

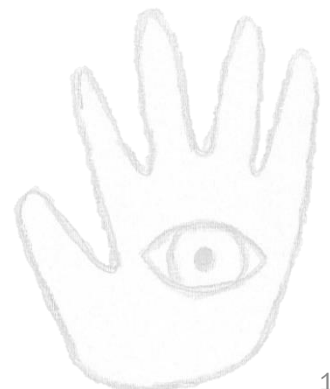
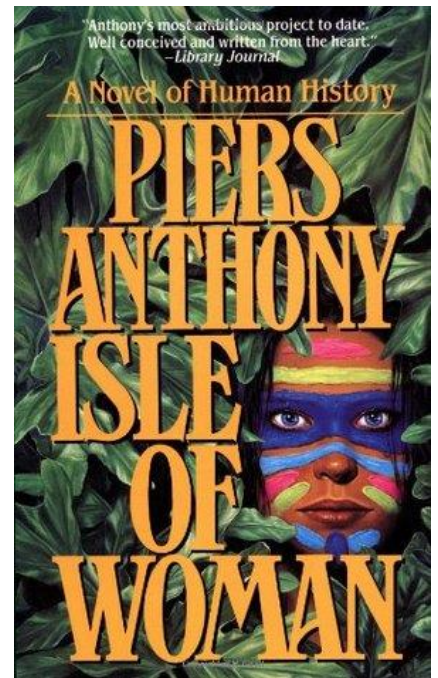
The Best Philosophical Novels According to Authors

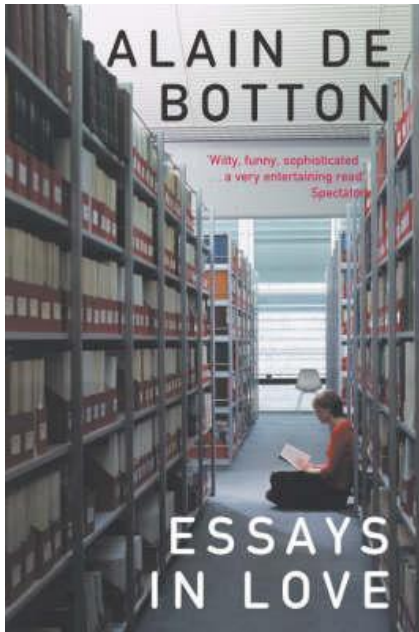
Eleven authors whose books were included on my list of The 105 Best Philosophical Novels share their favorite works of philosophical fiction. Recommendations are listed alphabetically by the authors' last names.

Piers Anthony, author of [Isle of Woman](#)

“Most of what I read are fantasy novels that are not strong on philosophy. Perhaps my own most philosophical novel is [Tarot](#), published in three parts: *God of Tarot*, *Vision of Tarot* and *Faith of Tarot*.”

As for other writers, “[Animal Farm](#) by George Orwell, perhaps. But for me the most remarkable is not a novel but a discussion of the little stories that are jokes: [Rationale of the Dirty Joke](#) by G. Legman, wherein the thesis is that a person's character is best defined by his favorite dirty joke. The book itself is no joke; it is a massive two volume effort summarizing thousands of jokes of every sub-category, and it really makes the case. My own favorite joke, ironically, is not included. I wrote to the author, and I think he was embarrassed to have missed it. It relates to the power of the spoken word, which of course relates to my profession.”





Alain de Botton, author of [Essays in Love](#)

[In Search of Lost Time](#) by Marcel Proust: “The ultimate novel of ideas, tackles the meaning of life and guides us to how to stop wasting our lives via a theory of aesthetic appreciation.”

[The Unbearable Lightness of Being](#) by Milan Kundera: “A beautiful novel that teaches us that ideas and the novel can co-exist. We are moved and we think.”

[Lanzarote](#) by Michel Houellebecq: “The novel of ideas continues in the hands of France's greatest contemporary writer; *Lanzarote* explores ideas of tourism, nationality, sexuality and commercialism, while making us chuckle a lot along the way.”

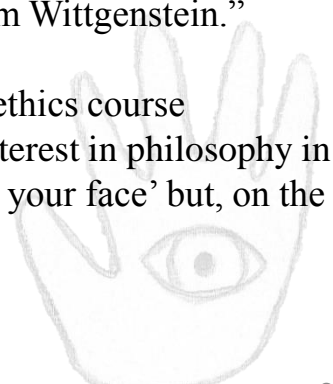
Jack Bowen, author of [The Dream Weaver](#)

[Ishmael](#) by Daniel Quinn: “Having read this when it came out in 1992, it was one of the first times I saw the environment through an ethical lens. It was so accessible and almost playful yet profoundly serious.”

[The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia](#) by Bernard Suits: “A groundbreaking approach to the philosophy of sport and, really, bigger concepts relating to our daily lives such as play, relationships, competition, strategy, make-believe.”

[The Broom of the System](#) by David Foster Wallace: “His novels are all philosophically relevant so it's hard just to chose one ([Infinite Jest](#) should also be on this list). Wallace's prose alone sheds light on philosophical issues of language and this book explicitly relies on various topics derived from Wittgenstein.”

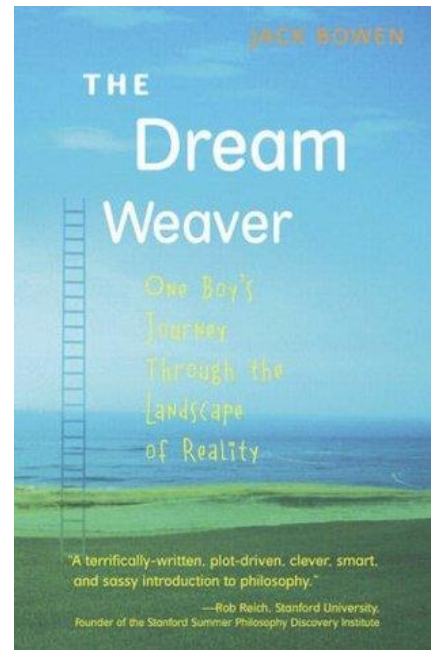
[Brave New World](#) by Aldous Huxley: “I read this for a Bioethics course at Stanford and is one of the things that really piqued my interest in philosophy in general. On the one hand the philosophical issues are so ‘in your face’ but, on the other, they're couched subtly in well-written fiction.”



Jack Bowen (continued)

[Fahrenheit 451](#) by Ray Bradbury: “I read this book as a book of fiction and then, immediately thereafter, re-read it with a pencil in hand and it served as a catalyst for some really deep philosophical reflection, not just on the more obvious issues of censorship and the media, but even more so personally as far as what sort of life I wanted to have and what I valued.”

[Resuscitation of a Hanged Man](#) by Denis Johnson: “Often connected to themes of Kierkegaard, this book subtly touches on various philosophical themes without being overtly philosophical.”



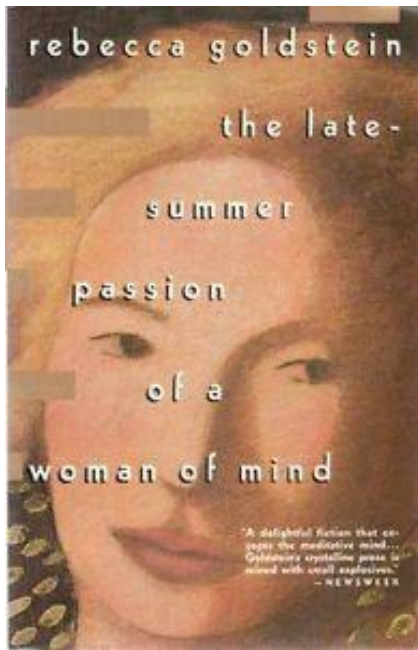
Rebecca Goldstein, author of [The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind](#)

The following remarks are excerpted with Goldstein’s permission from an interview granted to Five Books in November 2016. The complete interview is available at <http://fivebooks.com/interview/best-philosophical-novels>.

[Middlemarch](#) by George Eliot: “Not only is Eliot a great moral thinker—you feel the movement of a philosophically sophisticated ethicist moving behind the scenes of *Middlemarch*—but it’s also about the use of literature in moving us morally forward.”

“For her, the general problem is the same as for Spinoza, which is, ‘What do we do about human nature? We are stuck with human nature. How can we nevertheless make moral progress, become something more, given the smallness of human nature?’”





Rebecca Goldstein (continued)

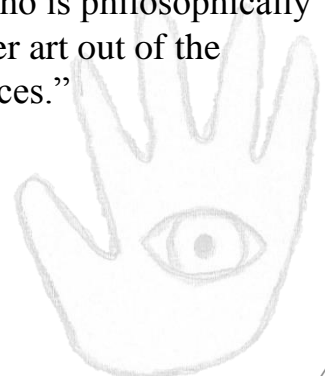
[Moby-Dick](#) by Herman Melville: “Melville became obsessed with the... question: If we are Spinozists and persuaded by his deductive argument [for *Deus sive natura*, the view that God and nature are interchangeable], what happens to our autonomy? We’re swamped by infinity. That, I believe, is at the heart of what’s going on in *Moby-Dick*. What that great white whale represents is impersonal, logically constituted reality that has no regard for our autonomy, that would swamp us, that would reconstitute our individuality in its image, and it’s an insult to our very beings. It may be reality, but it’s a personal insult.”

[Death in Venice](#) by Thomas Mann: “I’m really interested in novels that are deeply Platonic, and *Death in Venice* is deeply Platonic. The dialogues of Plato lurking in the background are the *Symposium* and, even more importantly, the *Phaedrus*.”

“[The question of how to distinguish the good madness which leads to truth from the bad madness of delusion] is a question that I am terrifically interested in and *Death in Venice* dramatizes it brilliantly. It’s an incredibly moving novel and I love the movie adaptation by Visconti as well, even though its dialogue gets a bit heavy-handed at times.”

[The Black Prince](#) by Iris Murdoch: “Iris Murdoch means a great deal to me because, though I never meant to be a novelist, I always loved her novels very much, even back when I didn’t tell any of my colleagues that I read novels on the sly.

“Again, the feeling, when you read the book, of someone who is philosophically talented and ferociously knowledgeable, and who creates her art out of the tensions that this philosophical talent and knowledge produces.”



Rebecca Goldstein (continued)

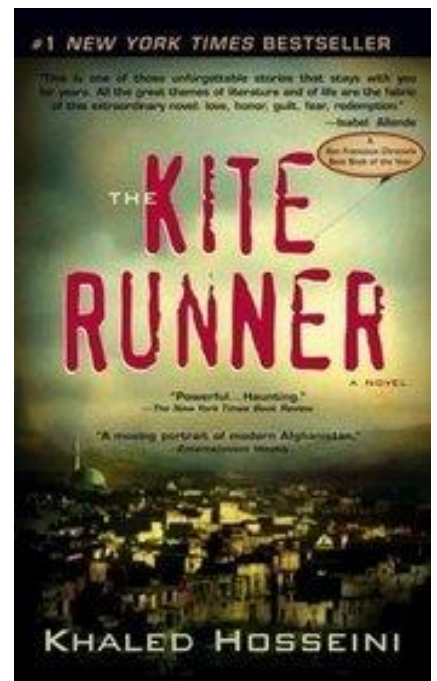
[Infinite Jest](#) by David Foster Wallace: “It’s an extraordinary book and I, of course, have my own interpretation about what is going on. I think it’s about... recursion: When you have an operation that you perform on some element—say a number—and you get a new product as a result, and then you perform the very same operation on that product and get a new product, and then you perform the operation on that, *ad infinitum*.”

“One of the things that [Wallace] is examining in the novel is the various games that we play, many of them recursive. The way we lose ourselves in recursively looping games can drown our sense of isolation and loneliness and misery. They can make us feel as if we’re making progress in our lives. And of course, since recursion generates infinity, perhaps this sense isn’t illusive. Or perhaps it is. Perhaps on the human level it undeniably is. That’s a despairing line to take, and Wallace takes it.”

Khaled Hosseini, author of [The Kite Runner](#)

[The Moon Reminded Me](#) by Ellen Grace O'Brian:

“From one poem to the next, O'Brian's lens shrinks and widens without effort, to exhilarating, near vertiginous effect. Her images flit from the ordinary to the timeless, from the foam of a wave absorbed by sand, to the ancient longing of humans for the Eternal. Above all, she is aware, on every page, and beautifully, to the immovable presence of Love in the universe. Love unbridled and all-pervading, Love bursting with grace and beautiful madness, residing in us all, waiting only to unfurl. What a gift this collection is.”



Ki Longfellow, author of [The Secret Magdalene](#)

[The Oz books](#) by L. Frank Baum

[The Master and Margarita](#) by Mikhail Bulgakov

[The Stranger](#) by Albert Camus (and all of his works)

[Don Quixote](#) by Miguel De Cervantes

[Crime and Punishment](#) by Fyodor Dostoevsky (and all of his works)

[The Trial](#) by Franz Kafka (and all of his works)

[The Last Temptation of Christ](#) by Nikos

Kazantzakis (though she perhaps enjoys it less than she used to)

[The Fan Man](#) by William Kotzwinkle

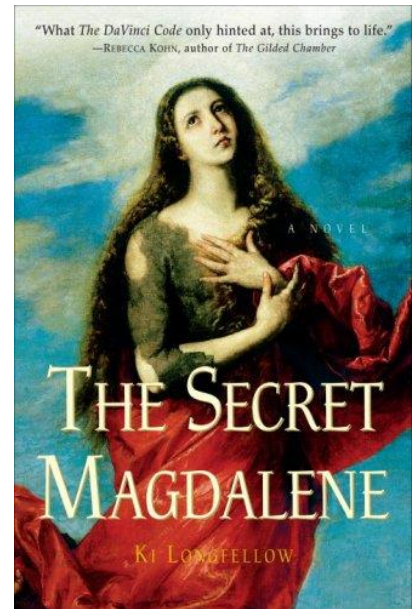
[Moby-Dick](#) by Herman Melville

[Lolita](#) by Vladimir Nabokov (and all of his works)

[The Third Policeman](#) by Flann O'Brien (and all of his works)

[Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead](#) by Tom Stoppard

[Candide](#) by Voltaire



She adds “I forced myself to stop here. There are so many more... Long ago, the list would be rather different. I wonder how different it will be a decade from now.”

James K. Morrow, author of [Towing Jehovah](#)

[The Mind-Body Problem](#) by Rebecca Goldstein

“In her first novel, philosopher Rebecca Newberger Goldstein deftly satirized the ‘linguistic turn’ in Anglo-American analytic thought and introduced her celebrated notion of the mattering map.”



James K. Morrow (continued)

Candide by Voltaire

“Whatever you think of the Enlightenment, it arguably came along just when it was needed, delivering our species from the illusion that the world has been optimally arranged from On High. The jury is still out on whether Voltaire’s portrait of Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz—Dr. Pangloss—is a cartoonish libel or a deserved comeuppance. I prefer the latter interpretation.”

The Stranger by Albert Camus

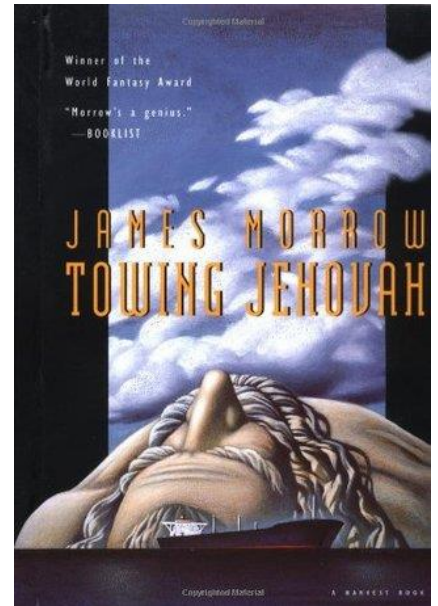
“Although [Camus] disavowed the label ‘existentialist,’ the term invariably surfaces in conversations about his chilling antihero, Meursault, who personifies the tension between personal freedom and external imperatives, eventually affirming ‘the benign indifference of the universe.’”

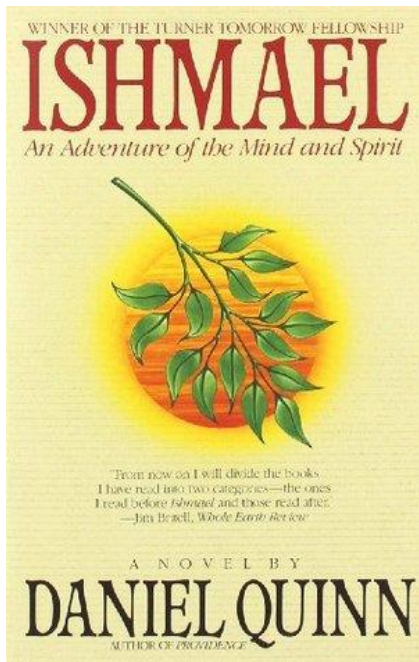
Raintree County by Ross Lockridge

“Forget the god-awful movie adaptation with Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. Ross Lockridge’s dense, epic, and complex novel subtly maps Plato’s *Republic* onto the American experiment and features a contemporaneous Socrates called Jerusalem Webster Stiles.”

Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

“Although he was evidently not conversant with German philosophy during the composition of his psychological masterpiece, Fyodor Dostoyevsky tells of a self-made Nietzschean superman’s fall from grace and ascent to wisdom.”



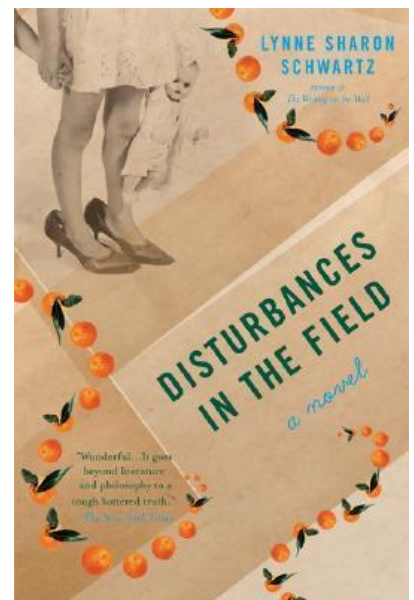


Daniel Quinn, author of [Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit](#)

Quinn's list favors several lesser-known books: [Leonardo's Judas](#) by Leo Perutz, [The Temp](#) by Brigitte Lozerech (little known outside France), [The Parable of the Blind](#) by Gert Hofmann, [The Limits of Vision](#) by Robert Irwin (seldom read), [A New History of Torments](#) by Zulfikar Ghose (seldom read), [The Assignment](#) by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, [The Journey to the East](#) by Hermann Hesse, and [Suspects](#) by David Thomson (seldom read).

Lynne Sharon Schwartz, author of [Disturbances in the Field](#)

“The greatest philosophical novel is Marcel Proust's [In Search of Lost Time](#), which of course is universally known. Then there's Thomas Mann's [The Magic Mountain](#), which has one of the best long discussions of time that I've ever read, plus ongoing philosophical arguments between two characters of opposing views. Virginia Woolf's novels are all philosophical, in the manner in which she approaches style and character, especially in [The Waves](#). And something I've read just recently, Paul Murray's [The Mark and the Void](#), is a rather funny/serious consideration of the role international financial shenanigans play in the world today--definitely philosophical for our era. Another contemporary novel that impressed me is Sheila Heti's [How Should a Person Be?](#), which explores exactly that, through the antics of the heroine. Of course there are dozens more: Orwell's [1984](#), the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Vladimir Nabokov and Orhan Pamuk; Jim Crace's [Being Dead](#) occurs to me, a wonderful book about a murder that dwells not only on the characters' past lives but also on the decomposition of their bodies—depending of course on how far you want to stretch the term ‘philosophical.’”



Peter Watts, author of [Blindsight](#)

“I don't know if I have read any [strictly] philosophical novels. The neurologist David Eagleman wrote a collection of short fiction vignettes about various types of afterlife, bundled between a single set of covers as [Sum](#); I loved it, but it's not a novel.”



"You could argue that science fiction is infested with philosophy, almost by definition. [Ursula K.] le Guin's [The Left Hand of Darkness](#) and [The Dispossessed](#) are pretty clearly thought experiments in gender and politics and the nature of knowledge. [Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?](#) [by Philip K. Dick] is a rumination on the essential nature of humanity, inspired by Dick's research into the concentration camps of WW2. It's hard to imagine a more philosophical sentiment than 'We don't want other worlds; we want mirrors,' which lies at the thematic heart of [Stanislaw] Lem's [Solaris](#). [R. Scott] Bakker's [Neuropath](#) dissects (actually, vivisects) the concept of free will. You pick up any SF book at random, chances are you'll be able to find some element that can be described as 'philosophical' if you squint hard enough.”

“[1984](#) [by George Orwell]. Obviously.”

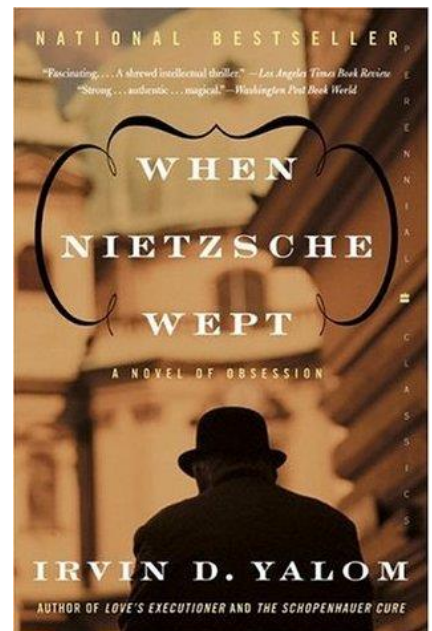


Peter Watts (continued)

“I love all those titles, but I hesitate to call them ‘philosophical’ because that puts you on one hell of a slippery slope. The central question of science fiction is ‘What if?’—and if that’s not just a different facet of ‘What is the nature of,’ then it’s at least in the same genus. Every time you propose a new way of looking at something, you’re being philosophical. Every time you lapse into social commentary, you’re spouting philosophy. It may be hackneyed, derivative, shallow philosophy, but you’re still engaging in ‘a rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct,’ to cadge a definition from dictionary.com. Hell, you could describe everything [Kurt] Vonnegut ever wrote as philosophy: [Galapagos](#), anyone? [Slaughterhouse-Five](#)? And those are brilliant books, and they do contain philosophical elements, but to describe all these as ‘philosophical novels’ is like proudly proclaiming William Shatner to be ‘Canadian’ because he passed through town on his way to Hollywood. You can make the case, technically, but it makes you look really insecure.”

Irvin D. Yalom, author of [When Nietzsche Wept](#)

Yalom recommends the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Miguel de Unamuno, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Samuel Beckett, Milan Kundera, Hermann Hesse, Álvaro Mutis and Knut Hamsun.



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