



# Finding a Good Read

A column to help you find intriguing books

This month the column comes from Jenni Fagan, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, who shares some favourite books with Inside Time readers.



Jenni Fagan

### Dorothy Allison - *Bastard Out of Carolina*

Dorothy Allison is one of the best living American writers. I was lucky enough to meet her and she blew me away as a person as much as a writer. This is the story of a young girl, Bone, whose upbringing in a tough, dysfunctional, wild family is marred by her own serious child abuse. Bone's clarity and insight into the people she grows up among is uncompromising. She describes her first day of school, meeting a teacher who shows her 'pity and contempt as old as the red dust hills.' The book was banned in many states on its release. That some people in society are still not willing to hear the truth of Bone's childhood speaks only to their denial and wilful ignorance of a problem that is inherent in society. This book is astounding and brilliant.

### Derek Owusu - *That Reminds Me*

Derek Owusu's book, published by Stormzy, centres on a young boy, born to Ghanaian parents in London, who ends up in care. I rarely read bril-

liant work by other folk who grew up in the care system like I did; but this one really stands out. He begins the story with the very simple struggle of learning to write. The book is filled with beautifully humane observations. It's the writing and originality of his voice, combined with his ability to see and articulate the world that makes every single line utterly compelling.

### Franz Kafka - *Metamorphosis*

This is my favourite story possibly of all time. Gregor Samsa is a travelling salesman. One morning he wakes up in bed to find he has grown a scaly back and little legs all over his belly. When he tries to talk he screeches, but through this unbearable situation he is really only bothered about one thing; how can he get out of bed and still make it to work? He tries to still show his humanity despite the horror of those around him. The story captures what it means to feel expendable to the rest of society. It is the ultimate story of someone who is rejected and othered the minute they are no longer profitable or seemingly respectable.

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### Jeanette Winterson - *Weight*

In this retelling of the myth of Atlas and Heracles, Jeanette Winterson takes us into a story of betrayal, loss, of deception, and of how we can be bound or trapped by an idea which perhaps in some

way is concealing a wider truth. Jeanette Winterson was adopted as a kid and had a difficult life including living in a wrecked car for a while. I understand wanting to begin again, alongside reckoning with the huge weight of the world. It suggests hope too - that we might not always carry the full weight of our own burdens and that someday there might be a chance to let that go.

“ He writes of riots and love, of hope, and raves, of laughter, of defiance, of friendship. ”

### Caleb Femi - *Poor*

This collection is set in Peckham, where I lived while writing my first novel. Femi uses extraordinary turns of phrase relating the poetic and brutal stories of the people and places of his childhood home. He speaks of the untold stories of black boys unflinchingly and knows the difference between being working class and being 'Poor'. The latter is rarely honoured in literature, or in life. He writes of riots and love, of hope, and raves, of laughter, of defiance, of friendship. This story might come from an estate in South London but it moves and pulses with all the tragedies and triumphs of the world.

Jenni Fagan is the author of five novels, one non-fiction memoir about growing up in local authority care, eight poetry collections, alongside screenplays, essays and articles. She is a Granta Best of Young British Novelist and Scottish Author of the Year. Her work has been translated into nine languages.



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