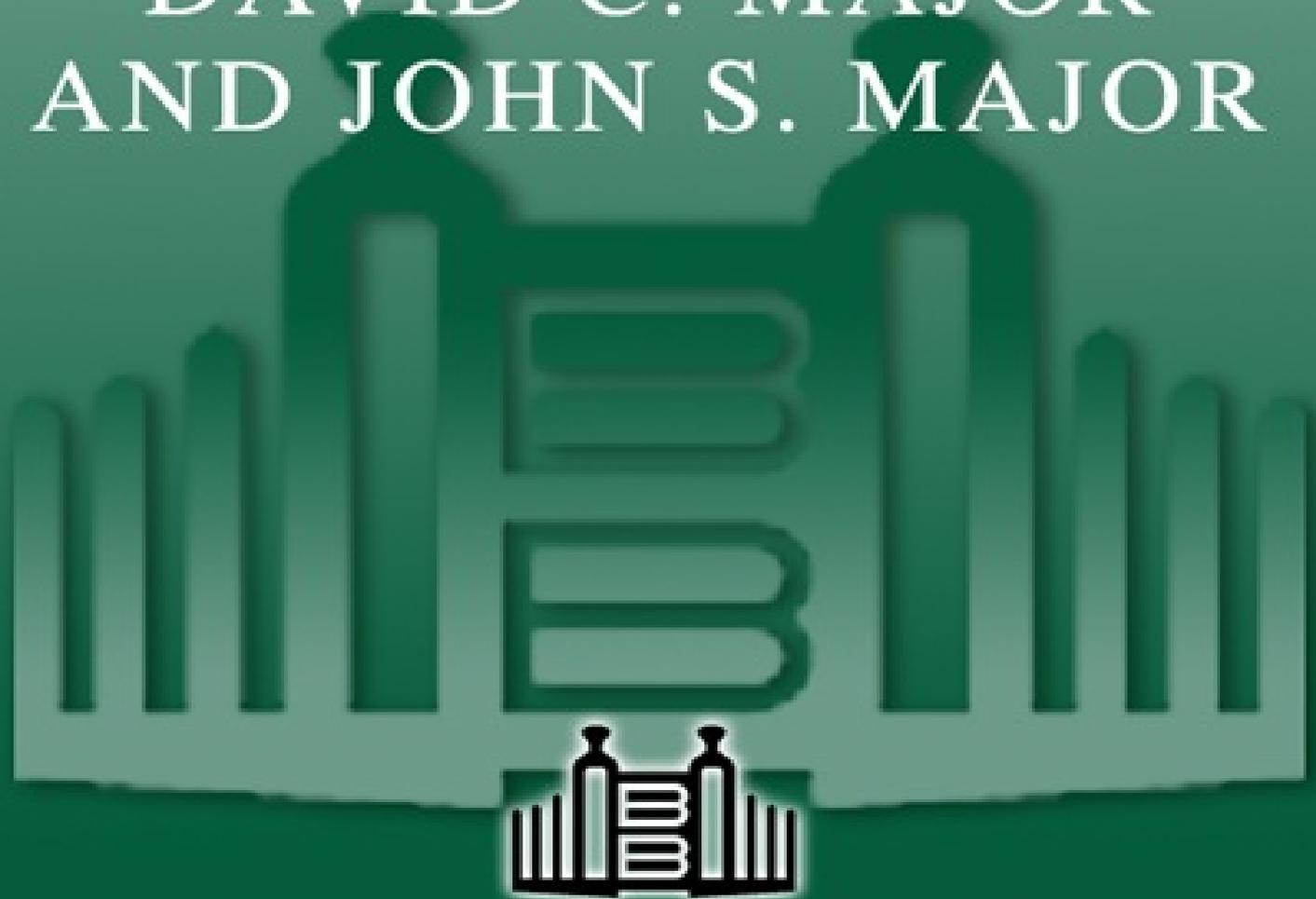


# 100 ONE-NIGHT READS

A BOOK LOVER'S GUIDE

DAVID C. MAJOR  
AND JOHN S. MAJOR

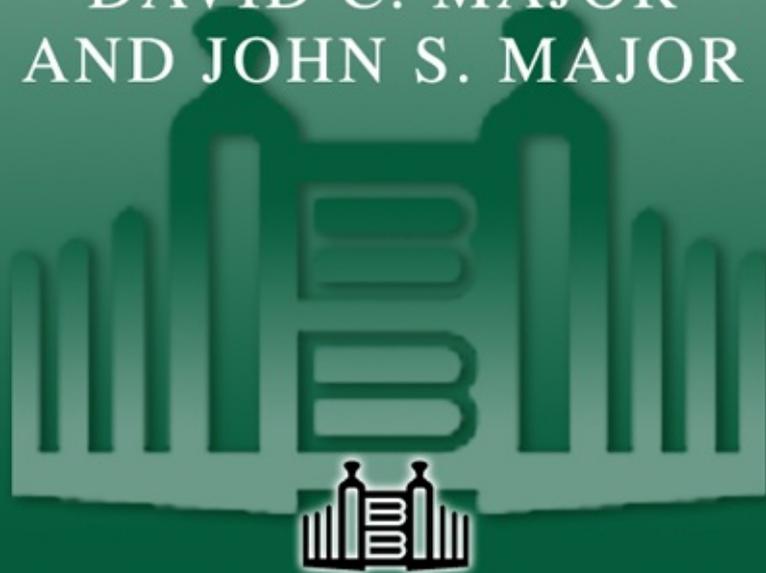


BALLANTINE BOOKS

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*100*  
ONE-NIGHT  
READS

*A Book Lover's Guide*



DAVID C. MAJOR  
*and*  
JOHN S. MAJOR

*Ballantine Books • New York*

FOR GRAHAM AND STEVE

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## INTRODUCTION



If you have picked up this book in a bookstore, or even more if you have already bought it and brought it home, you have proclaimed yourself to be a reader. You will recognize in the authors of this book kindred spirits who take pleasure in reading and who wish to share that pleasure with you. We hope to enrich your reading life by recommending to you one hundred books that we have read and loved over the years, that we believe you will enjoy greatly as well, and that you can read in a single evening.

In part what we want to share with you is our own good fortune. As children, if we said (as all children sometimes say), “There’s nothing to do,” our mother would respond, “Of course there is. Get a good book and read it.” And because that seemed to be excellent advice, and because we were lucky enough to live in a home where good books were readily available and in a town with a well-stocked public library, we both formed at an early age the lifetime habit of reading. Books have been our friends and companions for decades; we have learned that books expand the world in which one lives, and expand one’s mind to match that world.

All too few people have learned how much reading has to offer. We have often heard people say, “I don’t have time to read.” It is true that modern life seems to consist of exhausting work and family obligations, after which one only wants to rest and relax. But the small amount of leisure available often fails to live up to its promise: It doesn’t refresh or restore. Modern leisure does not provide enough to us because it often does not demand enough of us. Much of the entertainment available today—TV programs, movies, and magazines of uninspiring banality—demands nothing at all; one is reduced to the role of a mere spectator. Reading, in contrast, is an *activity*. Though one sits nearly motionless in a comfortable chair, reading challenges and engages one’s mind. A reader is a participant in his or her own recreation and finishes a book with a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of engagement, and an awareness that he or she has been restored and refreshed in a way that spectatorship cannot provide.

Of course, you already know this, or you would not be reading this book.

What we have done in compiling this book is fairly simple. We describe, in these pages, one hundred books that can be read with great enjoyment in the course of a single evening. (Sometimes, admittedly, the evening will last a little beyond your normal bedtime, and, if you prefer, the books can be read over the course of several days instead of in one evening; but many of the books we recommend will be hard to put down once you have started them.) For each of our one hundred one-night reads we have written a concise essay describing the book, telling something about its author, and, most important, explaining what we think is truly special about the book—why it is a book that you will particularly want to read. In these essays we try to give enough of a sense of each book to provide you with a good overall concept of the work and insight into its distinctive qualities. But of course we don’t say everything—there are surprises in store for you in each of the books.

These essays are our way of sharing with you our own lives as readers. We hope that you will enjoy them in their own right, and that they will inspire you to read many of the books that we recommend. Because we mean the essays to be, in effect, letters from us to you, we often mention ways in which the books we describe have some personal significance for us—for example, because they represent links to some person or place that has been special in our lives. We are sure that you, too, will find, sometimes quite unexpectedly, similar significance in the books that you read.

The main reason we have devoted this book to one-night reads is that these are books to read for pleasure. We are not proposing that you treat our recommendations as a course of study: The books that we suggest are not yet another attempt to define “the hundred greatest books of all time” or some other version of “the canon.” These are, however, all very good books. Some of them are books to read for pure entertainment; others might have a real and lasting influence on how you view yourself and the world around you. All, in our view, far surpass ordinary bestsellers in their capacity to give lasting satisfaction. These are books that have made a difference to us, books that we remember vividly, sometimes many years after first reading them—books to which we have returned to read again with great pleasure. Moreover, these books are worthy of discussion with friends. You might enjoy talking about them, and their meaning to you, at one of the book circles or reading groups that have increased in number in recent years.

As you begin to read each book, here is something to ponder: The difference between a well-educated person and one who is not is about one thousand well-chosen books. (This was pointed out to us by a profoundly well-educated and humane graduate professor at Harvard, and it impressed us deeply.) Twenty books a year for fifty years; and at the end of that time, a sense of having participated in much of what is finest in human culture. We think that people who like books will read at least one every few weeks; so the books listed here, if you read all of them, will last you several years, and they will constitute a worthwhile part of your lifetime reading. We hope that after you read our essays, the excitement of the books that we recommend will stay with you even if you are not able to read them immediately. The name of an author or the title of a book, lodged firmly in your mind, will guide your selections at some later time, when you are in a bookshop, library, or using an online book service.

A few words about the organization and content of the essays are in order. The books that we recommend include both fiction and nonfiction. The contents of the book are arranged alphabetically by author. Just after the alphabetical table of contents, we have included a list of the books grouped by category—fiction, humor, memoirs, and others, with some books listed more than once. Because the question of exactly what to read on a given night depends in part on one's mood, we've tried to make it easy to choose a book that seems right for a particular evening. We hope that even within categories that you know well, we will have listed a few books that will be new to you, or that you've meant to read but have not yet gotten to. We hope, also, that we will be able to tempt you to read within categories that have not been part of your reading life so far. While our two tables of contents list the books alphabetically and by category, we do not intend that you necessarily read the essays in alphabetic or categorical order. We invite you simply to browse at random among them, just as in a library it can often be richly rewarding to wander through the stacks to see what catches the eye and the imagination.

In many cases, after discussing a book we note other works by the same author that we think you will enjoy. In our experience, when we read a book with particular enjoyment we immediately want to read other works by the same author, and we think you will feel this way, too. In addition, from time to time in these essays we take note of ways in which the books we discuss are in some way related; we hope that the cross-references we provide will be helpful to you. If you find them distracting, feel free to ignore them. In any case, a parenthetical reference to page so-and-so does not mean that we think you should turn to that page immediately, but rather that you might wish to do so sometime at your leisure.

For each of the one hundred books we recommend, we give some information about publishers and editions. This information is not intended to be comprehensive. (In any case, an attempt to be comprehensive would be doomed by the realities of modern publishing and bookselling, which ensure that books go out of print or out of stock with distressing speed.) However, we have made every effort to ensure that the information we provide was accurate as of the time this book went to press. Where possible, we give the original hardcover publisher and date, information on one or more readily available paperback editions, and information on any other editions that we find particularly appealing. Many of the books that we recommend have achieved the status of standards or classics, and it is likely that you will be able to find them for sale in one edition or another. Others are more obscure and may be unavailable in most bookstores; but we believe that all of them can be found, sometimes after a bit of pleasurable hunting in libraries or on the shelves of used-book stores. You might also want to consult one of the several excellent online services that have made it quite easy to find out-of-print books nowadays. Our reason for giving original publication information, even when the date may be long ago and the publisher long since out of business, is that we hope some of you might be tempted to find and acquire first editions of books that you particularly love; this is a rewarding way to build a personal library in which you will feel pleasure and pride.

We know from experience that reading more is one of the easiest and most satisfying of all ways to enrich and enlarge one's life. This book is our attempt to share with you some of the joy that we have found in books. We hope that our book will be a useful companion for a long time in your reading life, both through the one hundred books we describe and recommend and the further works to which they lead.

As all readers will appreciate, the task of acknowledging those who have encouraged us, helped us, and given suggestions for good reading over the course of several decades is impossibly large, encompassing many helpful librarians, teachers, and friends; we are grateful to far more people than we can name here. However, we want to acknowledge with thanks our agent, Robert Lescher, and our editor, Joe Blades, exceptional professionals and fine people both. And we owe much to our wives, Patricia Hart and Valerie Steele, and our sons, Graham and Steve, for encouragement and thoughtful advice.

## CHINUA ACHEBE

### *Things Fall Apart*



A common element of many great books is the plight of people caught up in social and political change. In the case of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* the changes are earthshaking. This fine book takes its title from a poem of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats; in the story the phrase refers to the traditional life that did not so much dissolve as fall apart under the impact of British colonialism.

Achebe is a member of the Ibo ethnic group in what is now Nigeria, a former British colony that is the most populous country in Africa. He was born to a family that had adopted Christianity, yet he was able to learn of and understand the older ways that had largely disappeared just decades before his birth. Since the failure of the secession of the Ibo ethnic province of Biafra in 1967–70, Achebe has lived much of the time abroad and is now a college professor in the United States. It is our good fortune that his skills as a writer enabled him to capture the clash of the village world and the impact of European incursions in this fine novel.

Most of *Things Fall Apart* is a depiction of traditional life in Iboland. It is part of Achebe's skill that he involves us so deeply in this life that its destruction later in the novel is felt all the more keenly. The book is concerned with life in the village of Umuofia and the nearby villages that together make up a larger social unit. The principal character, although by no means the only one drawn in some detail, is Okonkwo. In many ways we come to admire Okonkwo, his wise friend Obierika, and their friends and relatives. Okonkwo is a man whose own father was not a success in the village; he was something of a layabout who liked nothing better than to relax by playing his flute, was not a hard worker, and, always in debt, could not provide his son with a good start in life. Okonkwo grew up determined to do better: He early became a great wrestler and warrior, worked hard to establish his farm, and became a considerable man in the village, with a prosperous compound, three wives, and many children.

He and his neighbors live in a highly developed society of norms, rituals, and religious beliefs that help people make sense of their world. Some of these would be familiar anywhere: Men trade proverbs for a time before engaging in serious conversation, because “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.” Others are different but entrancing: There is a sacred silk-cotton tree, in which the spirits of good children are said to dwell as they wait to be born, and young women who desire babies come to sit in the shade

of this tree. Others are very difficult: The male tendency in a strictly patriarchal society is to be extremely rough on wives and children, and at one point Okonkwo shoots at one of his wives for a trivial transgression, fortunately missing with his ancient rifle. And there is bitter warfare when other methods of settling disputes do not work. Okonkwo himself has taken heads, and on great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drinks his palm wine from the skull of his first killing. Achebe describes Umuofia just as it was, with what we would see as both good and bad.

Misfortune befalls Okonkwo when, during a great funeral, his rifle fired in celebration explodes, killing the son of the dead man, the elder Ezeudu. Tradition decrees that for this inadvertent killing Okonkwo and his wives and children must live in exile for seven years in his mother's village; his compound in Umuofia is destroyed. (Perhaps this disaster was earlier prophesied by Ezeudu himself; he had warned Okonkwo against participating in the ritual killing of a boy who had been sent to Umuofia by another village as reparation for a murder.) It is during the time of exile that the colonial incursions of church and government begin in earnest. Okonkwo's inability to comprehend the changes under way and his loss of influence on them stem in part from his detachment from the web of interrelationships in his own village.

The church moves into his mother's village, and among its early converts is Okonkwo's eldest son, of whom he has never approved. Once again Achebe shows us both good and bad: The church is willing to take in the village outcasts and teaches people to read and write in its schools, yet there is gross disrespect of old customs, and many of the British and their locally recruited henchmen can be evil indeed. When Okonkwo finally goes back to Umuofia, thinking to regain and improve his old standing, the new order has moved in too strongly to be rooted out, and Okonkwo is stymied. After a humiliating betrayal by the district commissioner and his lackeys, Okonkwo lashes out one more time and seals his own fate. He has in some ways vindicated himself, but we wonder about the destinies of his wives and children. This is tragedy in the classic sense: Okonkwo, a strong and successful man, has the flaw of being unable to grow out of the habits of mind and action that made him great in the first place, and it is these very habits that bring him to grief within the newly evolving society of his people.

What is special about this penetrating novel is how successfully it integrates new and old with the personal consequences of change. Its straightforward, accessible style embodies a dense overlay of ideas and emotions that draws us into the story and keeps us thinking about its meaning. It is as if, for Americans, a member of the Iroquois Confederacy had captured in beautiful and compelling prose the calamities that ensued with the onset of European settlement.

A graduate of University College, Ibadan, Achebe has been a prolific writer of novels, short stories, and plays; *Things Fall Apart* is his best-known work.

Among his other books, we especially like *A Man of the People*.  
Chinua Achebe (1930–), *Things Fall Apart* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky,  
1958). The Anchor paperback reprint (1994) is readily available.

ERIC AMBLER

*A Coffin for Dimitrios*



The implication of the title is that Dimitrios needs a coffin. Why would that be? Well, because he is dead, of course. But is he really? And if not, whose body is it that was plucked out of the Bosphorus by a fisherman and now reclines on a slab in the Istanbul morgue? These questions frame the plot of one of Eric Ambler's cleverest and most satisfying novels. In this story, we find the inoffensive Charles Latimer, ex-lecturer in political economy at a minor British university and current writer of successful drawing-room mystery tales, being drawn unwittingly into the sordid affair of Dimitrios by the mysterious Colonel Haki.

Published in 1939, *A Coffin for Dimitrios* is in some ways closer to the gentlemanly Sherlock Holmes puzzle stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle than to the grimly realistic spy novels of Graham Greene and John Le Carré (though both were Ambler fans). Ambler is recognized today as one of the modern masters of the international thriller, a writer who, as one commentator put it, “elevated the genre to literature.” In our own time, when thrillers dominate the bestseller lists and many are indistinguishable in their cardboard characters, gratuitous violence, and fascination with weapons technology, it is a pleasure to turn to the works of Eric Ambler for the more traditional novelistic virtues of ingenious plots, attractive and plausible characters, authentic settings, and excellent prose.

But if *A Coffin for Dimitrios* displays some old-fashioned virtues, its plot contains elements that are surprisingly modern. One might think, for example, of drug smuggling as a fairly recent phenomenon. But in the novel, the unsavory and not-quite-dead-yet Dimitrios turns out to have made some of his ill-gotten fortune by smuggling heroin into France in a coffin, for which he finds there is more than one use. International procurement of prostitution, assassination for hire, money laundering, espionage, and political subversion—Dimitrios has been a very busy man.

Latimer, the novelist-protagonist of the story, follows the trail of Dimitrios around Eastern Europe and on to Paris, just doing research, he tells himself, for his next book. But instead he is involved ever more deeply in a web of danger and deceit. The crimes of Dimitrios, he learns, are by no means confined to the past, and their consequences can still be quite deadly. Who, Latimer wonders too late, is the mysterious and oddly helpful Mr. Peters, who seems so anxious for Latimer to find Dimitrios? The book ends with Latimer happy to return to writing the decorous mystery novels from which he has

learned to make a comfortable living; Balkan intrigue has proven to be rather too much for his taste.

Even this brief summary will convey something of the pleasure in store for the readers of Ambler's work. He was a master of the thriller plot who was able to devise a story complicated enough to hook readers and keep them guessing and create a resolution clever enough to leave readers both surprised and satisfied, while avoiding the contradictions, unlikely coincidences, gaping holes, and obvious red herrings that can sabotage the work of lesser mystery writers. His characters are engaging, with villains who are villainous but not caricatures of villainy. His heroes tend to be likeable embodiments of how the British prefer to see themselves—as quintessential amateurs, perhaps superficially bumbling and ineffectual but plucky, resourceful, and resolute when the going gets tough.

Many of Ambler's best books are set in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Turkey, where literally Byzantine political intrigues have been standard fare for very much longer than any of us have been alive. Dedicated movie-goers and video hounds may be familiar with *A Coffin for Dimitrios* under its film title, *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944); Ambler's 1962 novel *The Light of Day* became the hit crime-caper film *Topkapi* (1964), noted for its stellar cast and its unforgettably tense depiction of a burglary at the sultan's palace in Istanbul.

Born in 1909, Ambler graduated from the University of London and took postgraduate training in engineering. He then worked as a vaudeville performer, songwriter, and advertising copywriter before settling down to his vocation as a novelist. During World War II he served with a British army unit that produced training and propaganda films, and after the war was a screenwriter and producer for the Rank Organisation, one of Britain's major film studios. He produced a steady stream of thriller novels that are like fine old brandy, waiting to be savored and enjoyed. They are ideal books to read for relaxation and pure pleasure; among our other favorites are *Epitaph for a Spy* and *Journey into Fear*.

Eric Ambler (1909–1998), *A Coffin for Dimitrios* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939). Paperback edition, Carroll and Graf, 1996.

## KINGSLEY AMIS

### *Lucky Jim*



Kingsley Amis is often regarded as one of the “angry young men” of 1950s Britain, a time when long-standing and complex cultural norms and barriers were seriously out of sync with the aspirations of ordinary British people. Amis' first novel, *Lucky Jim*, reflects this situation. The comic hero, Jim Dixon, is a lecturer in medieval history at a provincial university filled with class bias, limited possibilities, and some extremely wacky people. That Jim comes out all right in the end, after many vicissitudes, is, as the title suggests, something of a bit of luck.

The book takes place during Jim's first (probationary) year at the university. The plot is a long series of very funny mishaps that get Jim ever deeper into trouble, in a situation where he constantly has to worry whether he will be rehired. His route to the teaching of medieval history was a checkered one in the first place; he took it because it was one of the easiest courses at his own college. He doesn't care much for the subject or the work, but on the other hand he has no notion of what he could do as an alternative in England's rigid social and employment structure. So he is panicked about staying.

The characters, in addition to Jim, include Ned Welch, his department chair and arbiter of his fate. Welch is egocentric and forgetful—many academics will feel at home with such a chair—and has a dreadful family, including his wife and two pretentiously arty sons, Bertrand and Michel. (The Welches are collectively known to his underlings as “the Neddies.”) In addition there is Jim's hysteric colleague, Margaret Peel; a luscious girlfriend of Bertrand's named Christine Callaghan; her uncle Julius Gore-Urquhart; and assorted fellow lodgers and other matey and not-so-matey types. Only one student is genuinely interested in pursuing Jim's subject under his guidance, but Michie has the disadvantage in Jim's eyes of having commanded a tank platoon at the Anzio landings during World War II in Italy, whereas Jim (typically) was a Royal Air Force corporal safely and ineffectively stationed in western Scotland.

Jim himself is far from perfect. His response to the world around him tends to be either terribly awkward or simply reactive, although in the end he comes forward to have an effect on his fate. He is highly sensitive to the words and gestures of others, which causes both an inability to react to some situations and overreaction to others. He also has the endearing, to the reader at least, habit of making a weird assortment of faces, some with names (such