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BOOKS

# 8 Short Novels Your Book Club Will Actually Read (and Love)

Put aside the doorstoppers and consider these picks of 250 pages or less

By Maria Speidel, AARP

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It happens to countless book clubs: You start out with great intentions of reading brilliant weighty novels, taking on books like Barbara Kingsolver's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Demon Copperhead* (560 pages) or Abraham Verghese's epic *The Covenant of Water* (736 pages). They're fantastic, but many members of your group just don't have the time or motivation to plow through them and your discussions fizzle.

So consider these lighter (physically), also-wonderful novels — many of them award winners, most with compelling characters of all ages — that everyone in your club should have time to enjoy.



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### ***The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead, 224 pages**

[Whitehead](#) won his second Pulitzer Prize (his first was for 2016's *The Underground Railroad*) for this gripping 2019 story about a scholarly teen, Ellwood Curtis, who suffers stunning injustices at a reform school for boys in Florida. A deep dive into the corrupt heart of the Jim Crow South, it's based on the horrific happenings at a real-life segregated reform school, the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Florida. The action slides back and forth from the fictionalized Nickel Academy in the 1960s to New York in the 2010s, when, after the secret graves of abused boys are found at Nickel, Ellwood relives the suffering he experienced while there. Read it before the movie comes out this fall.

### ***Margaret the First* by Danielle Dutton, 155 pages**

This 2016 fictionalized biography fits into a popular trend in storytelling: reimagining the lives of notable, but often overlooked, women from history. Here the focus is on the 17th-century feminist Margaret Cavendish, who was known as Mad Madge for her unconventional exploits. While working for the royal household, she meets and marries William Cavendish, and becomes a duchess — then, with her husband's encouragement, a writer, science fiction pioneer, fledgling scientist and daring fashionista who once attended the theater in a topless dress. Considered totally wild in her day, she became a favorite of the tabloids. It's an entertaining story rich with historical details.

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# COLSON WHITEHEAD

AUTHOR OF *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*

WINNER  
OF THE  
PULITZER  
PRIZE

*The*  
**NICKEL  
BOYS**

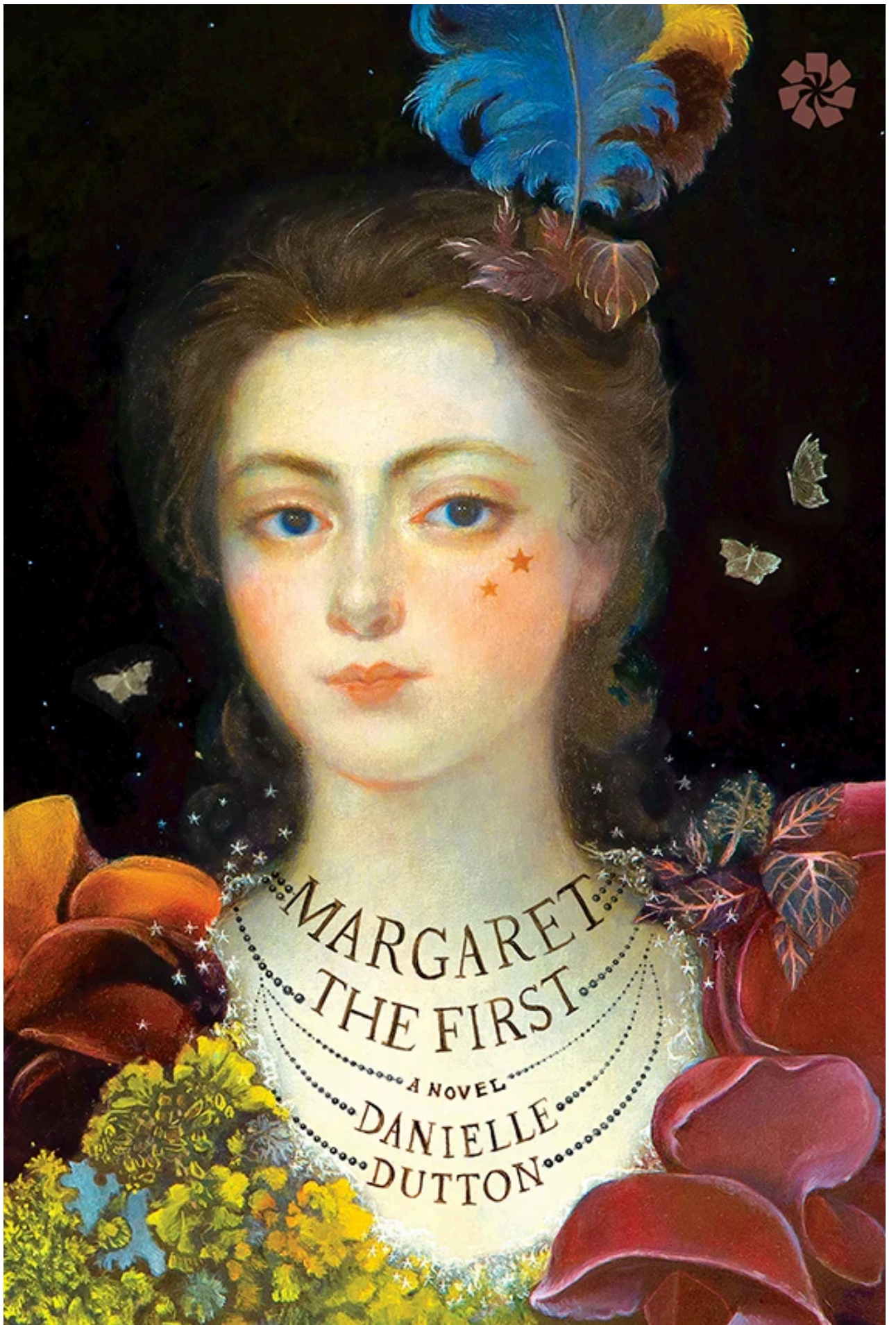
A NOVEL



"Beautiful, wrenching . . . [*The Nickel Boys*] proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that Whitehead is one of the most gifted novelists in America today." —NPR







MARGARET  
THE FIRST  
A NOVEL  
DANIELLE  
DUTTON

## ***Weather* by Jenny Offill, 224 pages**

Offill's bestselling 2020 novel is written in the bite-size, stream-of-consciousness paragraphs of the clear-eyed first-person voice of Lizzie Benson, a librarian at a New York City university who stresses over her dog, husband, son, needy library patrons, religious mom and ex-addict brother. Her bandwidth is stretched further when Sylvia, her former mentor and a successful podcaster, hires Lizzie to answer letters written by the doomsday preppers who listen to her podcast, *Hell and High Water*. Oh, the 2016 election is taking place too. Offill engagingly portrays a woman mauled by the mundane and monumental.

## ***The English Understand Wool* by Helen Dewitt, 64 pages**

This twisted tale — a sneaky send-up of the truth behind tabloid headlines and our obsession with scandal — can be lapped up quickly, making for an entertaining evening on the couch. (It's even delightfully sized, the shape of a medium-sized children's book.) Readers meet Marguerite, a 17-year-old Marrakesh-based heiress ensconced with her Maman at London's Claridge's hotel. The duo is fresh off procuring woolens from the Outer Hebrides and linen from Ireland to be made into outfits by Maman's London tailor and a Thai seamstress on retainer in Paris. Maman is full of *bon mots* on avoiding *mauvais ton*, or bad taste, but silent on some rather crucial matters, and things quickly go sideways. Last fall the author and bookstore owner Ann Patchett [praised Dewitt's book on TikTok](#), calling it "the best thing, ever. This is the strangest, most subversive, clever, fabulous, funny, wild, tiny, gorgeous read."

## ***The Perfect Nanny* by Leïla Slimani, 228 pages**

This thriller is a heartbreaking, suspenseful study on class, race, motherhood and gender that opens with a chilling sentence: "The baby is dead." Slimani then forensically reveals the damaged psyche of lonely, destitute Louise, the seemingly selfless nanny who murders the two children of comfortable Parisians Myriam and Paul. At first, Louise solved so many problems for the couple, offering them, among other things, a spotless house and delicious cooking. But the ease Louise brings allows Myriam and Paul to overlook some developing tensions. Based on a real-life Manhattan killing, the novel and is being turned into an HBO series with Nicole Kidman and Maya Erskine. The Moroccan-French author is also a French diplomat; her book won the Prix Goncourt, France's top literary prize.







NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# Weather

A Novel

Jenny Offill

Author of *Dept. of Speculation*

“Genius. . . Remarkable and resonant. . .  
The right novel for the end of the world.” —*Los Angeles Times*





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*THE ENGLISH UNDERSTAND*  
*WOOL HELEN DEWITT*



STORYBOOK  
ND



*Threebears*



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"You won't move until you reach the last page."

—*People*

**#1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER**



THE  
**PERFECT**  
NANNY



*A Novel*

**LEILA SLIMANI**

*Author of Adèle*

### ***Tinkers* by Paul Harding, 191 pages**

A 2010 Pulitzer Prize winner, this is an epic, generation-spanning story in a small package. George Washington Crosby, an elderly clock repairman, is lying near death in a rented hospital bed stationed in the living room of the house he built. George starts hallucinating episodes from his life, as well as the life of his long-deceased father, a tinker. Harding's rendering of George and family with evocative details — like the way George stashes the cash proceeds from his clock-repair business in safe deposit boxes at six different banks — builds into a beautiful elegy to flawed, wonderful, ordinary lives.

### ***Orbital* by Samantha Harvey, 224 pages**

Recently longlisted for the 2024 Booker Prize, *Orbital* is a lyrical, thought-provoking story focused on one day on the international space station. "Rotating about the earth in their spacecraft they are so together, and so alone, that even their thoughts, their internal mythologies, at times convene," Harvey writes of the craft's six occupants. *Orbital*'s 16 chapters represent the 16 revolutions of the earth the spaceship makes in 24 hours. While astronauts eat, sleep and do their space jobs, Harvey gets at the sheer outer-worldliness of it all: In weightlessness, Pietro feels his body dissolving; if he stayed long enough, he thinks, would he become something amphibious, like a tadpole? Nell, the meteorologist, watches a typhoon grow over Asia and thinks of it as the earth emoting. The author has said she wanted the novel to avoid sci-fi fantasies of space.

### ***Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan, 118 pages**

Irish writer Claire Keegan made big splashes with her slim bestselling novellas *Foster* (62 pages) and this 2021 gem. It poses the question: How does an individual confront institutionalized abuse? It's Ireland in 1985, and it will be eight years before the crimes of Ireland's infamous Magdalene laundries (workhouses/prisons for "fallen women" run by Roman Catholic orders) jump from village gossip to national headlines. Coal merchant Bill Furlong clocks the tiny cruelties of daily life but rarely steps out of his routine as a busy family man. While making deliveries at the local convent, he has a series of unsettling encounters with young women. These events bring a reckoning with his own heritage and heart. Watch for the upcoming movie adaptation, starring Cillian Murphy.

*New York Times* BESTSELLER



# tinkers



**Paul Harding**

FOREWORD BY MARILYNNE ROBINSON

TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



The background is a rich, multi-colored nebula or galaxy. It features a central bright area with shades of blue, purple, and pink, surrounded by darker regions of orange, red, and green. Several glowing spheres of various sizes and colors (green, orange, red, yellow, purple) are scattered throughout, some appearing to be in orbit around a central point. The overall effect is a sense of cosmic depth and movement.

# ORBITAL

A NOVEL

SAMANTHA  
HARVEY

"Every word is the right word in the right place,  
and the effect is resonant and deeply moving."—Hilary Mantel

The  
Booker  
Prize  
2022

Shortlisted

SMALL  
THINGS  
LIKE  
THESE

CLAIRE KEEGAN



WINNER OF THE ORWELL PRIZE



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Maria Speidel is a writer who lives in Los Angeles with a house full of books.

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2Papa

3 DAYS AGO

I might kindle a couple!

REPLY | 1 Reply | 1

TerryM691703

3 DAYS AGO

Reply to 2Papa

It will not be affordable EDITED

REPLY | 0

Add your reply

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