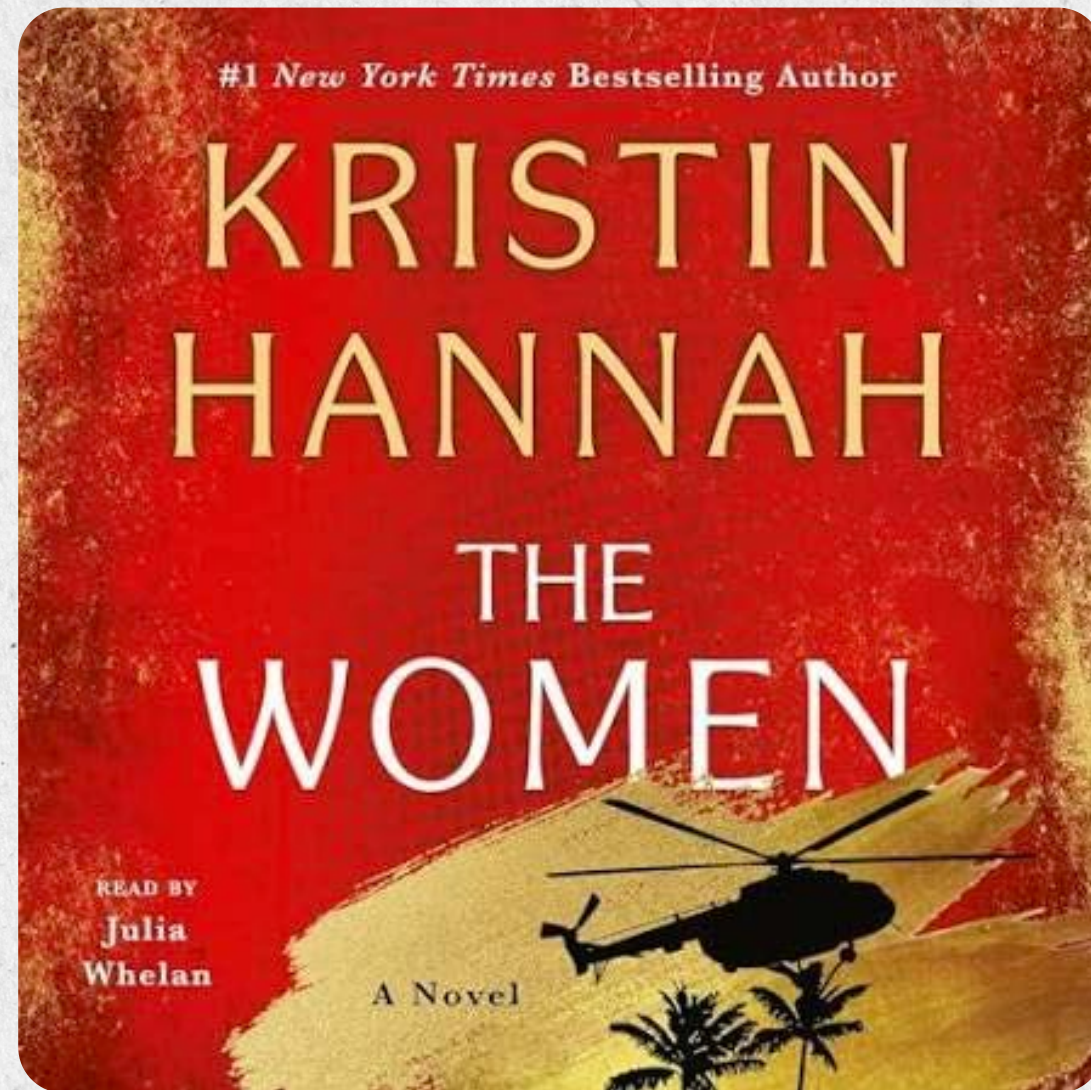
Spec. Fiction Readers' Advisory

LIKE
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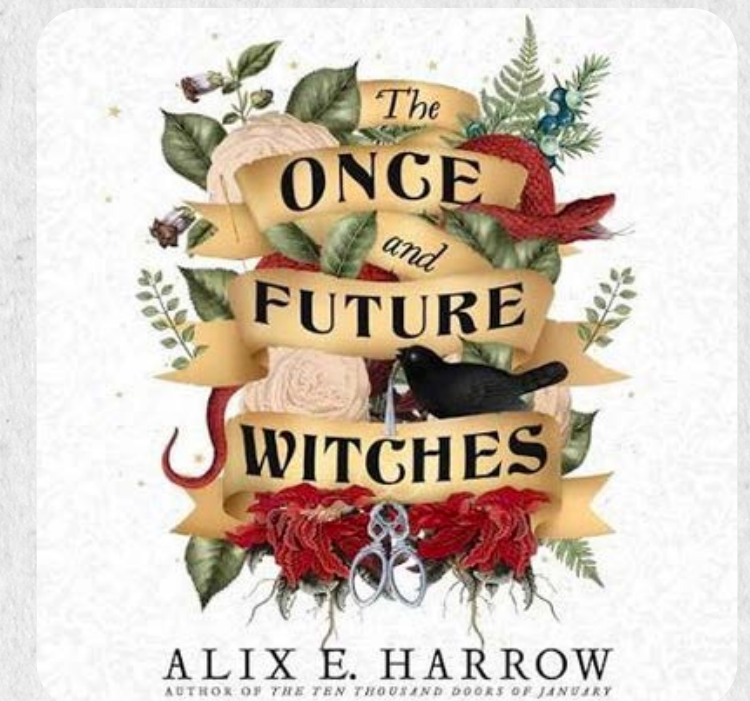
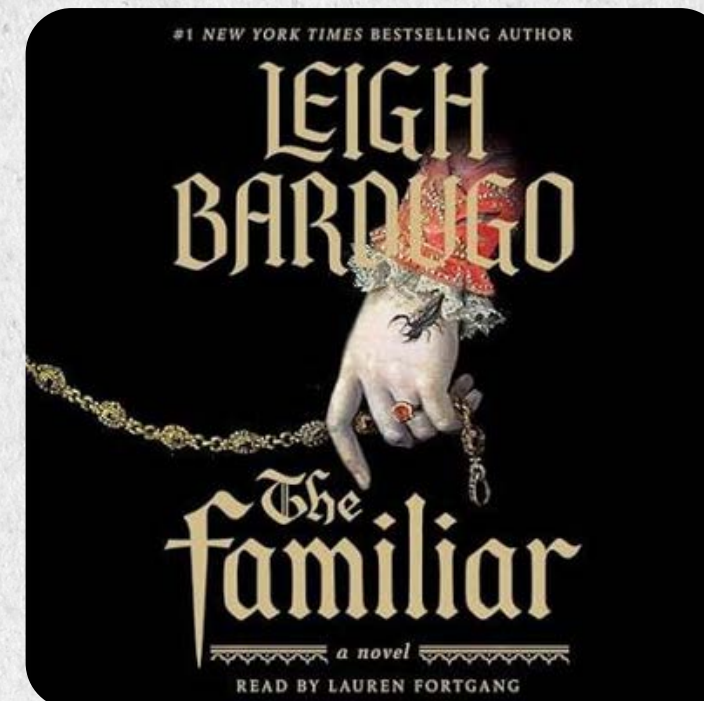
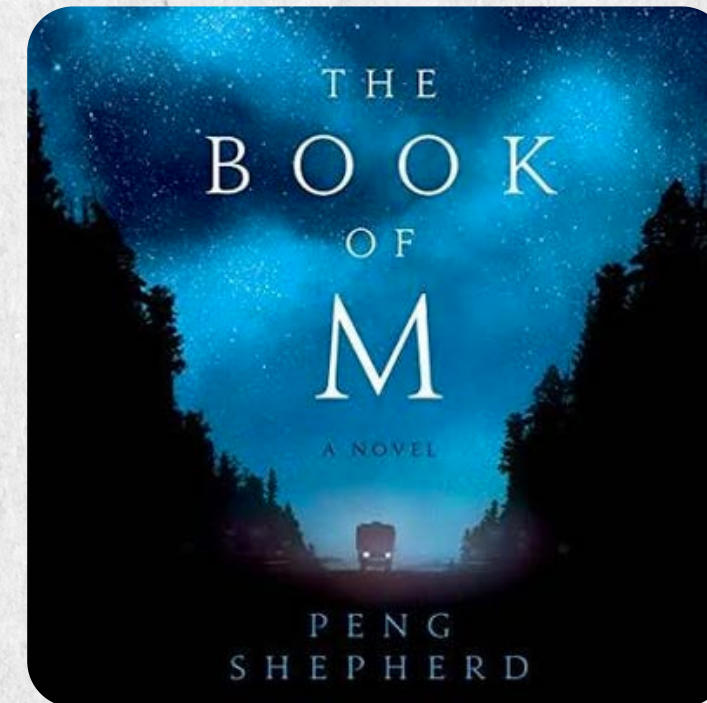


Historical Fiction

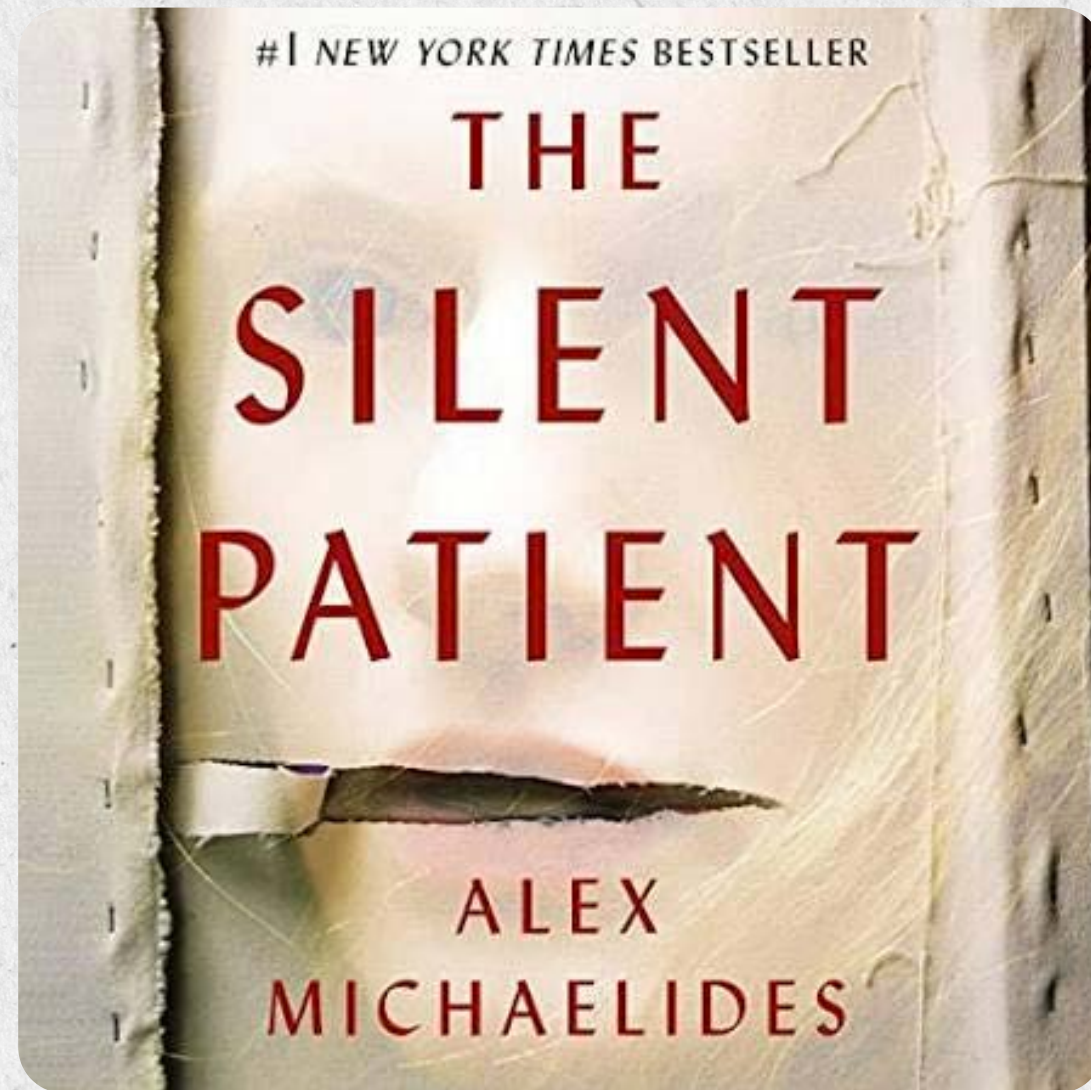


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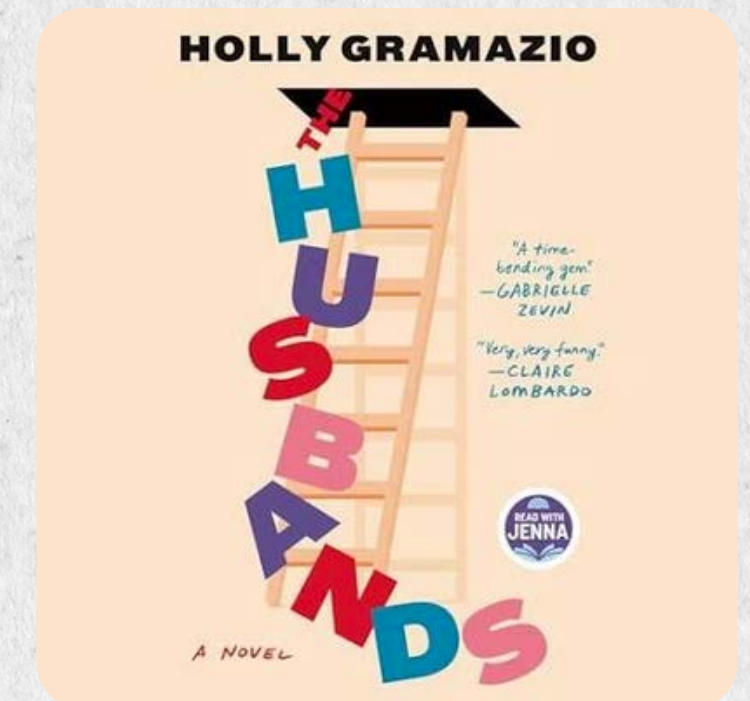
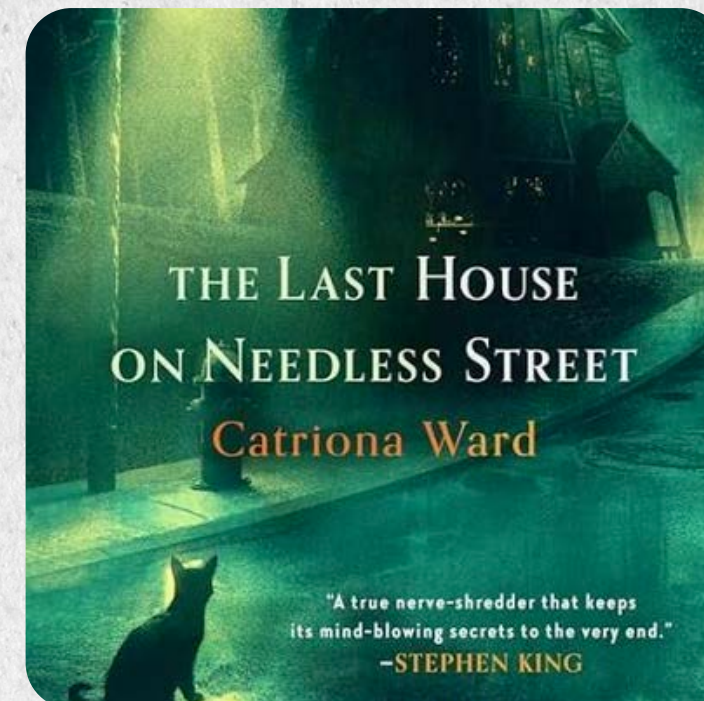
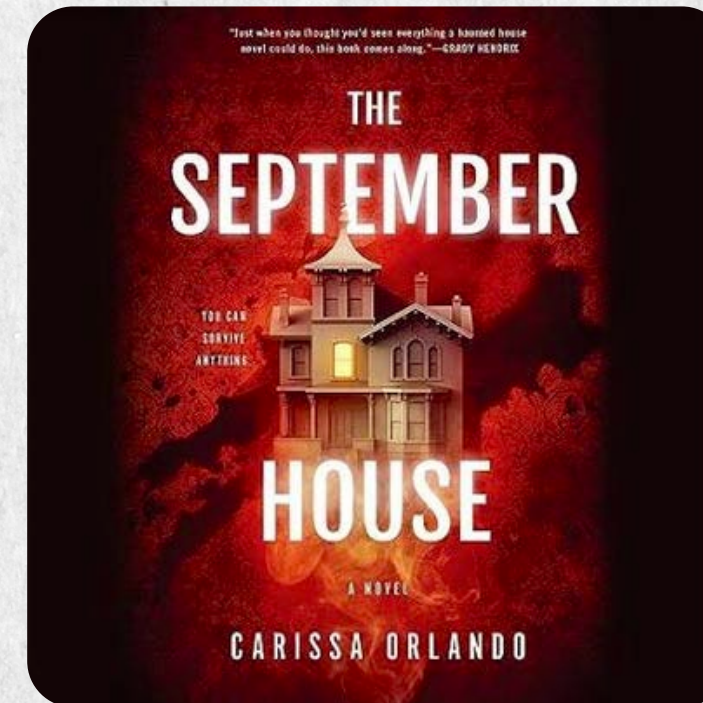


Psychological Thrillers

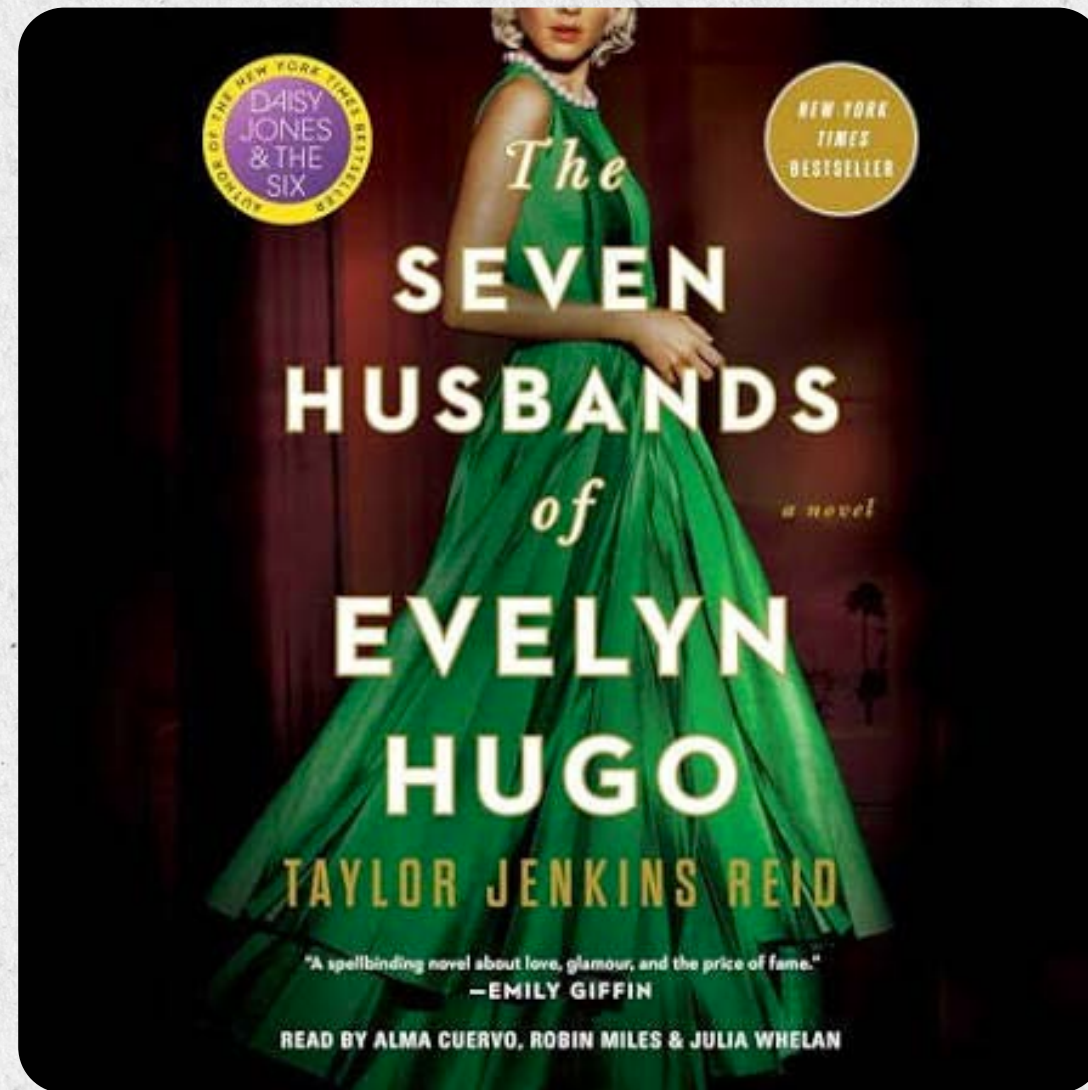


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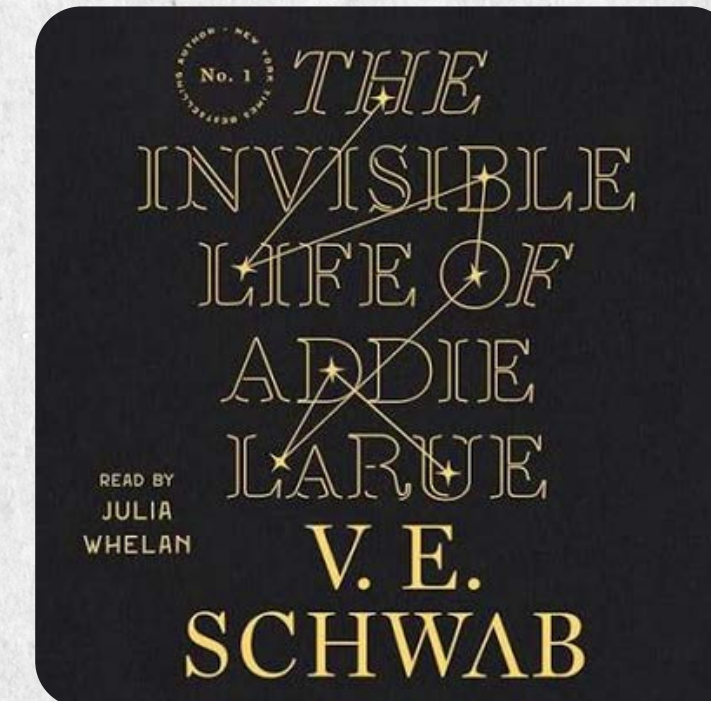
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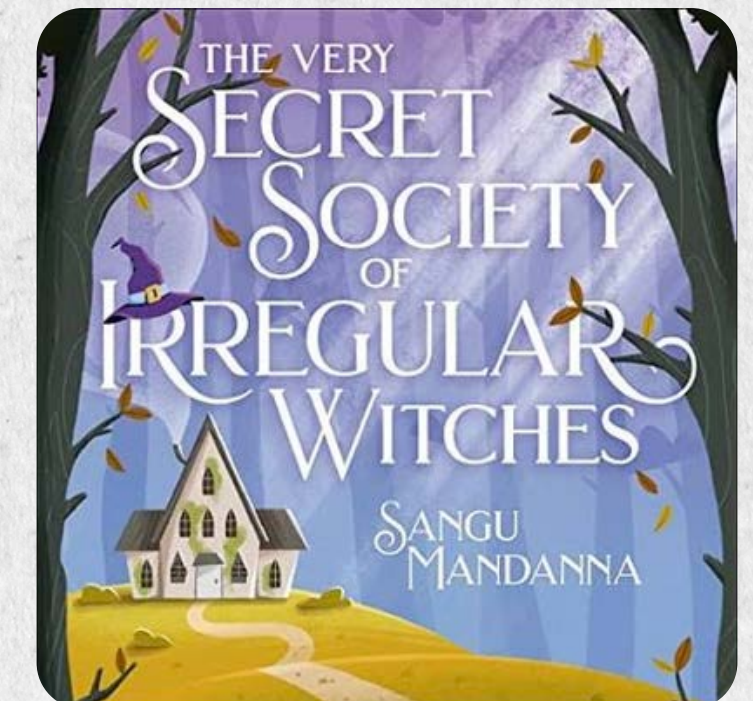
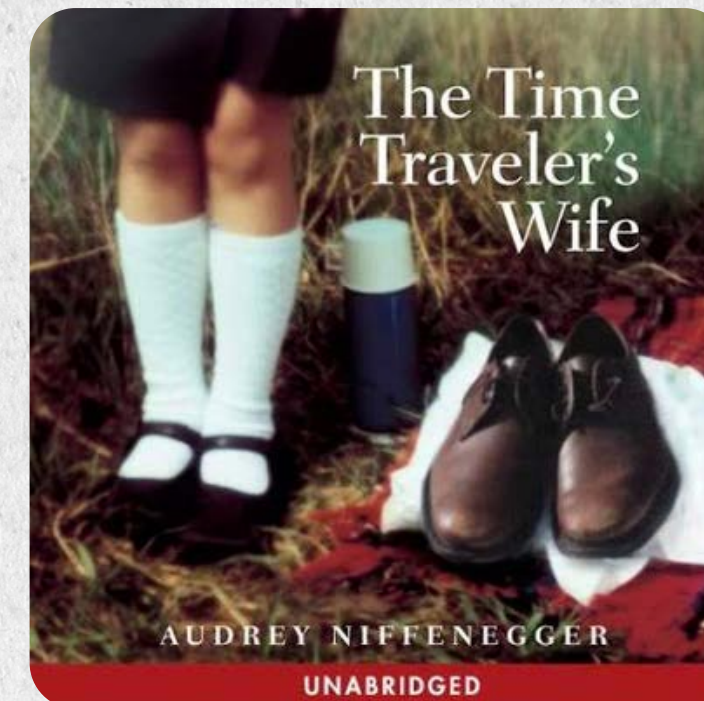
Romantic Fiction



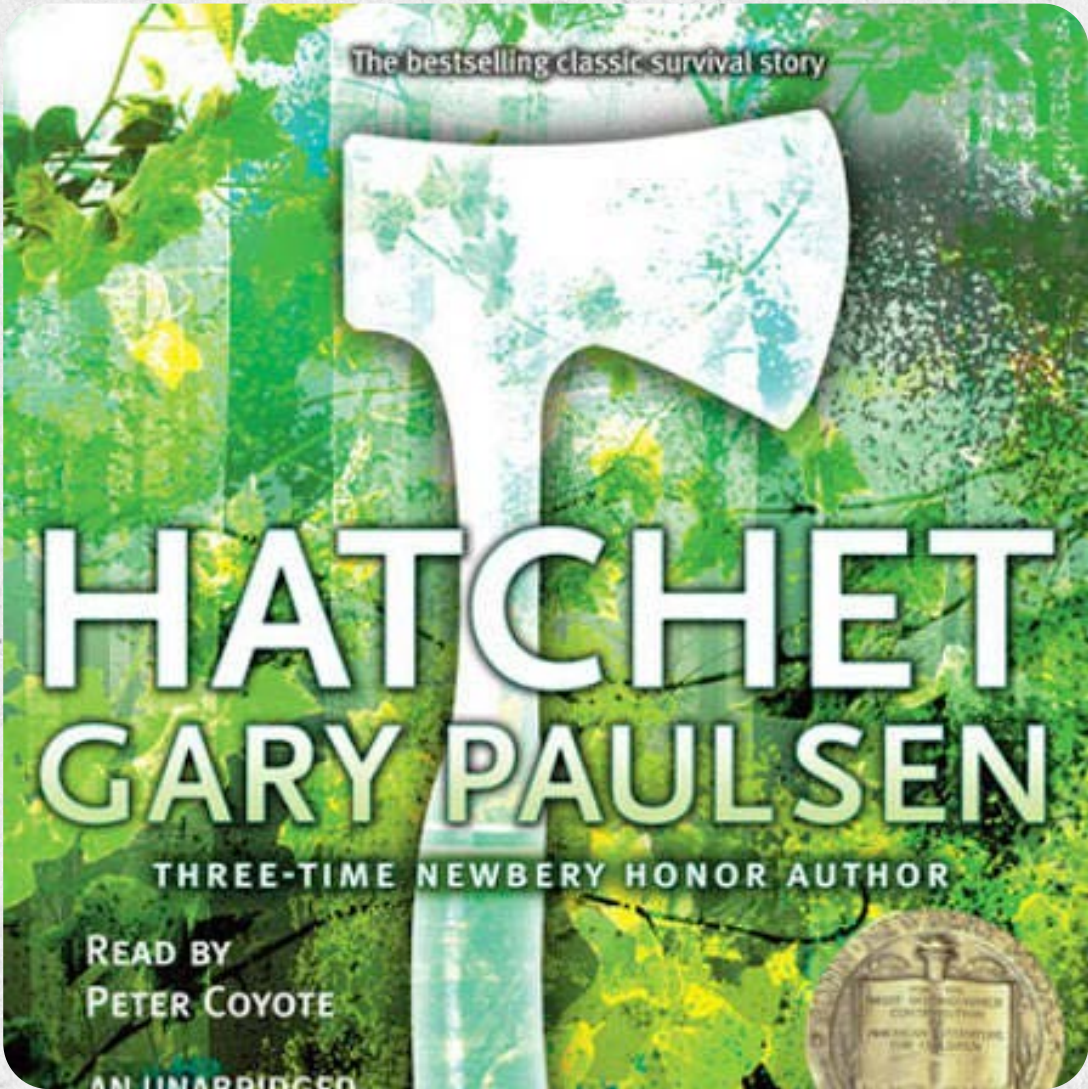
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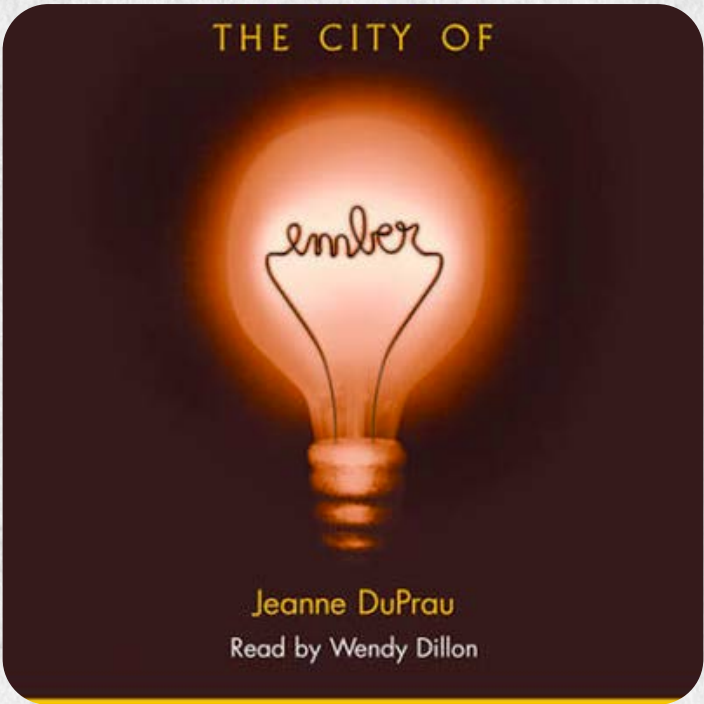
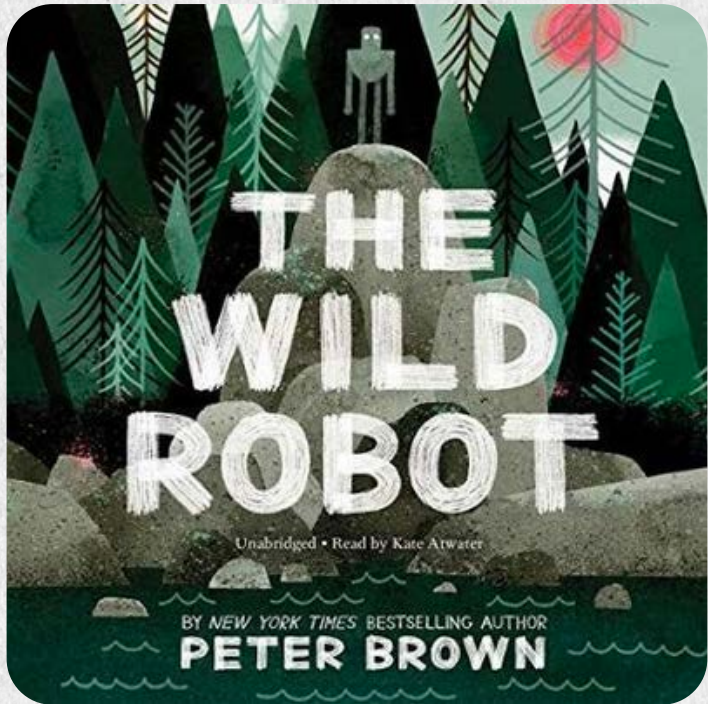
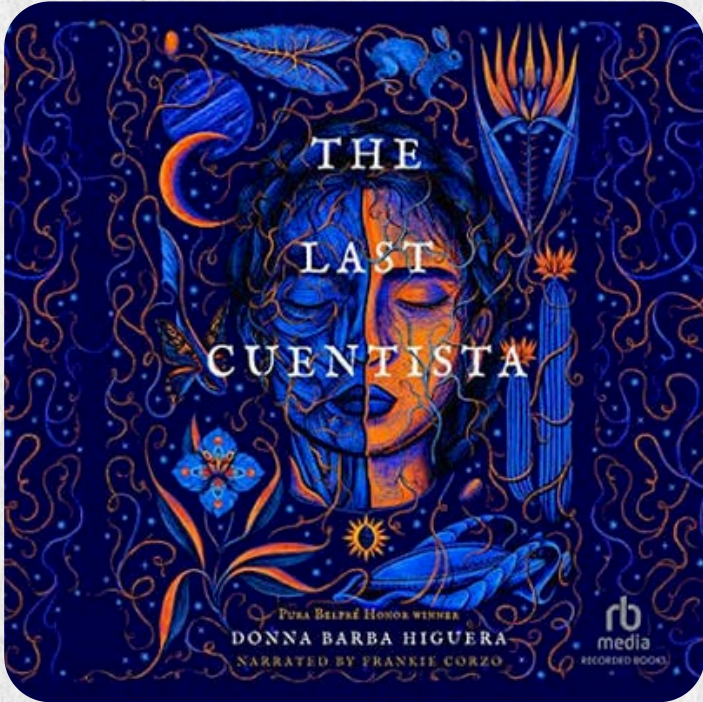


Youth: Adventure & Survival Stories

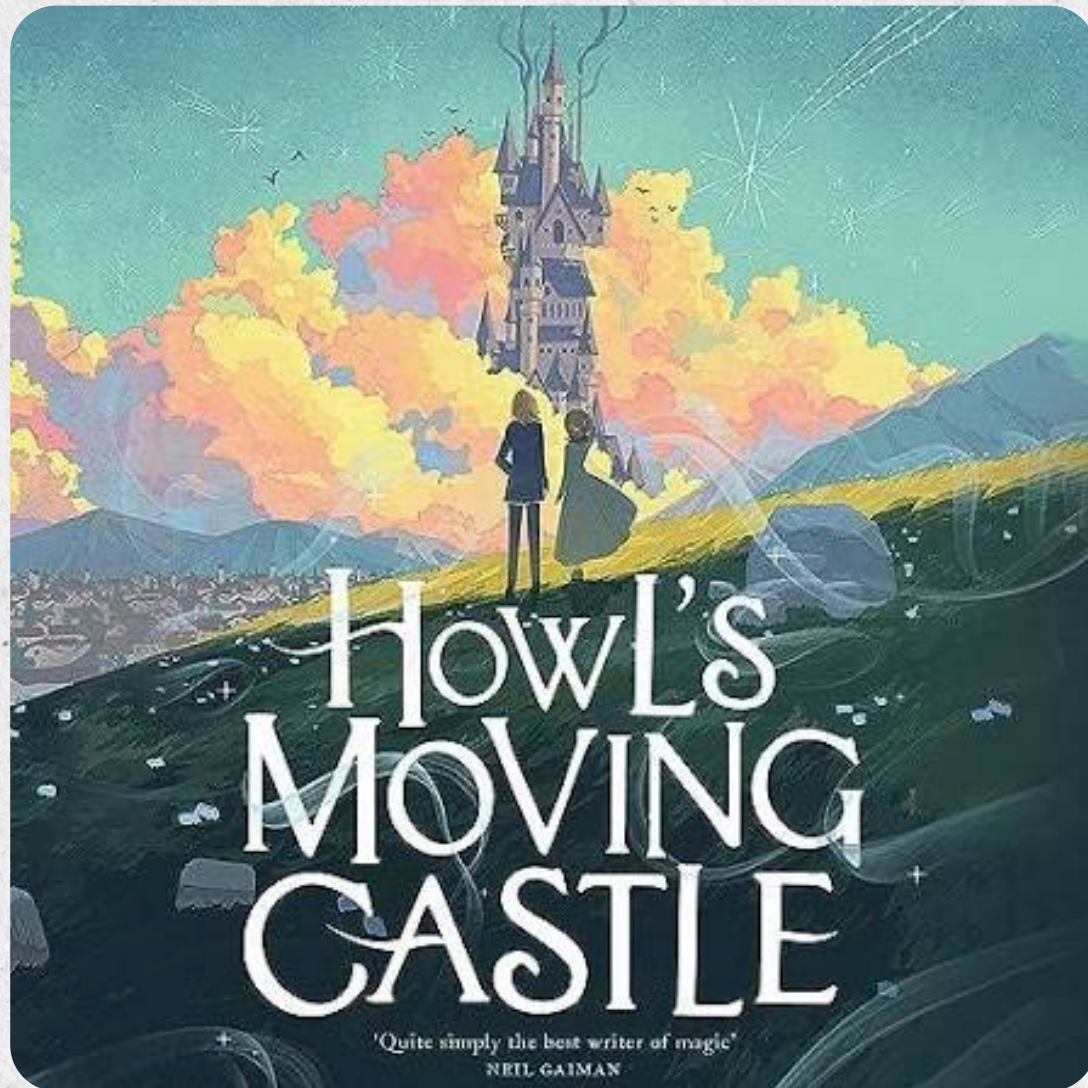


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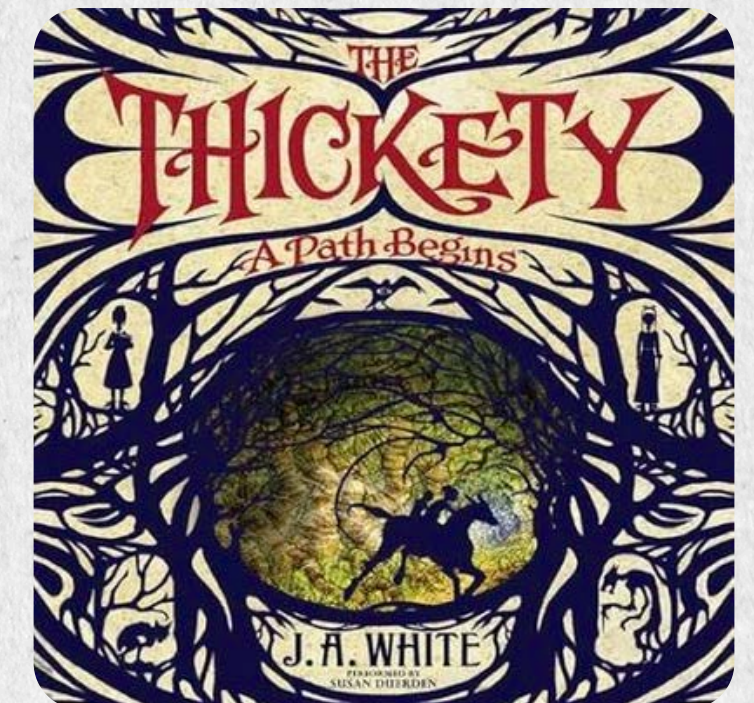
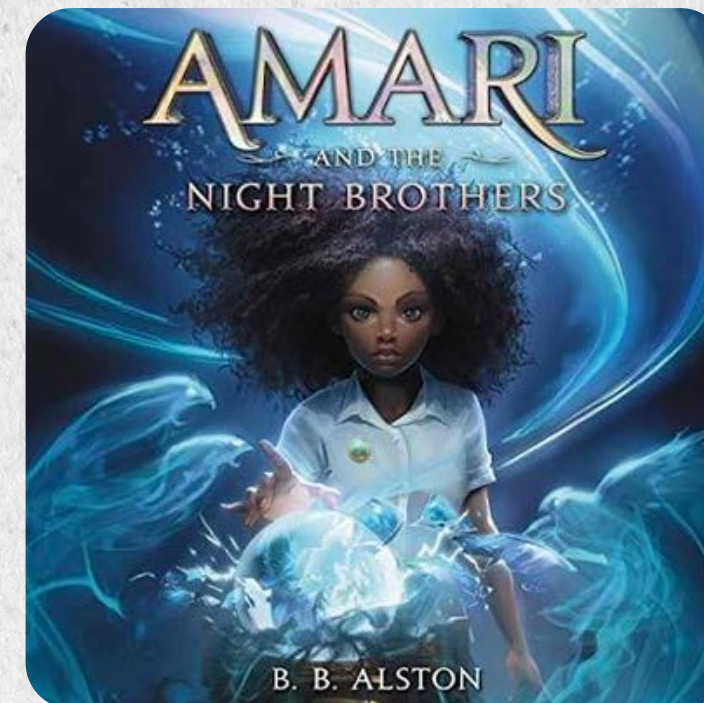
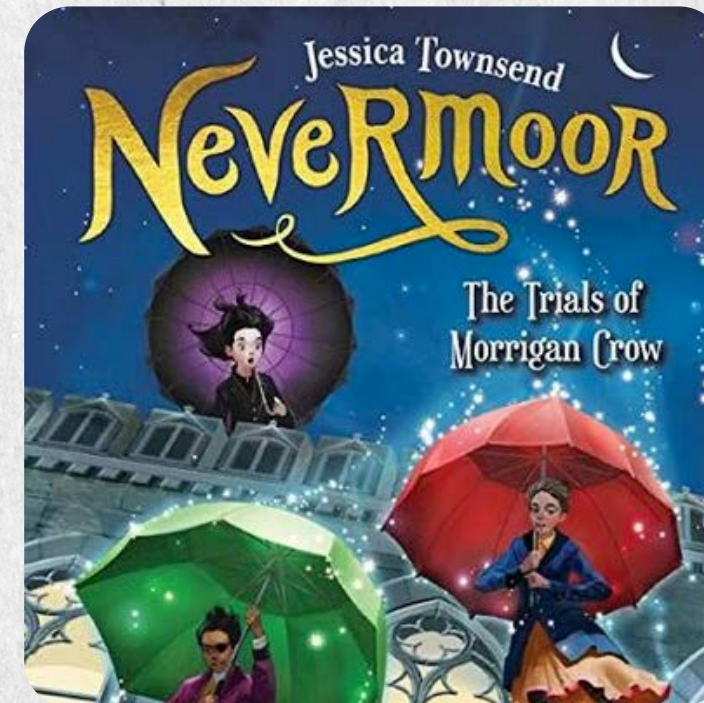


Youth: Mysteries & Secret Worlds



LIKE THIS?

TRY THAT!



TO WRAP UP

THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER:

1. Speculative fiction is an umbrella.

Don't think of it as a single genre. Remember that speculative fiction crosses all genres because it answers the questions “what if?”

2. Recommend based on appeal, not just genre.

3. Speculative fiction is constantly evolving.

New subgenres and hybrids continue to emerge, and recent best seller lists demonstrate just how broad the category has become.

**THE
END**