

Reading list for English Reading Groups, 2018-2019



Note: this sign (📖) refers to the level of difficulty in reading. We use 3 levels.

On page 1-5 you will find the new titles with brief descriptions of 2018-2019. Reader's Guides of these books will be published mid 2018. On page 6-14 you will find titles and brief descriptions, of which Reader's Guides were published previously.

New Titles of 2018-2019

Margaret Atwood - *The Handmaid's Tale* (Canada)

E18-01, 1986, 479 pages 📖



"The red Birthmobile is parked in the driveway. Its back door is open and I clamber in. The carpet on the floor is red, red curtains are drawn over the windows."

The Handmaid's Tale is a novel about life in a controlled state, Gilead, where people wear uniforms and everything is checked and controlled. Women have just one purpose in life, giving birth. The narrative perspective is from one of the handmaids, Offred (Of Fred). Tales of Offred's life in Gilead alternate with flashbacks of her previous life.

This dystopian novel of Margaret Atwood originally written in 1986 has recently become of interest again, owing to political developments in certain countries. It has recently also been made into a television series. A dictatorial, religious state such as Gilead is a fear for everybody, now and in the future.

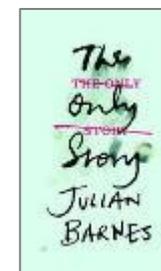
Julian Barnes – *The Only Story* (UK)

E18-02, 2018, 213 pages 📖

This is a novel about a complicated love story. It is narrated by Paul, who is looking back at his life. Paul was 19 when he first met Susan, a woman more than twice his age. They met at a tennis club and fell in love. The setting is in the London suburbs in the 1960s. The novel is divided into three parts, written in three different narrative voices: the first, second and third person. With each change, Paul

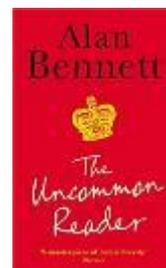
moves on to a new phase in their affair, describing the demands that are placed on him by the lifelong consequences of his first love.

Barnes explores – once again – what we forget and remember, the reliability of our memories. 'The Only Story' is a beautifully written, deeply moving novel.



Alan Bennett - *The Uncommon Reader* (UK)

E18-03, 2007, 121 pages 📖

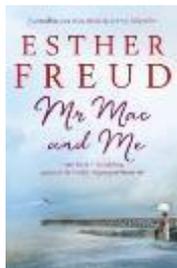


The Uncommon Reader is a novella about the reading habits of Queen Elisabeth II of England. While walking her corgis, the Queen visits a travelling library parked in the courtyard of Buckingham Palace. It turns out that the mobile library comes to the courtyard every Wednesday. The librarian introduces the Queen to reading novels and this marks a change in her life. Having never had a 'normal' life, she now begins to live in books. Her advisors, however, are not so pleased with her new hobby. The Queen continues to read and to ask questions. She also begins to write, and her insights convey a sense of humour. She then starts discussing novels with other people, with several other books and writers being mentioned in this novella. The Queen becomes so enthusiastic about reading that her work suffers from it. The end of the story is surprising.

The prose Bennett writes is light and satiric. This is a proof of the power of books and how reading can change a life. A very charming novella.

Esther Freud – *Mr Mac and Me* (UK)

E18-04, 2014, 296 pages 



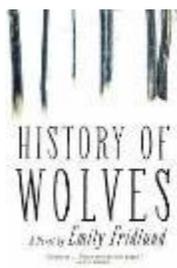
In this novel Esther Freud paints a vivid portrait of a coastal village in Suffolk during the First World War, but also of an artist, the architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The story, seen through the eyes of young Thomas Maggs, the son of the local tavern keeper, tells us about the unlikely friendship between Thomas and Mackintosh, or Mac, a stranger to the Suffolk region. Just as their friendship begins to blossom, war with Germany is declared. All the summer guests flee the village and are replaced by soldiers on their way to war. As the townspeople increasingly feel the brutality of war, they become more and more suspicious of Mac and his eccentric behaviour.

As the townspeople increasingly feel the brutality of war, they become more and more suspicious of Mac and his eccentric behaviour.

This is a beautiful and touching tale of family and friendship. It is as much about life in a small village during war time, as it is about Mac, who was such a misunderstood genius.

Emily Fridlund - *History of Wolves* (US)

E18-05, 2017, 275 pages 



Linda, fourteen, lives in a small Minnesotan town with her parents, hippies who stayed behind after their commune fell apart. Called “freak” at school by the other children, she feels an outsider and often wanders around the woods on her own. This changes when Patra and Leo move in across the lake from where Linda lives. Patra’s husband is a scientist and is often away for long periods of time doing research. To help her out, Linda becomes a

babysitter to their four-year old son Paul. Paul seems a little different from other children. Without realising it, Linda becomes involved in something that will have a tremendous impact on the rest of her life.

Showing everything through Linda’s eyes, Emily Fridlund is able to make the reader understand how difficult it is to decide whether and when to take action in a situation that doesn’t feel right.

Jane Gardam - *Old Filth* (UK)

E18-06, 2006, 289 pages  



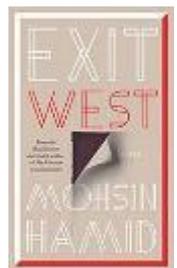
Sir Edward Feathers, also called Old Filth (FILTH is an acronym for "Failed in London, Try Hong Kong") finds himself bereft of his beloved Betty in a beautiful house in Dorset at the age of 82. His next door neighbour is a widower as well and a former colleague. There was no love lost between them. But compelled by need they get in touch again and this seems the beginning of an ‘opening of shutters on the past that he (Edward) had kept clamped down.’

He was a Raj orphan brought up by foster parents in Wales. This period in particular left scars on his soul and had a huge impact on the rest of his life.

In what way is for the reader to find out. Old Filth is the first of a trilogy and can be read independently. But the following two books might reveal the answers to some unresolved questions.

Moshin Hamid - *Exit West* (British Pakistani)

E18-07, 2017, 240 pages 



This is a novel about refugees and migration. The protagonists of the book, Nadia and Saeed, become lovers. They are living in a besieged, unnamed city in the East. The horrors of the civil war are described vividly. As the situation deteriorates and becomes unbearable, they are forced to flee through 'magical doors', which transport individuals from one country to another. First they reach a refugee camp on the island of Mykonos. Then they move to London in an upscale mansion that has been taken over by other refugees. Finally they live in a shanty town in Marin, California. They are migrants among many other migrants, all trying to build a new life in those different places.

This is a fascinating book about what's happening in the world right now, with migration, refugee crises and globalisation.

Gail Honeyman - *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (UK-Scotland), E18-08, 2017, 327 pages 



Eleanor Oliphant's life is built around routine and she does not live up to social expectations. She works as a finance clerk and keeps mostly to herself. When she coincidentally gets involved with Raymond, an IT guy at the office, she gradually discovers friendship and compassion.

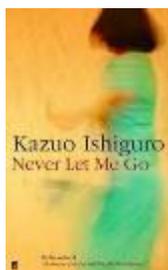
The book is divided into three parts: Good Days, Bad Days and Better Days. The first part depicts

Eleanor's weekly routine, providing an overview of who she is. Later on, it is revealed how things from the past have shaped her.

Honeyman was discovered through a writing competition. Her debut novel is a very intriguing and heart-warming read. Although the book is at times hilarious, there is a darker undertone that makes the character of Eleanor feel very real.

Kazuo Ishiguro - *Never Let Me Go* (UK)

E18-09, 2006, 276 pages  



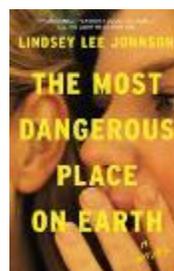
Never Let Me Go is the story of Kathy and Tommy and Ruth, and of the love-triangle they begin at the seemingly idyllic Hailsham School. Ruth is the controlling one, Tommy is the one who used to find it hard to keep his temper, and Kathy is a carer by nature as well as profession. They have heard that love - or art, or both - will get you a deferral. Kathy, now 31, is the narrator of the story, in which she tries

to come to terms with her childhood, and with the fate that has always awaited her and her closest friends.

A story of love, friendship and memory, 'Never Let Me Go' is charged throughout with a sense of the fragility of life.

Ishiguro, winner of the Nobel prize in literature 2017, was praised by the Swedish Academy for novels which were driven by 'great emotional force'.

Lindsey Lee Johnson - *The Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (US), E18-10, 2017, 268 pages 



In *The Most Dangerous Place on Earth* we get to know a group of high school students in Mill Valley, California. Their rich parents are so wrapped up in their own lives that they haven't got a clue what their children are up to. Abigail has an affair with one of her teachers. Dave knows his parents want him to go to Berkeley, but also realises he won't be able to achieve the necessary SAT score on his own. Nick is good at making money, whether he is selling

lunches, papers on the internet or pills. Although everyone admires the beautiful Elisabeth, she doesn't have any real friends. And then there's Molly Nicoll, who recently graduated and has become their new English teacher, and really wants to connect with her students.

This novel makes gripping reading and shows us the enormous influence that social media have on the lives of adolescents.

Bernard MacLaverty - *Midwinter Break* (Northern Ireland)

E18-11, 2017, 243 pages 



Gerry and Stella, a retired Irish couple in their late sixties, set out for a holiday weekend in Amsterdam. They have an adult son living in Canada and one grandchild. The Troubles in Ireland were the reason they moved to Glasgow. Gerry used to be an architect and Stella was a school teacher. Initially we meet a couple whose relationship seems safe, easy and familiar. Soon though the reader learns about their secret thoughts and behaviour; about their traumatic experience of a bomb attack in Belfast and the impact it has had on their lives up to the present day. Gerry makes fun of her being a devout catholic. Stella knows that he drinks too much whisky. The couple are experts in avoiding talking about subjects that really bother them until it is bound to explode.

MacLaverty describes the lives of ordinary people and succeeds in captivating the reader's interest.

Sarah Perry - *The Essex Serpent* (UK)

E18-12, 2016, 418 pages 



Against the background of an ever growing interest in scientific approach to discoveries, which lead people to gradually understand what happened to the planet during all the eras preceding ours, 19th century England still harbours rural communities in which superstitious beliefs in ghosts, ogres and monsters remain close to the surface. This is the world in which newly widowed Cora Seagrave and devout reverend

William Ransome find themselves to be contestants about the persistent tale of a monster lurking in the Blackwater estuary of Essex. She wants to find the truth. He wants to protect his parishioners from pagan rites.

Perry weaves a delightful hint of the "Gothic" through this tale of a Victorian but undaunted lady, who appears to have a soft spot for the village rector.

Kamila Shamsie - *Home Fire* (British Pakistani)

E18-13, 2017, 260 pages 



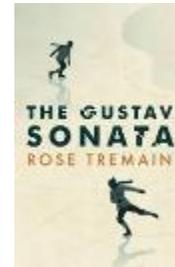
The story is told by the five main characters, all of whom are from a British-Pakistani Muslim background. Isma who, after the death of their mother, took care of her younger twin siblings and is now finally able to pursue an academic career in Massachusetts; Aneeka, the beautiful younger sister, who stays behind in London; Parvaiz, Aneeka's twin brother, whose decision to follow in

the footsteps of a father he has never known and join the Caliphate turns all their lives upside down; Eamonn, the son of the Home Secretary, who becomes involved with Aneeka, and Karamat Lone, Eamonn's father, who has a point to prove.

What makes 'Home Fire' particularly interesting is the way these five points of view provide the reader with a good insight into the different kinds of loyalty that play such an important part in the story, including being loyal to yourself, your family and your background.

Rose Tremain - *The Gustav Sonata* (UK)

E18-14, 2016, 256 pages 



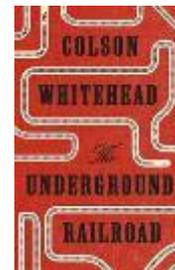
This book tells the story of Gustav and Anton. Gustav grows up in the small village of Matzlingen in Switzerland during the Second World War. Gustav's father died while his son was still very young. Anton meanwhile is from a wealthy Jewish family. Gustav and Anton become friends at kindergarten. Gustav protects Anton and is invited by the family to join them on trips. The boys differ in many ways.

Although Anton is pushed by his mother to play the piano and his mother expects him to become a soloist, he will not be able to make a career as a pianist. Gustav grows up with his mother, who has to work hard for a living. He has questions about the death of his father, and about things that happened to his mother. For some time, Anton and Gustav lose sight of each other, but the loose ends ultimately come together.

A beautiful novel written in clear and simple language reminiscent of the work of John Boyne.

Colson Whitehead - *The Underground Railroad* (US)

E18-15, 2016, 306 pages 



Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia, where life for the slaves is very hard. When Caesar, a new arrival from Virginia, tells her about the Underground Railroad, they decide to try and escape. The Underground Railroad is a secret network of tracks and tunnels beneath the Southern soil. Cora and Caesar's first stop is South Carolina, in a city that initially seems all right. Behind the city's

quiet appearance however, a villainous plan is in place for its black inhabitants. Moreover, the relentless slave catcher Ridgeway, is on their track. As a result, Caesar and Cora are forced to flee again. Cora travels to North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana and the North, seeking true freedom in an odyssey through time and space.

Whitehead re-creates the unique terrors for black people in the pre-Civil War era and which are still partly present today.

Readers' Guides 2011 - 2018

Margaret Atwood - *The Heart Goes Last* (Canada)

E17-01, 2015, 416 pages 📖

In this contemporary dystopian novel we see what might happen if the economy and, with it, civilisation were to break down. Stan and Charmaine, a destitute young couple, sign up for a Project promising them a happy life. The catch is that once you have signed up, there is no way out. At first they enjoy their new life, but then cracks start appearing and they both start breaking the rules. Life in the Project is so intensely monitored, however, that they are both found out, with far-reaching consequences. In a farcical, fast-paced ending the scene changes to Las Vegas, where all the protagonists get their just deserts.

Paul Auster - *Sunset Park*

E14-02, 2010, 310 pages 📖📖

After an impulsive act with tragic consequences, Miles Heller drops out of university and hits the road, without contacting his parents. At 28 he is still living in South Florida, clearing out closed houses that residents abandoned in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008. He meets under-aged Pilar and she moves in with him, but Miles fears he will be accused of statutory rape. When his old friend Bing lets him know of a room in a Brooklyn squat, already occupied by two other friends, he decides to hide there and wait for Pilar to turn 18. What Miles doesn't know is that Bing has been telling his parents about his whereabouts. Miles's estranged parents are a famous

actress rehearsing for her Broadway return and a celebrated literary publisher.

Pat Barker - *Regeneration*

E12-01, 1992, 252 pages 📖

Craiglockart War Hospital, Scotland, 1917: Army psychiatrist William Rivers is treating shell-shocked soldiers and officers to make them fit enough to return to the trenches in France. Through the eyes of Rivers the reader discovers about the horrors the men had to suffer during the Great War. All kinds of psychological traumas are disclosed in the sessions. Every patient reacts differently on the atrocities they have experienced One of them is Siegfried Sassoon, a published poet and an officer, who wrote a protest against the unnecessary prolongation of the war. In the hospital Sassoon meets with Wilfred Owen, a young poet.

Julian Barnes - *The Noise of Time* (UK)

E16-01, 2016, 180 pages 📖📖📖

In this fictional biography of Dmitri Shostakovich, Julian Barnes describes the inner struggles of an artist during Stalin's reign of terror and the compromises he was required to make under a totalitarian regime, to stay alive. The reader meets the Russian composer at three critical moments in his life, firstly as a young man standing by a lift expecting to be taken away by the powers that be. The next encounter is after the Second World War, on a propaganda tour in the USA. In the third part, the older Shostakovich has become embittered by the relentless demands of the party, even although Stalin is dead. Barnes succeeds in giving the reader remarkable insight into the composer's relationships with family, wives and friends.

Sebastian Barry - *The Temporary Gentleman* (Ireland)

E16-02, 2014, 320 pages 📖

Holed up in a relatively humble dwelling in Ghana, the middle-aged Irishman Jack McNulty sits down to write his life story. His commission as an engineer in the army during World War II saw

him stationed in Africa. Now, however, it is 1957 and the war is over, but he is reluctant to return to Sligo in his native Ireland. Jack's eventful past produces both nostalgia and yearning, as well as fear and loathing, as he reconstructs his troubled marriage with the beautiful and enigmatic Mai Kirwan. Jack shares a turbulent life with her, from the blossoming stages of carefree youth in the 1920s to the disarming conflict of losing one another. *The Temporary Gentleman* is the story of a lost soul retracing his steps so as to be able to go forward.

Paul Beatty - *The Sellout* (US)
E17-02, 2015, 288 pages   

In *The Sellout* (winner of the Man Booker Prize 2016) the author takes the reader into the American Supreme Court where we listen to the story of a young, middle class, Afro-American farmer, 'Me', who lives in Dickens, a poor black area on the outskirts of Los Angeles which was wiped off the map by the California authorities as they felt ashamed of this 'agrarian ghetto'. 'Me' and Dickens's illustrious resident, Hominy Jenkins, once child star in the *Little Rascals* movie, feel devastated and homeless and set out to put Dickens back on the map with a most outrageous action: to reinstate slavery and racial segregation in Dickens. This leads to 'Me' ending up at the Supreme Court.

Amy Bloom - *Lucky Us*
E15-02, 2014, 256 pages. 

Disappointed by their families, two half-sisters travel through 1940s America in search of fame and fortune. Iris, aged 16, wants to become a film star, and her ambitions take them from Ohio to Hollywood and the jazz clubs of Long Island, looking for a place they can call home. They make friends in high and low places and meet memorable people in a series of surprising events. Eva, who is 4 years younger than Iris, is the principal narrator, but other characters also have their say, sometimes in the form of letters. Each chapter is given the title of a jazz song "as the author's gift to the reader".

Alain de Botton - *The Course of Love* (UK)
E17-03, 2016, 240 pages  

The long-awaited follow-on from Alain de Botton's first novel "On Love" finds the Lebanese-German Rabih Khan grown into a young man of thirty-one. In his capacity as an architect, he meets a client Kirsten McClelland and they fall deeply in love. What follows is a captivating description of the relationship over a period of thirteen years where marriage and the birth of a son and daughter set the back-drop for an in-depth examination of the emotions and behaviours that draw the couple together and nearly drive them apart. Ideals are put to the test by the pressures of an average existence with humdrum routines.

Geraldine Brooks - *Caleb's Crossing* (Australia)
E17-04, 2011, 311 pages 

In this novel the author takes her readers to a fledgling community of English Puritan settlers on America's North East coast in the 1660s. What features is that these early settlers seek peaceful cohabitation with the local tribes.

Main character Bethia Mayfield's future is determined by the orthodox views of her father, brother and grandfather. But she possesses a free roaming mind and finds a kindred spirit in Caleb, son of the chieftain of the local Wampanoag. They are brave openhearted characters in search of knowledge at a time of superstition and ignorance. What follows is Bethia's struggle to maintain a position between the strict rules of Puritan society and the ways of the native Americans. Her endeavours culminate in two Wampanoag students being allowed to enter Harvard University.

A.S. Byatt - *Possession: A Romance* (UK)
E17-05, 1990, 511 pages  

The main protagonists in this Booker Prize-winning novel are two literary scholars working in the 1980s. Their lives are mirrored by those of the 19th-century minor poet and his mistress they are studying. As they travel up and down the country, even fleeing to France, like their counterparts, they succeed in piecing together

information on the secret love affair. This leads to a surprising revelation for one of the scholars, and also gives them time to realise their feelings for each other.

J.L. Carr - *A Month in the Country*

E15-03, 1980, 111 pages 📖

Tom Birkin, a war veteran, looks back on a summer spent in a small village just after the First World War. In summer 1920 he had arrived by train in rainy Oxbodby, a village in the quiet northern English countryside. Although his initial encounter with some villagers was somewhat stand-offish, this quickly changed for the better. His reason for travelling to the village was to uncover and restore a huge medieval wall painting hidden beneath whitewash on the wall of the village church.

Tom was still visibly shaken by his wartime experiences and the painful break-up of his marriage. While in Oxbodby he befriended another veteran, Charles Moon, who was searching for a lost grave. Their shared past helped them to come to terms with the horrors of war, while the hospitality and warmth shown to Tom by some of the villagers left their mark on the rest of his life.

Tracy Chevalier - *Remarkable Creatures*

E14-03, 2009, 350 pages 📖

The novel is set in the early 19th century and tells the story of Mary Anning, who has a real talent for finding fossils. Since Mary's findings suggest that the world is far older than had previously been thought, they change people's way of thinking about the origins of the world and the concept of extinction. Mary becomes friends with Elizabeth Philpot, who shares her passion for fossils. Their remarkable friendship, which is severely challenged when both women are attracted to the same man, is one of the major themes in the book. The friendship is remarkable because Elizabeth is twenty years older, educated and from middle-class London, whereas Mary is poor and has lived in Lyme Regis (where the story takes place) all her life. The novel also describes the challenges

faced by the women, who are both spinsters in a male-dominated society.

Emma Cline - *The Girls* (USA)

E17-06, 2016, 355 pages 📖📖

Evie Boyd is a typical fourteen-year-old girl: she is insecure about her looks, does not know how to behave around boys and is embarrassed by her mother's behaviour after her parents' divorce. One day she meets Suzanne, who is a few years older and lives on a ranch in a kind of commune led by the charismatic Russell. Evie finally feels she has found a place where she belongs and where she is accepted for what she is. As she is drawn in, however, Evie starts to lose touch with the real world and does things she had never previously dreamt of doing.

Jim Crace - *Harvest*

E14-04, 2013, 273 pages 📖📖📖

A medieval village community on the verge of a major change: subsistence agriculture giving way to the production of wool for profit. The arrival of three strangers (two men and a woman) pushes the impact of what is about to happen to the background. Although they have announced their arrival by laying a fire in the hearth of their shack on the common land, these newcomers get the blame for another fire, which destroys the Manor's dovecote. The two men end up at the pillory, while the woman is evasive, and this makes her all the more interesting to the villagers.

In a chilling way Crace describes the sudden collapse of an age-old society, based on Anglo-Saxon-like lore, and the change from a society where everyone cared for each other into a society in which everyone is left to fend for themselves. This book was shortlisted for The Man Booker Prize 2013.

Anthony Doerr - *All the Light We Cannot See* (US)

E16-03, 2014, 530 pages 📖📖

This novel tells the story of Marie-Laure (French) and Werner (German), both of whom are stuck in a war that is not theirs. When

the Second World War breaks out, the blind Marie-Laure and her father flee to the coastal city of St Malo, carrying a big and dangerous secret with them. Meanwhile, the orphaned Werner has an important choice to make as the only way for him to attain a better life than his parents is to join the German army. Both children are forced to grow up in a world that is being devastated and where all they are trying to do is survive.

Emma Donoghue - *Room*

E14-05, 2010, 336 pages 

The novel opens in a world held inside a small garden shed, as seen through the eyes of five-year-old Jack. The boy has never been outside its walls. For him it is a rich life, crafted for him by a loving mother, with stories, exercises, carefully rationed TV viewing and undivided attention. But life in the room is becoming confining. Eventually the book turns in another direction. More characters enter, and Jack's world extends beyond its original setting. The development is thrilling and at times stirringly exciting.

Margaret Drabble - *The Dark Flood Rises* (UK)

E17-07, 2016, 326 pages  

Margaret Drabble invites us in this novel to look through her eyes at how sad, how funny and how absurd aging is. The main character Francesca Stubbs in her seventies, still active, racing around England writing reports on sheltered housing for the elderly and caring for her dying ex-husband has recently become somewhat obsessed with mortality. The novel follows Fran, her family and friends over a period of two months, jumping from character to character and from England to the Canary Islands. Each characters' story adds to a beautifully written contemplation on what it is like to grow old.

Richard Flanagan - *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

(Australia), *E16-04, 2013, 467 pages*   

Dorrigo Evans is an Australian surgeon in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp on the Thai-Burma railway line during the Second World

War. As he works to stop disease, slave labour and malnourishment, he remembers his pre-war love affair with Amy, his uncle's wife. At the same time, the Japanese camp commander Nakamura struggles to fulfil his duty to the Emperor. This gripping novel follows multiple characters from 1943 on to their post-war lives, jumping back and forth in time and switching between the perspectives of Dorrigo, Amy, several Australian prisoners, the Japanese camp commanders and others. All are haunted by questions about survival, human resilience and morality in a landscape of fear and death, whether in pre-war Sydney, the jungles of Thailand or the rubble of bombed-out Tokyo. The novel won the Man Booker Prize in 2014.

Gillian Flynn - *Gone Girl*

E15-06, 2014, 495 pages 

This 'romantic' story about Nick and Amy has so many twists that it will leave the reader dizzy and confused. The plot centres on the marriage of the accomplished magazine writer Amy Elliott and Nick Dunne, an aspiring novelist. Their happiness is first interrupted by the financial crisis, when Nick and Amy lose their jobs and decide to move to Missouri, where Nick comes from and where they buy a cheaper house. Nick then uses the last of Amy's inheritance to open a bar. On the morning of their fifth wedding anniversary, Amy disappears in what looks like an abduction, and a nationwide search begins. All signs point to foul play and Nick suddenly has to try to clear his name when the police accuse him of Amy's murder.

Richard Ford - *Canada*

E14-07, 2012, 418 pages 

Canada is the story of Dell Parsons, a 15-year-old boy whose parents have committed a crime and are both in jail. He has to flee his parental home in Montana and goes to Canada, where he is taken care of by a distant relative who has reasons to be suspicious towards strangers. Dell's sister, Berner, has a boyfriend who looks after her. So Dell is forced to live under the care of people who don't love him. He is desperate to go to school and meet other young

people, but is not allowed to and is forced to work hard. Thanks to his strong will he is able to survive in absurd circumstances. In the third and last part of the book the brother and sister meet each other again after many years apart. How have they been able to live on after such a troubled youth?

Karen Joy Fowler - *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

E15-07, 2013, 310 pages 

Rosemary Cooke, the narrator in *We are all completely beside ourselves*, finds it difficult to come to terms with some of the things that happened during her childhood. When Rosemary was five, her sister Fern suddenly disappeared. Not much later, her brother Lowell ran away from home. These events have influenced Rosemary's entire life. Through several small hints the reader gradually begins to realise that there is something we are deliberately not being told about Fern. As Rosemary, now in her late thirties, looks back, both she and the reader finally learn the truth about her past.

Nadine Gordimer - *The Pickup*

E15-08, 2001, 268 pages  

The Pickup is a post-apartheid novel by the South African writer Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), winner of the Nobel Prize in 1991. When Julie Summer's car breaks down on a backstreet in Johannesburg, South Africa, a young Arab garage mechanic, Abdu, comes to her aid. They become lovers. Their attraction to one another is fuelled by different motives. White Julie is in rebellion against her wealthy background, while Abdu, an illegal immigrant, is desperate to avoid deportation to his country of origin. After a letter arrives from the Department of Home Affairs, Abdu has to leave the country. The second part of the novel finds the couple living with Abdu's family in an impoverished village on the edge of the desert in an unknown Arab country, where it becomes increasingly clear that Abdu and Julie want different things from life

Sara Hall - *The Wolf Border* (UK)

E16-05, 2015, 432 pages  

Rachel Caine, the fiercely independent main character, has been working as a wolf expert in Idaho, USA, for ten years, when she is offered a highly prestigious job on the estate of the immensely rich Earl of Annerdale. The latter wants to reintroduce the wolf on his vast estate in Cumbria, in the North of England, where Rachel was born. After first rejecting his offer, she accepts when she finds out she is pregnant. As the wolf project gets under way, she re-establishes contact with her brother, comes to terms with her troubled childhood and finds herself capable of forging ties with the people around her.

Jhumpa Lahiri - *The Namesake*

E12-04, 2004, 304 pages  

This novel, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, tells the story of an Indian couple that left India to start a new life in America. Their children, born in America, grow up in between the Indian culture of their parents and the American society they live in. While their parents feel closely connected to the family and culture they left behind in India, their children do not feel part of this world. The oldest son is named after his father favourite Russian author Gogol. Not feeling any connection to this name, that is neither American nor Indian, he changes his name when he turns eighteen.

Laila Lalami - *The Moor's Account* (US)

E16-06, 2014, 321 pages  

Lalami takes the reader into the imagined memoirs of the first black Moroccan slave who had to join the Spanish explorers and conquistadors in their explorations of the Southwest of North America. His testimony was left out of the official record. From the moment the expedition landed in Florida in 1527, it faced starvation, disease, accidents and skirmishes with the local Indian tribes. Only four survivors are miraculously saved: three Castilians and the Moor Mustafa, who had sold himself into slavery out of poverty. Named Estebanico by his master and stripped of his religion, he holds on to

his own identity, his dignity and the memory of his beloved family. Being a nobody he was ignored in history, but his account brings him back to life in this book.

Harper Lee – *To Kill a Mockingbird/Go Set a Watchman* (US)
E16-07, 1960/2015, 324/278 pages 

Lee's debut novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is the story of Scout. Through her eyes we watch how things come to a climax in the climate of racism and prejudice that had been simmering for a long time in the 'tired old town' of Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s. The events of that summer, in which her father, Atticus Finch, plays a significant role as the lawyer of the young black man accused of raping a white girl, eventually lead to the battering and injuring of her brother Jem and teach Scout much about life and the true nature of some of the inhabitants of Maycomb.

Emily St. John Mandel - *Station Eleven* (Canada)
E16-10, 2014, 336 pages  

Station Eleven opens with the death of Arthur Leander, a famous actor, who dies on stage while performing *King Lear*. His death coincides with a 'flu pandemic that kills the majority of the world population. Kirsten, a child-actor, witnesses Arthur's death and years later we find her in *The Travelling Symphony*: a collection of actors and musicians who roam the country performing music and Shakespeare plays. Events from the past, present and future are intertwined as the story unfolds. *Station Eleven* is an atypical post-apocalyptic story, for its focus is on finding beauty and meaning in a dangerous and bleak world.

Carson McCullers - *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*
E12-07, 1940, 312 pages  

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is a story about the lives of several poor people in a small industrial town in the South of the United States. John Singer is a deaf-mute and in spite of his disability several people, each with a very different background, regularly visit him and talk to him endlessly. They all consider John Singer their

best friend. The story is also about racial and gender discrimination and how to cope with poverty. The characters all hunt for love and friendship. Discover how each of them struggles to find it.

Ian McEwan - *The Children Act*
E15-10, 2014, 242 pages  

Fiona Maye, a respected High Court judge in the Family Division, is 59 and has no children of her own. To her surprise, her husband Jack expresses discontent with their sex life and decides to have an affair. While her private life is in crisis, Fiona has to make daily decisions on other people's lives in her work, sometimes even on questions of life or death. One of these cases involves a 17-year-old Jehovah's Witness with leukaemia. He and his parents are refusing treatment because of their religious beliefs. That case and the judge's ruling on it make for very gripping reading.

Ian McEwan - *Nutshell* (UK)
E17-08, 2016, 197 pages 

A wonderful tale from an extraordinary author. Trudy betrays her husband John, publisher of poems, with his brother, Claude, a grasping property developer. The two of them plan to get rid of John, but there is a witness. The entire story is told from the point of view of this witness, an almost fully grown foetus. And this is no ordinary foetus as he has been listening to podcasts and already knows a great deal about the world he has not yet entered. Can the tiny narrator prevent this murder or find a way to avenge his father's death?

David Mitchell - *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*
E13-06, 2010, 470 pages   

This historical novel is almost entirely set at the Dutch trading post Dejima, Japan's only small window with a view on the outside world, in the late 18th century. A young Dutchman, Jacob de Zoet, wants to make his fortune there and takes up the job of a clerk. He has to clear up accounts in a place riddled with corruption. While his fellow Dutchmen give him the cold shoulder, he becomes friends with a

local interpreter and the Dutch doctor, Marinus, who teaches medicine to a few students. Jacob falls hopelessly in love with midwife Orito Aibagawa. When her father dies, Orito is secluded in a remote temple, where women are kept for dubious purposes. The story takes another turn, when Dejima is threatened by a British warship. In the last part of the book the reader finds a wiser Jacob de Zoet, who has learnt to deal with corruption and betrayal, the hard way.

Alice Munro - *Dear Life*

E14-09, 2012, 319 pages  

A collection of fourteen short stories by Alice Munro, the winner of the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature. The majority of her stories are set in small Canadian towns in Munro's home territory of South Ontario, a Protestant region. She focuses on one moment in a person's life that is altered for ever by a chance encounter, an action not taken or a simple twist of fate. The last four stories are, in Munro's words, "autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact". All these timeless stories are breathtaking and make you go back time and time again to discover their magic.

Chigozie Obioma - *The Fishermen* (Nigeria)

E16-08, 2015, 304 pages  

The Fishermen (shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2015) is the story of an Igbo family of four brothers growing up in the small town of Akure, in the south-west of Nigeria, in the 1990s. Their father is strict, but proud of his sons. He wants them to become great men: lawyers, doctors or engineers. Shortly after their father, an employee at the Central Bank, is sent to another town in the North, the four brothers break free and go fishing in a forbidden river. There they encounter a dangerous local madman, Abulu, who has the power of prophecy and predicts that the eldest brother, Ikenna, will be killed by one of his brothers. The strong bond between the brothers threatens to fall apart. Are the tragic events that follow caused by the curse or by Ikenna believing it?

Edna O'Brien - *The Little Red Chairs* (Ireland)

E17-09, 2016, 299 pages  

This story is set in an Irish village, where one day a mysterious foreigner walks into town and opens an alternative healing clinic. He manipulates the local women by providing hot stone massages and poetry. The beautiful Fidelma, who is unhappy about being childless, falls under his spell and becomes pregnant. When his true identity as a Balkan war criminal is revealed, shocking and harrowing events follow. To come to terms with the past Fidelma moves to London, where she lives among the homeless and hears stories told by refugees and victims of horrors. After attending the war criminal's trial in The Hague, Fidelma finds a way to give her life a new direction.

Ruth Ozeki - *A Tale for the Time Being*

E14-10, 2013, 432 pages  

In this novel the lives of the two main characters, the Japanese Nao and the American Ruth, become connected by Nao's diary, which washes up on the shore of the island where Ruth lives. Nao, a teenage girl in Tokyo, sees no escape from her classmates' bullying, and her sense of isolation is deepened by her unhappy family life. Before she takes her own life, Nao is determined to document the life of her great-grandmother, a Buddhist nun who is over one hundred years old. On the other side of the Pacific, Ruth, a novelist living on a small island off the coast of British Columbia, finds a 'Hello Kitty' lunchbox washed up on the beach – possibly debris from the tsunami that struck Japan in 2011. Inside is Nao's diary. This book was shortlisted for The Man Booker Prize 2013.

Marilynne Robinson - *Lila* (US)

E16-09, 2014, 261 pages 

Lila is the story of a young woman neglected by her parents and rescued by Doll, a woman who cared for her and took her on the road with an itinerant gang. Together they worked in the fields and slept beneath the stars in Iowa. Eventually they have to part and for some miserable years Lila roams the countryside alone. One stormy

night she finds shelter in the church of John Ames, a preacher and longtime widower in Gilead. John Ames, a Christian, and Lila, with no knowledge of the Bible, find each other in their loneliness. Throughout the book the reader learns more about the hardships Lila suffered in her life on the road. In her new sheltered life with Ames she struggles with their opposing worldviews.

F. Scott Fitzgerald - *The Great Gatsby*

E12-02, 2010 (originally published in 1925), 320 pages 

The American Dream is well known to most of us. Yet, we cannot fully understand the virtues and failures of the green mirage without reading *The Great Gatsby*. The reader experiences firsthand what it is like to be engulfed by events caused by the American spirit of freedom, greed and lust. The mysterious Jay Gatsby is willing to do everything to reconquer his long lost love Daisy Buchanan. Her cousin, Nick Carraway is chosen to play the go-between for the tragic couple.

Nicholas Searle - *The Good Liar* (UK)

E17-10, 2016, 360 pages 

Roy Courtney is in his eighties and cons people for a living. For his final grand scam he has his eye on Betty, a wealthy widow whom he met through an online dating site. Flashbacks show us the stunts Roy has had to pull in the past in order to save his own skin, but this time things end very differently from what he – and the reader – expects. It turns out that Betty is not the dithering scatterbrain that she seems and that she has her own reasons for getting involved with this swindler.

Graeme Simsion - *The Rosie Project*

E14-12, 2013, 327 pages 

Don Tillman, a professor in genetics, does not understand jokes and takes everything literally. He is also very organised. Aged 39, he has decided it is time to marry. Unfortunately Don is not very good at dating. He therefore designs a questionnaire consisting of sixteen double-sided pages to help him find the perfect wife. Rosie Jarman

is clearly totally unsuitable, but while Don is waiting for someone who does fit the criteria of the Wife Project, he agrees to help Rosie find her biological father. As Don and Rosie use rather unconventional methods to collect DNA samples from the various candidates, they frequently end up in awkward, but extremely funny situations. At the end of the novel Don realises that decisions made instinctively are just as sound as those based on logic.

Elizabeth Strout - *Olive Kitteridge* (US)

E16-11, 2008, 270 pages 

Olive Kitteridge, the Pulitzer prize-winning 'novel in stories' by Elizabeth Strout, describes a small coastal community in Maine. We read about a young man contemplating suicide, a girl who is dumped on her wedding day, an elderly couple who have stayed together despite the husband's infidelity and a girl who has to cope with the fact that her mother ran away to become an actress. All of these people know Olive Kitteridge, a retired maths teacher, who is very outspoken in her opinions and who is the link running through the thirteen stories. Sometimes she is mentioned only briefly, but several stories centre on her and describe her rather complicated relationship with her only son and her life with her quiet and gentle husband.

Graham Swift - *Mothering Sunday* (UK)

E17-11, 2016, 177 pages 

The novella follows Jane Fairchild, a maidservant at Beechwood House, during one day in March 1924. The day was Mothering Sunday, when servants were traditionally given the day off to visit their mother. Jane, being an orphan, spends the morning with Paul, her secret lover, who is the sole remaining son and heir of the neighboring estate. After he leaves her for a lunch date with the girl he is to marry in two weeks' time, Jane wanders through the house trying to memorize everything. As the narrative moves back and forth from 1924 to the end of the century, going back and forth between tragedy and romance, we learn more about Jane's life and how this special day influenced the rest of her life.

Paul Theroux - *The Lower River*

E14-13, 2012, 323 pages 📖

Ellis Hock runs a men's clothing store in a small town in Massachusetts. Business gets worse and his marriage comes to an end. Hock longs for a happier and more satisfying life and so goes back to a small village in Malawi where he had worked as a teacher forty years earlier and had helped to build a school. Back then there had been a hospital, a church and shops, and life was relatively good in Malabo, where he was a highly respected person. A lot of things have changed since then, however. The school building is now in ruins, while the people are poor and apathetic. At first they treat Hock respectfully. But, shortly afterwards, things change dramatically and Hock discovers what the villagers really want from him.

Madeleine Thien - *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (Canada)

E17-12, 2016, 463 pages 📖📖

Madeleine Thien's epic novel spans seven decades and three generations. The story begins in the present day with Marie, a Chinese-Canadian mathematician trying to unravel the secrets around her father's suicide in 1989 and the unexplained arrival of a young woman from China and her subsequent disappearance. The story takes the reader back in time through the generations and traces the lives of families and friends forced by members of the communist regime to renounce their past lives and identities, endure hardship and deny their love for Western music and the arts. There is no trust and anybody can be a traitor, even friends and family members.

Colm Tóibín - *Nora Webster* (Ireland)

E16-12, 2014, 373 pages 📖

Nora Webster is set in Ireland in the late 1960's. Nora has just lost Maurice, the love of her life. Reduced circumstances force Nora to look for work and she goes back to work at the firm she worked at before her marriage and this time, she is determined not to be pushed around. Amidst the mostly well-meaning attempts by family

members and neighbours to help Nora, she feels trapped between not wanting to alienate people and her wish to keep her personal situation private. Relationships with her four children are difficult and the children seem more comfortable talking to Nora's relations. Slowly but surely as the story of Nora Webster unfolds chronologically, Nora finds her inner voice, strength and determination, and finds solace and joy in singing and music.

William Trevor - *The Story of Lucy Gault*

E15-12, 2002. 240 pages 📖

In this novel William Trevor (1928), a celebrated author of Irish rural life, captures the threatening atmosphere of civil unrest in a small village in County Cork in the 1920s. Lucy's Anglo-Irish parents – her father is a Protestant landowner, while her mother is English – want to leave for England after local Catholic youths tried to set fire to their great house, Lahardane. Lucy, their only child, soon to be nine, does not want to leave her beloved birthplace. In a frantic attempt to convince her parents to stay she runs away. The confusion that follows shapes the lives of Lucy, her parents, the servant couple in the house and the local boy Horahan, who was involved in the attack on Lucy's home.

Anne Tyler - *A Spool of Blue Thread* (US)

E16-13, 2015, 358 pages 📖

This novel covers several generations of the Whitshank family. The mother Abby, a social worker, is at the heart of the story. She is married to Red, who works in construction. Red and Abby have two daughters and two sons. They are generally a happy family, although the older boy, Denny, never really seems to fit in. Now in her 70s, Abby is getting forgetful, while Red is going deaf, and there are concerns about whether they can continue to live independently. The family house in Baltimore is a character in itself. It was built by Red's father, Junior, for his wife, Linnie Mae. It is through the house that the reader learns about Abby's youth and the house's early days.

John Williams - *Augustus*

E15-13, 1972, 317 pages 

Augustus is historical fiction set in classical Rome and covers the period from 45 BC to AD 55. In three parts it tells the story of Octavius, a sensitive and scholarly 19-year-old who finds himself heir to the vast power of Rome following the brutal murder of his great-uncle Julius Caesar. After various fights with Julius Caesar's murderers and the power struggle with Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, Octavius becomes the first Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar (Book I). Williams has chosen to bring this period to us in the form of an epistolary novel: fictitious letters, journals, dispatches and memoirs written by his friends and enemies, his daughter Julia (Book II) and by Augustus himself at the end of his life (Book III). Julia's question to her father shows Williams' interest in Augustus' life: "Father, has it been worth it? Your authority, this Rome that you have saved, this Rome that you have built? Has it been worth all that you have had to do?"

The Booklist Explained

The booklist is compiled by the Senia's English Literature Working Group. The members of the group are Cees van den Akker, Henny de Boer, Christa de Jager, Elise Kleuskens, Francine Kruyt, Leo Stolk, Hans van der Weijden and Els de Wit. The readers' guides on this list are written by members of the group, volunteers and students studying English at Groningen University.

Availability

The booklist is determined at the beginning of the year in which reading groups make their choice for the next season (2018/2019), thus allowing enough time for the production of the readers' guides. It means that books published between February and August 2018 do not yet appear on the list but on next year's.

The books on the booklist are available at the time of presentation (March 2018). We cannot guarantee that the availability remains the same for next season.

Other Booklists

All the booklists from the other working groups are to be found on the Senia website. In particular the booklist of Dutch and Translated Literature may be of interest to English Literature Groups as books from the English booklist may be found from time to time in Dutch translation.

The Senia Books Notice Board

We stimulate exchanging books through the notice board on the website www.senia.nl. If you have any questions or comments on the readers' guides, please send a mail to engels@senia.nl.

15 maart 2018