

European Book Suggestions

*from Joanneke Elliott, African Studies and West European Studies Librarian, UNC-CH,
with additions from various sources*

Albania

Three Elegies for Kosovo by Ismail Kadare

Summary: This slim volume tells the tale of a band of singers on the infamous Field of Blackbirds as the medieval Serbian state is defeated by the Ottoman army.

Belgium

Het moois dat we delen (not yet translated) by Ish Ait Hamou.

Summary: Soumia and Luc live in the same neighborhood, but they don't know each other. She is desperately trying to leave the past behind. He lives in and with the past. When they get to know each other by chance, they are faced with difficult decisions.

Mevrouw Verona daalt de heuvel af/Madame Verona Comes Down the Hill by Dimitri Verhulst.

Summary: Years ago, Madame Verona and her husband built a home for themselves on a hill in a forest above a small village. There they lived in isolation, practicing their music, and chopping wood to see them through the cold winters. When Mr. Verona died, the locals might have expected that the legendary beauty would return to the village, but Madame Verona had enough wood to keep her warm during the years it would take to make a cello—the instrument her husband loved—and in the meantime she had her dogs for company. And then one cold February morning, when the last log has burned, Madame Verona sets off down the village path, with her cello and her memories, knowing that she will have no strength to climb the hill again.

Oorlog en terpentijn/War and turpentine by Stefan Hertmans.

Summary: A retelling of his grandfather's life. The result is a gritty yet melancholy account of war, memory and art.

Een Jihad van Liefde/A Jihad for Love by Mohamed El-Bachiri.

Summary: Mohamed El-Bachiri lost his wife Loubna in the Brussels bombing of March 2016 – a young woman murdered by a fanatical jihadist. Mohamed was left to bring up their three sons on his own. Instead of hating or collapsing into grief, he put together a short book of reflections on love, loss and the ways in which we can live together despite differences of religion and ideology.

On Black Sisters' Street by Chika Unigwe

Summary: Four very different women have made their way from Africa to Brussels. They have come to claim for themselves the riches they believe Europe promises but when Sisi, the most enigmatic of the women, is murdered, their already fragile world is shattered.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Lazarus Project by Aleksandar Hemon

Summary: Unable to adjust to life in his adopted home, Vladimir Brik withdraws and begins obsessively researching the real life of an eastern European Jew who was shot and killed on a policeman's doorstep in Chicago a century earlier.

Bulgaria

Stork Mountain by Miroslav Penkov

Summary: A young American student returns to his native Bulgaria to seek out an aging grandfather and sell his share of the inherited farmland. The journey leads him to a remote village clinging to the Strandja Mountains, a stone's throw away from Turkey and Greece.

Croatia

The Ministry of Pain by Dubravka Ugrešić

Summary: Tanja is a professor of ex-Yugoslavian literature at a Dutch university, teaching a class of fellow exiles who are enrolled primarily to maintain their refugee status. Abandoning her syllabus, she encourages her students to indulge in their Yugo-nostalgia, unwittingly leading them into a tangle of difficult questions surrounding exile, guilt, and victimhood.

The Walnut Mansion by Miljenko Jergović

Summary: An epic novel of twentieth-century Balkan life, from the decline of the Ottoman Empire through the bloodshed of the Bosnian War.

Our Man in Iraq by Robert Perišić

Summary: In Zagreb, a journalist ends up in an awkward situation after getting his cousin a job writing about the American war in Iraq. The journalist has to first write for his cousin as the reports get stranger and stranger and then cover up for him when he disappears.

France

La Blanche by Mai-Do Hamisultane.

Summary: Casablanca, 1992. In a white Art Deco villa, a man is pushed down the marble staircase to his death. His murder, never truly explained, fractures a family, a way of life, and the minds of both his wife and his daughter. To survive, his nine-year-old granddaughter carefully suppresses her memories until twenty years later, when her life is once more ripped apart, this time by a disastrous love affair.

Chanson douce/The Perfect Nanny: A Novel by Leïla Slimani.

Summary: When Myriam decides to return to work as a lawyer after having children, she and her husband look for the perfect nanny for their son and daughter. They never dreamed they would find Louise: a quiet, polite, devoted woman who sings to the children, cleans the family's chic Paris apartment, stays late without complaint, and hosts enviable kiddie parties. But as the couple and the nanny become more dependent on one another, jealousy, resentment, and suspicions mount, shattering the idyllic tableau.

Désorientale/Disoriental by Négar Djavadi.

Summary: Kimiâ Sadr fled Iran at the age of ten in the company of her mother and sisters to join her father in France. Now twenty-five and facing the future she has built for herself, as well as the prospect of a new generation, Kimiâ is inundated by her own memories and the stories of her ancestors, which come to her in unstoppable, uncontrollable waves. In the waiting room of a Parisian fertility clinic, generations of flamboyant Sadrs return to her, including her formidable great-grandfather Montazemolmolk, with his harem of fifty-two wives, and her parents, Darius and Sara, stalwart opponents of each regime that befalls them.

En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule: roman/The end of Eddy by Édouard Louis.

Summary: An autobiographical novel about growing up gay in a working-class town in Picardy.

Un étrange pays/A strange country by Muriel Barbery.

Summary: Alejandro de Yepes and Jesús Rocamora, young officers in the Spanish regular army, are stationed alone at Castillo when, out of nowhere, a friendly redhead appears to them in the cellar. There is something magnetic and deeply mysterious about this Petrus. Alejandro and Jesús are bewitched, and, in the middle of the sixth year of the longest war humankind has ever endured, they abandon their post to follow him across a bridge only he can see.

L'Art de Perdre (not yet translated) by Alice Zeniter.

Summary: L'Art de perdre is a beautifully written, extremely touching novel about three generations of (Franco-)Algerians and their experiences with war, immigration and cultural adaptation.

"Muslim": a novel. by Zahia Rahmani.

Summary: Muslim: a novel is a genre-bending, poetic reflection on what it means to be Muslim from one of France's leading writers. In this novel, the second in a trilogy, Rahmani's narrator contemplates the loss of her native language and her imprisonment and exile for being Muslim, woven together in an exploration of the political and personal relationship of language within the fraught history of Islam. Germany

Gehen, ging, gegangen/Go, Went, Gone by Jenny Erpenbeck.

Summary: The novel tells the tale of Richard, a retired classics professor who lives in Berlin. His wife has died, and he lives a routine existence until one day he spies some African refugees staging a hunger strike in Alexanderplatz. Curiosity turns to compassion and an inner transformation, as he visits their shelter, interviews them, and becomes embroiled in their harrowing fates.

Vom Ende der Einsamkeit/The End of Loneliness: A Novel by Benedict Wells.

Summary: Told through the fractured lives of the siblings, The End of Loneliness is a heartfelt, enriching novel about loss and loneliness, family and love.

EisTau/The lamentations of Zeno by Ilija Trojanow.

Summary: Literary fiction about climate disaster and a scientist imploding on a journey to the Antarctic.

Gott ist nicht schuchtern/City of Jasmine by Olga Grjasnowa.

Summary: When Hammoudi, a young surgeon based in Paris, returns to Syria to renew his passport, he only expects to stay there a few days. But the authorities refuse to let him leave, and Hammoudi finds himself caught up in the fight against the regime. Meanwhile, budding actress Amal has also joined the protests against the government and her own father, by whom she feels betrayed. Realizing that they will never again be safe in their homeland, Amal and her boyfriend Youssef decide to flee to Europe in a desperate bid to survive.

Italy

L'amica geniale, Storia del nuovo cognomen, Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta, Storia della bambina perduta/Neapolitan Novels Series by Elene Ferrante.

Summary: Series about two very different women, Lila and Elena, who grew up together in post-WWII Naples, Italy, and their complex friendship.

Le città invisibili/Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino.

Summary: Kublai Khan has sensed the end of his empire coming soon. Marco Polo diverts his host with stories of the cities he has seen in his travels around the empire: cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and designs, cities and the dead, cities and the sky, trading cities, and hidden cities.

Le otto montagne/The eight mountains by Paolo Cognetti.

Summary: While on vacation at the foot of the Aosta Valley, Pietro meets Bruno, an adventurous, spirited local boy. Together they spend many summers exploring the mountains' meadows and peaks and discover the similarities and differences in their lives, their backgrounds, and their futures. The two boys come to find the true meaning of friendship and camaraderie, even as their divergent paths in life-- Bruno's in the mountains, Pietro's across the world--test the strength and meaning of their connection.

Beautiful by Massimo Cuomo.

Summary: A magical tale of love and rivalry between two brothers.

La Sostanza del Male/Beneath the mountain by Luca D'Andrea.

Summary: In Luca D'Andrea's atmospheric and brilliant thriller, set in a small mountain community in the majestic Italian Dolomites, an outsider must uncover the truth about a triple murder that has gone unsolved for thirty years.

In Other Words by Jhumpa Lahiri

Summary: *In Other Words* is at heart a love story - of a long and sometimes difficult courtship, and a passion that verges on obsession- that of a writer for another language.

Latvia

Soviet Milk by Nora Ikstena

Summary: The central character in the story tries to follow her calling as a doctor. But then the state steps in. She is deprived first of her professional future, then of her identity and finally of her relationship with her daughter. Banished to a village in the Latvian countryside, her sense of isolation increases. Will she and her daughter be able to return to Riga when political change begins to stir?

Doom 94 by Jānis Jonevs

Summary: A semi-biographical novel by Latvian writer Jānis Jonevs about the generation living in Jelgava, Latvia in the 1990s that searches for their own identity and are fans of alternative culture.

Lithuania

Vilnius Poker by Ričardas Gavelis

Summary: A man returns to Vilnius after some time in a labor camp, but the city that he finds has only a very tenuous hold on reality.

Memoirs of a Life Cut Short by Ričardas Gavelis

Summary: Levas Ciparis, the anti-hero of this masterly critique of life in the late Soviet Union, is a man alone and he desperately wants to belong.

Montenegro

Hansen's Children by Ognjen Spahić

Summary: Set in the last remaining European leper colony, the cast of characters in *Hansen's Children* come to life in a quarantined corner of Romania, a microcosm with its own power struggles, corruption and stubborn memories.

The Netherlands

De dood van Murat Idrissi/The Death of Murat Idrissi by Tommy Wieringa.

Summary: Two venturesome women on a journey through the land of their fathers and mothers. A wrong turn. A bad decision. They had no idea, when they arrived in Morocco, that their usual freedoms as young European women would not be available. So, when the spry Saleh presents himself as their guide and saviour, they embrace his offer. He extracts them from a tight space, only to lead them inexorably into an even tighter one: and from this far darker space there is no exit. Their tale of confinement and escape is as old as the landscapes and cultures so vividly depicted in this story of where Europe and Africa come closest to meeting, even if they never quite touch.

Hoe ik talent voor het leven kreeg/Two Blankets, Three Sheets by Rodaan Al Galidi.

Summary: Based on the author's true story, this is the account of Iraqi refugee Samir, who spends nine years in an asylum center in the Netherlands.

De belofte van Pisa/The promise of Pisa by Mano Bouzamour.

Summary: The story of a Dutch-Moroccan boy who has to survive at an elite music academy in posh Amsterdam South, while his brother is in prison.

Bruiloft aan zee/Wedding by the sea by Abdelkader Benali.

Summary: Lamarat Minar would have been a champion Parcheesi player if he had stayed in his native land, but instead he left with his family to live in Europe. Now he has returned home to attend his sister's wedding to their uncle Mosa, to whom she was promised when she was still a child. However, as the ceremonies begin, Mosa has disappeared to his favorite whorehouse, Lolita's Bar, and Lamarat is dispatched to find and bring him back to salvage the family honor.

Poland

House of Day, House of Night by Olga Tokarczuk

Summary: Tokarczuk's novel delves into the stories of one Silesian town, Nowa Ruda, which, because of border changes, has been a part of Poland, Germany, and the former Czechoslovakia. Yet history isn't just history – intertwined with it are the lives of the people who lived it.

Portugal

The Tenth Island: Finding Joy, Beauty, and Unexpected Love in the Azores by Diana Marcum

Summary: Reporter Diana Marcum is in crisis. A long-buried personal sadness is enfolding her—and her career is stalled—when she stumbles upon an unusual group of immigrants living in rural California.

The Shelf Life of Happiness by David Machado

Summary: Even as he loses his home, suffers severe damage to his car, and finds himself living in his old, abandoned office building, Daniel fights the realization that things have changed. He's unable to see what remains among the rubble—friendship, his family's love, and people's deep desire to connect. If Daniel can let go of the past and find his true self, he just might save not only himself but also everyone that really matters to him.

The Lusiads/Os Lusíadas by Luiz Vaz de Camões

Summary: This classic is to Portugal what *The Odyssey* is to Greece. An epic poem that follows the famous voyage of Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, as he discovers the sea route to India, it's based on some of Luiz Vaz de Camões' (author of *The Lusiads*) own experiences in Asia and Africa during the 1500s.

Romania

Life Begins on Friday by Ioana Pârvulescu

Summary: A journalist from the present day has been inexplicably transported to snowy Bucharest in final days of the year 1897, where a sprightly cast captures the essence of the Romania's *belle époque*.

The Hunger Angel by Herta Müller

Summary: Doubly condemned as an ethnic German and a gay man, Leo Auberg is sent to a gulag in the Soviet Union during their occupation of Romania in 1945.

Serbia

The Russian Window by Dragan Velikić

Summary: An omnibus novel in three parts, *The Russian Window* juxtaposes each character's missed opportunities with the paths they choose, providing the reader with an understanding of the diverse and countless lives of others.

Slovenia

Dry Season by Gabriela Babnik

Summary: In a novel which defies convention, elderly Ana abandons her life as a wife and mother in Ljubljana and becomes the lover of 27-year-old Ismael in Burkina Faso. Having left the post-Yugoslav world and its promise of westernisation behind, the currents which bring Ana to seek renewal through her young lover are the cracking pistol warnings of colonialism and fetishisation. As the story progresses, we come to recognise that what separates the lovers is neither age nor race, but the gulf between the concepts of east and west.

The Feline Plague by Maja Novak

Summary: Not quite magical, not quite real, it tells a coming of age story of a girl struggling to find happiness even as she begins to recognize and deal with the cruel coldness of the adult world.

UK

Conversations with friends: a novel by Sally Rooney.

Summary: Frances is a coolheaded and darkly observant young woman, vaguely pursuing a career in writing while studying in Dublin. Her best friend is the beautiful and endlessly self-possessed Bobbi. At a local poetry performance one night, they meet a well-known photographer, and as the girls are then gradually drawn into her world, Frances is reluctantly impressed by the older woman's sophisticated home and handsome husband, Nick. But however amusing Frances and Nick's flirtation seems at first, it begins to give way to a strange—and then painful—intimacy.

Milkman by Anna Burns.

Summary: In an unnamed city, middle sister stands out for the wrong reasons. She reads while walking, for one. And she has been taking French night classes downtown. So when a local paramilitary known as the milkman begins pursuing her, she suddenly becomes "interesting," the last thing she ever wanted to be. Despite

middle sister's attempts to avoid him--and to keep her mother from finding out about her maybe-boyfriend--rumors spread and the threat of violence lingers. Milkman is a story of the way inaction can have enormous repercussions, in a time when the wrong flag, wrong religion, or even a sunset can be subversive. Told with ferocious energy and sly, wicked humor, Milkman establishes Anna Burns as one of the most consequential voices of our day.

Gingerbread by Helen Oyeyemi.

Summary: Influenced by the mysterious place gingerbread holds in classic children's stories, beloved novelist Helen Oyeyemi invites readers into a delightful tale of a surprising family legacy, in which the inheritance is a recipe.

Swing Time by Zadie Smith

Summary: The story takes place in London, New York and West Africa, and focuses on two girls who can tap dance.

The Things we Thought we Knew by Mahsuda Snaith

Summary: Ravine and Marianne were best friends. They practised handstands together, raced slugs, and looked up at the stars and imagined their own constellations. And then, one day, Marianne disappeared.