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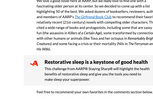
50 of Our Favorite Novels Featuring Fantastic Older Characters

Enjoy these great reads with lot or fascinating protagonists over 50

By Christina Ianziti and Kim Ann Zimmermann
Published March 20, 2018



Top: Lizabeth Scott in gold in Lizzie; Jeanne Moreau in the beloved cult film "Bonnie & Clyde" Clockwise: Lizzie; Jeanne Moreau

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We love a good novel here at AARP, but we really love to find one with a fascinating older person at its center. So we decided to come up with a list of our favorite novels featuring fantastic older characters. Our staff members and members of AARP's The Girlfriend Book Club recommended their favorite relatively recent (21st century) reads with compelling older characters. They chose novels that span many genres, including romance, crime, science fiction and fantasy. We hope you'll find a great read in this lineup. Of course, we left out the classics of literature, such as Charlotte's Web or Gone with the Wind (Twelves) and some facing a crisis or their mortality (Mrs. in The Increase and Ms. Wilby).

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Feel free to recommend your own favorites in the comments section below.

(Note: The books are organized by theme, not ranked from best to worst.)

All-around favorites

1. A Man Called Ove by Fredrik Backman, translated by Henning Koch (2014)

The debut novel by Swedish author Fredrik Backman is already a beloved classic of its genre. A grumpy older character finds his predictable schedule upset by a pushy neighbor who, with her family, moves into his neighborhood and bring light and purpose to his life. Curmudgeon Ove and his cat – plus the friends in a movie version, A Man Called Ove – were so known to drive into apoplexy are also. These two neighbors include (they accidentally drive into his mailbox, for starters) and force him to engage with the world.

2. Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Strout (2008)

What can we say about Elizabeth Strout? In every novel, she quietly and powerfully explores the complicated lives of people who, on the surface, seem ordinary but reveal by Pulitzer Prize-winner – introduces us to the titular, ever-curmudgeonly retired schoolteacher in the fictional town of Crosby, Maine, who has warmth and kindness at her core. She appears in subsequent books, including 2019's Olive, Again, and Strout's latest, Anything Is Possible, which is a series of character, the kind and often befuddled Lucy Barton). Frances McDormand won an Emmy for her role as Olive in the 2014 HBO miniseries based on the book.

3. Then of Golden by Allen Levi (2021)

And a group of book-loving friends. "What are you reading?" and at least one is likely to point to this gorgeous debut novel, written and self-published by Levi, a retired pharmacist and musician in Georgia. The small-town, Southern sensibility that can be, Strout & Goodreads Reviews a slightly mysterious, sexually fluid character, Jeremiah Jones, who arrives in Vidalia and begins to the fictional Georgia town of Golden — for reasons unclear until the story's end — and works a kind of magic through his warmth and generosity. (Watch an interview with Levi by Shelley Ewing, the editor of AARP's The Girlfriend.

4. Remarkably Bright Creatures by Shelby Van Pelt (2022)

This bestseller has a unique premise. A 70-year-old widow, Tova, who works as an aquarium's nightime cleaner, develops a deep friendship with a very intelligent octopus named Marcus. Tova's life is upended when a young intern (who is one of the novel's many fine, by-the-book characters) is assigned to examine of Tova's life so far — and while a destructive inspector circles closer.

5. The Three Pines series (Inspector Gamache) by Louise Penny

The Canadian author has published 20 novels in her best-selling detective series set in the quaint, if disturbingly murder-prone, Quebec village of Three Pines. The series, which is set in the Eastern Townships, is populated by intelligent, unassuming Inspector Jean-Guy Beauvoir, a recovering alcoholic and opinion-a-trimmed mustache. He tends to look for the good in others despite the darkness he contends with in his job. Penny's 21st installment, Kind Measure, Cities, comes out in October. Expect another smart, well-planned mystery to be solved by the Sûreté du Québec's finest.

6. The Dave Robicheaux series by James Lee Burke

This series started back in the '80s, but we can't exclude Robicheaux, who's still appearing in new books by the family. Edgar Award-winning mysterious crime author. As his many fans know, Robicheaux is sympathetic if troubled character Dave Robicheaux, a former New Orleans police detective and Vietnam veteran who's forever battling his alcoholism, demons from both his childhood and the war, and the occasional mob boss. Burke's latest, Wayward Souls, is set in the west confounding crimes in New Orleans and the nowhere backwaters of Louisiana, with the help of his partner, Cletus Purcel. The latest and 25th in the series, The Neabulus Boogie, came out in February.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

Top: Meryl Streep in Ironweed; Top: Ian Hart as Jesse Q. Sickmann; Lucy Hawkins, "Nine Pillars" Clockwise: Ironweed; Jesse; Nine Pillars

Popular series and mysteries/crime

8. The Thursday Murder Club by Richard Osman (2020)

The British author and TV quiz show host hit the jackpot with this wildly popular cozy mystery. It's the kind of humor crime-of-the-week series that you'd feel a future of quietly, intriguingly, mildly amusing. Four residents of a retirement community in Kent, England, meet regularly to solve cold cases and their unique skills – from surveillance to snoop, a nurse, a psychiatrist and a former organizer, respectively — to solve murders. Kirkus Reviews dubbed it "a top-class cozy infused with wit and charming characters who draw you in and make you wonder, every, please." A star-studded Netflix adaptation premiered last year. (Read an excerpt.)

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Top: Kathleen Turner in Serial Mom; Top: Ian Hart as Jesse Q. Sickmann; Lucy Hawkins, "Nine Pillars" Clockwise: Serial Mom; Jesse; Nine Pillars

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11. Kitten of a Certain Age by Deanna Raybourn (2022)

Four women in their 40s — Billie, Helen, Mary Alice and Natalie — work as elite hitwomen for a secretive agency. When Mary Alice is killed, her friends inherit the roles from this dark-kicking crew, now classed as obsolete, their employers send them on a cruise to celebrate their retirement. They soon realize it's a ploy to kill them, and they must use their skills to survive and to find the person who knew celebrated them. Brisk, sassy, fun, and totally dark, Kitten of a Certain Age is turns out, is the most dangerous thing you can be. Raybourn also wrote a 2023 follow-up featuring Kitten. Kitti Well With Others.

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12. Wow Wang's Unauthorized Advice for Murderers by Jason Q. Ratanto (2022)

Lonely but exasperating too deep-over Wow Wang, 60, discovers a dead body in the middle of her store and takes it upon herself to find the killer. She already has an investigator — OK, now — minak, taking to the Internet to ugly-cry her pain, and a cute, Black-and-Latino-and-Jewish-and-Asian-and-Native-American-and-Pacific-Islander-and-Hispanic-and-Arab-and-Iranian-and-Russian-and-Ukrainian-and-Polish-and-Greek-and-Italian-and-Portuguese-and-Spanish-and-Chinese-and-Japanese-and-Korean-and-Vietnamese-and-Cambodian-and-Thai-and-Filipino-and-Indian-and-Pakistani-and-Bangladeshi-and-Sri Lankan-and-Nepalese-and-Tibetan-and-Mongolian-and-Afghan-and-Kazakh-and-Uzbek-and-Turkmen-and-Tajik-and-Kyrgyz-and-Azerbaijani-and-Georgian-and-Armenian-and-Belarusian-and-Moldovan-and-Lithuanian-and-Latvian-and-Estonian-and-Finnish-and-Swedish-and-Norwegian-and-Icelandic-and-Irish-and-Welsh-and-Scottish-and-Manx-and-Cornish-and-Breton-and-Basque-and-Catalan-and-Galician-and-Asturian-and-Aragonese-and-Aragonese-and-Aragonese

36. *Mr. Loverman* by Bernardine Evaristo (2014)

This hilarious, bawdy and touching coming-out-late-in-life story is from the Booker Prize-winning British author of *Girl, Woman, Other*. Barrington Jedidiah Walker, 74, has a very full life. A Londoner by way of Antigua, he loves clothes, fine jewelry, Shakespeare, his daughters, his grandson and the bright side. "I am the human Valium," he says. He also has a horrible marriage to the Bible-thumping Carmel and a true love, Morris, his lifelong bestie with benefits. Nearing 75, Barry finally wants to live his truth. Can he?

37. *Augustown* by Kei Miller (2016)

The Jamaica-born Miller, who's also an award-winning poet, spins a complex, lyrical story touched with magical realism. It's set in 1982 in Augustown, a facsimile of the real August Town neighborhood in Kingston, Jamaica. Our favorite character, Ma Taffy, is an older, blind Rastafarian who's angry after a teacher chops off her great-nephew Kaia's dreadlocks. To soothe Kaia, she tells him stories from the past, including tales of trauma — among them the real-life tragedy in which, in 1920, a messianic preacher named Alexander Bedward convinced his followers to assemble in August Town, climb trees and jump so that they would fly to heaven. (Needless to say, gravity had other plans.) Meanwhile, Ma Taffy is attuned to more trouble on the horizon.

38. *The Stolen Life of Colette Marceau* by Kristin Harmel (2025)

A diamond bracelet, the French Resistance and a cunning, Paris-born jewel thief (Colette) combine to give this dual-timeline historical novel by the best-selling Harmel (*The Book of Lost Names*, among many others) a wonderful je ne sais quoi. At 89, Colette lives in Boston, carrying on her family's tradition of swiping jewelry from the bad to fund causes for the good. The haunting mystery from Colette's past — how her 4-year-old sister, Liliane, died in 1942 Paris — may be solved when the bracelet sewn into Liliane's nightgown that awful night surfaces in a local museum.

39. *The Thirteenth Tale* by Diane Setterfield (2006)

In this modern Gothic story, mega-best-selling author and recluse Vida Winter decides to unload the long-shrouded secrets of her personal story on Margaret Lea, an unsuspecting young bookseller. Old and ailing, Ms. Winter — an homage to Mrs. de Winter, the villainess in Daphne du Maurier's classic novel *Rebecca* — invites Margaret to her Yorkshire (Brontë territory!) manse so she can unburden "something growing inside me, dividing and multiplying." Twins, fires and ghosts all figure. Olivia Colman and Vanessa Redgrave starred in a 2013 BBC adaptation.

40. *Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk* by Kathleen Rooney (2017)

It's a cold New Year's Eve in 1984, and 85-year-old Lillian Boxfish decides to take a 10-mile walk through her beloved island of Manhattan while reflecting on her past. We follow her outer and inner journeys as she considers her personal history, which is "told in dazzling prose," author Renée Rosen (*Fifth Avenue Glamour Girl*) tells AARP. "Lillian is fearless, witty and will capture your heart with her very first step."

41. *Fellowship Point* by Alice Elliott Dark (2022)

This story revolves around two octogenarian stakeholders as they negotiate their wildly different plans for the future of their huge shared property: 35 acres of gloriously pristine waterfront in Maine. At the end of their lives, Polly Winter, a self-sacrificing mother and wife, and Agnes Lee, a single writer with secrets, wrestle with what they owe themselves, their friendship and the future. Novelist Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney (*The Nest*) recommends it for this list, calling it a "beautiful novel about family, love, loss and legacy."

Barrington Jedidiah Walker finds it's never too late to live (and love) authentically in "Mr. Loverman" by Bernardine Evaristo.
CHRISTOPHER SILAS NEAL

Second-chance love stories

42. *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* by Helen Simonson (2020)

Major Pettigrew is the demure, India-born resident of a small English town, concerned with such tidy things as the best way to brew a proper cup of tea. when he falls for a shopkeeper named Mrs. Ali, an Englishwoman with Pakistani roots. The prejudices of their neighbors threaten to keep them apart, but as the novel's title suggests, Major Pettigrew isn't going to let such narrow-mindedness take away his chance for love. Simonson's debut is a Romeo-and-Juliet-ish story with a nice dose of humor. The Christian Science Monitor praised it as "delightful," adding, "Simonson nails the genteel British comedy of manners with elegant aplomb."

43. *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83 1/4 Years Old* by Hendrik Groen, translated by Hester Velmans (2014)

This international bestseller chronicles a joyfully rebellious 83-year-old named — you may have guessed — Hendrik Groen, who makes trouble in his Amsterdam retirement home. Among his antics: forming the Old-But-Not-Dead Club with his pals and keeping an exposé-like journal filled with funny reflections on the indignities of aging. Groen is a pseudonym chosen by the Dutch author Peter de Smet, whose novel began as a diary-like column by "Hendrik Groen" on the website of the literary magazine Tarpeds. "There's not one sentence that's a lie, but not every word is true," de Smet has said of his Hendrikian tales.

44. *Our Souls at Night* by Kent Haruf (2015)

Haruf's brief and final novel, published a few months after he died, tells the quiet, beautiful story of two neighbors in their 70s, Addie Moore and Louis Waters, who have each lost a spouse and start sharing a bed every night for solace and warmth — regardless of what their other neighbors think. Author Kristin Hannah told AARP it was one of her favorite erotic love stories: she called it "a complex, intimate portrait of life and loneliness, family expectations and love." Robert Redford and Jane Fonda starred in a 2017 Netflix adaptation.

45. *The Switch* by Beth O'Leary (2020)

In this fun, classic switcheroo story, a burned-out English career woman, Leena, retreats to her grandmother's cottage in Yorkshire, while grandma Eileen, 79, takes up residence in her granddaughter's London flat. Leena wants relaxation and quiet. Eileen is looking for something spicier. Eileen is a fantastic character — an adventurous, sexually alive older woman who's reinvigorated and reinvigorates her newfound community.

In "The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry" by Rachel Joyce, Harold decides to walk across England to connect with a former colleague on her deathbed.
CHRISTOPHER SILAS NEAL

Late-life adventures

46. *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce (2012)

Retired English gentleman Harold Fry receives a letter from an old colleague, Queenie Hennessy, who tells him she's dying of cancer. He writes her a letter in response, then, completely out of character, decides to walk across England to deliver it in person (first sending a note: "I'm very sorry… Wait for me"). It's not a love story; it's about kindness and connection and so much more. It's also a favorite of the illustrious former *Washington Post* book reviewer Ron Charles, whose 2012 review included some of AARP books editor Christina Ianzito's favorite lines from a book review ever: "It's the kind of quirky book you want to shepherd into just the right hands. If your friends don't like it, you may have to stop returning their calls for a little while until you can bring yourself to forgive them." Just, yes. (Also wonderful? Joyce's 2015 companion novel, *The Love Song of Miss Queenie Hennessy*.)

47. *The Road to Tender Hearts* by Annie Hartnett (2025)

This hilarious, oddball — is there any other kind? — road trip story proves that even a hoarder with an alcohol problem and a trunkful of emotional baggage can have some gas left in the tank. P.J. Halliday, 63, a divorced former postal worker and unlicensed driver (there have been DUIs) who has been drinking away his million-dollar lottery win, sets off from his Massachusetts home with his daughter, Sophie; two young orphans; and Pancakes, a cat who has the weird ability to predict death. The destination: the Tender Hearts retirement community in Tucson, Arizona, where, he's learned, his high school love resides (and she's single!). What could go wrong?

48. *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson (2012)

In this international best-selling Swedish novel, Allan Karlsson, annoyed by the paltry vodka ration allotted for his 100th birthday party, slips out a window to escape his retirement home. He immediately becomes entangled in some incredible capers involving drug dealers, an elephant and other wackiness. Interspersed are tales of his globe-trotting career as an explosives expert with an uncanny knack for encountering famous people, including Harry S. Truman and Mao Tse-tung. The fantastical, *Forrest Gump*-ian tale was made into a 2013 Swedish-language movie.

49. *West With Giraffes* by Lynda Rutledge (2021)

Inspired by a real 1938 news event, this book club favorite follows the cross-country journey of two giraffes shipped from New York to the San Diego Zoo, delighting Depression-weary Americans. The story is told by Woodrow Wilson Nickel, 105, who recalls falling in love with the animals at 17 and talking his way into joining their transport. He fondly remembers the 12-day trip, despite the hardships along the way, and the young female journalist who came along to chronicle the westward adventure. "Few true friends have I known, and two were giraffes," Woodrow says, reminiscing.

50. *How the Penguins Saved Veronica* by Hazel Prior (2020)

A prim, rather stubborn 85-year-old British hero named Veronica McCreedy will steal your heart. In this charming novel, a box of mementos and a nature show inspire Veronica to life-changing action, leading to the discovery of a scruffy adult grandson, Patrick, and a newfound mission to save the penguins in Antarctica. It's a warm tonic for troubled times and a fun read that brings to mind another wonderful, feel-good novel, Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* (2012) — because of its humor as well as its flights to Antarctica.

Magazine.

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

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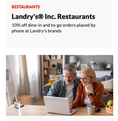

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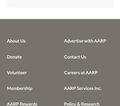

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