Books Set in the 1800s

Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan

Set in the late nineteenth century and told from young Anna's point of view, Sarah, Plain and Tall tells the story of how Sarah Elisabeth Wheaton comes from Maine to the prairie to answer Papa's advertisement for a wife and mother. Before Sarah arrives, Anna and her younger brother Caleb wait and wonder. Will Sarah be nice? Will she sing? Will she stay?

Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry

The Pulitzer Prize-winning American classic of the American West that follows two aging Texas Rangers embarking on one last adventure. An epic of the frontier, Lonesome Dove is the grandest novel ever written about the last defiant wilderness of America. Journey to the dusty little Texas town of Lonesome Dove and meet an unforgettable assortment of heroes and outlaws, whores and ladies, Indians and settlers. Richly authentic, beautifully written, always dramatic, Lonesome Dove is a book to make us laugh, weep, dream, and remember.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

Lily is haunted by memories—of who she once was, and of a person, long gone, who defined her existence. She has nothing but time now, as she recounts the tale of Snow Flower, and asks the gods for forgiveness. In nineteenth-century China, when wives and daughters were foot-bound and lived in almost total seclusion, the women in one remote Hunan county developed their own secret code for communication: nu shu (“women’s writing”). Some girls were paired with laotongs, “old sames,” in emotional matches that lasted throughout their lives. Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is a brilliantly realistic journey back to an era of Chinese history that is as deeply moving as it is sorrowful. With the period detail and deep resonance of Memoirs of a Geisha, this lyrical and emotionally charged novel delves into one of the most mysterious of human relationships: female friendship.
Alias Grace by Margaret Atwood

It's 1843, and Grace Marks has been convicted for her involvement in the vicious murders of her employer and his housekeeper and mistress. Some believe Grace is innocent; others think her evil or insane. Now serving a life sentence, Grace claims to have no memory of the murders. An up-and-coming expert in the burgeoning field of mental illness is engaged by a group of reformers and spiritualists who seek a pardon for Grace. He listens to her story while bringing her closer and closer to the day she cannot remember. What will he find in attempting to unlock her memories? Captivating and disturbing, Alias Grace showcases bestselling, Booker Prize-winning author Margaret Atwood at the peak of her powers.

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. An outcast even among her fellow Africans, she is on the cusp of womanhood—where greater pain awaits. And so when Caesar, a slave who has recently arrived from Virginia, urges her to join him on the Underground Railroad, she escapes with him. In Whitehead's ingenious conception, the Underground Railroad is no mere metaphor: engineers and conductors operate a secret network of actual tracks and tunnels beneath the Southern soil. Cora embarks on a harrowing flight from one state to the next, encountering strange yet familiar iterations of her own world at each stop. As Whitehead brilliantly re-creates the terrors of the antebellum era, he weaves in the saga of our nation, from the brutal abduction of Africans to the unfulfilled promises of the present day.

The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America by Erik Larson

Two men, each handsome and unusually adept at his chosen work, embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized America’s rush toward the twentieth century. The architect was Daniel Hudson Burnham, the fair’s brilliant director of works and the builder of many of the country’s most important structures, including the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in Washington, D.C. The murderer was Henry H. Holmes, a young doctor who, in a malign parody of the White City, built his “World’s Fair Hotel” just west of the fairgrounds—a torture palace complete with dissection table, gas chamber, and 3,000-degree crematorium. The Devil in the White City draws the reader into the enchantment of the Guilded Age.

Stalking Jack the Ripper by Kerri Maniscalco

Seventeen-year-old Audrey Rose Wadsworth was born a lord's daughter, with a life of wealth and privilege stretched out before her. But between the social teas and silk dress fittings, she leads a forbidden secret life. Against her stern father's wishes and society's expectations, Audrey often slips away to her uncle's laboratory to study the gruesome practice of forensic medicine. When her work on a string of savagely killed corpses drags Audrey into the investigation of a serial murderer, her search for answers brings her back to her own sheltered world. The story's shocking twists and turns, augmented with real, sinister period photos, will make this dazzling debut impossible to forget.
The Night Circus by Erin Morgenstern

The circus arrives without warning. No announcements precede it. It is simply there, when yesterday it was not. Within the black-and-white striped canvas tents is an utterly unique experience full of breathtaking amazements. It is called Le Cirque des Rêves, and it is only open at night. But behind the scenes, a fierce competition is underway: a duel between two young magicians, Celia and Marco, who have been trained since childhood expressly for this purpose by their mercurial instructors. Unbeknownst to them both, this is a game in which only one can be left standing. Despite the high stakes, Celia and Marco soon tumble headfirst into love, setting off a domino effect of dangerous consequences, and leaving the lives of everyone, from the performers to the patrons, hanging in the balance.

A Dangerous Fortune by Ken Follett

In 1866, tragedy strikes the exclusive Windfield School when a young student drowns in a mysterious accident. His death and its aftermath initiate a spiraling circle of treachery that will span three decades and entwine many lives. From the exclusive men's clubs and brothels that cater to every dark desire of London's upper class to the dazzling ballrooms and mahogany-paneled suites of the manipulators of the world's wealth, one family is splintered by a shared legacy. But greed, fed by the shocking truth of a boy's death, must be stopped, or the dreams of a nation will die.

Outlawed by Anna North

In the year of our Lord 1894, I became an outlaw. The day of her wedding, 17-year-old Ada's life looks good; she loves her husband, and she loves working as an apprentice to her mother, a respected midwife. But after a year of marriage and no pregnancy, in a town where barren women are routinely hanged as witches, her survival depends on leaving behind everything she knows. She joins up with the notorious Hole in the Wall Gang, a band of outlaws led by a preacher-turned-robber known to all as the Kid. Charismatic, grandiose, and mercurial, the Kid is determined to create a safe haven for outcast women. But to make this dream a reality, the Gang hatches a treacherous plan that may get them all killed. And Ada must decide whether she's willing to risk her life for the possibility of a new kind of future for them all.