



THE SHELF

5 books to read as a performative male

A guide to looking like you read without actually doing the heavy lifting

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If you have ever carried a tote bag to a coffee shop solely to place it on the table next to a freshly prepared matcha latte, you already know the assignment. Reading, in the modern era, isn't really about "reading" or enjoying a story—it is about signaling. It is about letting the person seated at the next table know that while you could be doomscrolling TikTok, you choose to instead engage with a higher form of brain simulation.

But you can't just read anything, right? You can't be caught dead with a James Patterson thriller or, god forbid, a book with a bright, cartoonish cover. You need a prop that says: "I am complex, suffering an existential crisis, and emotionally vulnerable—but only in a way that will also make me look intellectual".

Hence, here's a list of five essential books for the quintessential performative-male checklist, and exactly who they are for:

Infinite Jest
Little, Brown and Company, 1996
David Foster Wallace

This book puts you into the shoes of an intellectual endurance athlete. You don't just read *Infinite Jest*; you deploy it. Carrying this thousand-page brick of a book is a physical commitment that screams "I have stronger wrists and better cognitive stamina than you". The key here is the footnotes. When you are seen reading this in public, you must constantly flip back and forth between the main text and the footnotes with a look of mild annoyance, as though the author is personally testing your patience but you respect the challenge. This is peak pretentious energy.

The Stranger
Vintage International, 1989
Albert Camus

This is the book for the guy who wears a beanie above his ears in July. You want to project an aura of detached dystopia, a sense that you are simply too aware of the absurdity of existence to care about mundane things like "doing groceries" or "having a job". *The Stranger* is a short novella—which is great because it leaves you more time to look moody. It signals that you are deep, too deep to enjoy

parties. You aren't sad; you are existential. You aren't lost; you are purposefully not found.

Sapiens
Dvir Publishing House Ltd., 2011
Yuval Noah Harari

This is the holy bible for the man who optimises his sleep cycle and drinks muddy mushroom water instead of freshly brewed coffee. Reading *Sapiens* tells the world that you view human history not as a story, but as a dataset. It signals that you are ready to explain "evolutionary psychology" to a woman who has a degree in psychology itself. You want to look like you understand the backend code of humanity.

Norwegian Wood
Kodansha, 1987
Haruki Murakami

This is the bait. You use Murakami when you want to attract the artsy girl who thrifts her sweaters from Mirpur. It signals that you appreciate "aesthetic" prose and that you are in touch with your loneliness. It also helps you stir up conversations out of thin air as you subconsciously believe that cats can talk. However, the performative male loves this book specifically because the protagonist is a quiet, passive vessel for women's trauma. It allows you to fantasise about being the mysterious, quiet guy that women project their complex inner lives onto, without you having to actually put in any emotional effort.

Fight Club
W. W. Norton & Company, 1996
Chuck Palahniuk

Eventually, the performative male gets tired of pretending to be sensitive and decides to pivot to "identifying with the aggressor". *Fight Club* is for the guy who thinks he's a wolf among all sheep because he doesn't have a corporate 9 to 5 (he is a freelance graphic designer). Carrying this book says, "I am dangerous. And depressed. I might start a soap company". It is a desperate signal that you haven't been fully civilised by society, even though you pay for both Spotify premium and a Netflix premium account.

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ESSAY

Lessons from our literary girls: Why freedom framed as favour is no freedom at all

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Fiction has long chronicled that women have always worked more than what is counted, felt more than what is acknowledged, and lost more than what anyone will ever quantify. Would the girls we read about in books thank us for the certain policies framed as generosity, or would they warn us that such gifts often come at a cost? Female characters have wrestled with expectations disguised as care, with social regulations presented as protection, and with choices curtailed under the guise of integrity. Literature teaches us that the most dangerous forms of control do not begin with force. They begin with sentiment. They begin with praise. They begin with the soft language of concern.

Margaret Atwood understood this well. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) opens with women already trained to interpret restriction as protection. In the totalitarian state of Gilead, every new rule is framed as a moral duty, every loss of freedom repackaged as safety, every coerced sacrifice painted as tradition. The takeover comes at the hands of wealthy, devout men who tighten their grip while the public stands frozen. By the time the women sense something is wrong, the ground beneath them has already been tacitly pulled away. What the novel makes devastatingly clear is that oppression is most effective when wrapped in the language of compassion. Protagonist Offred's world shrinks not through overt brutality but through small, persuasive reassurances that the state is merely caring for her.

The chilling genius of Gilead lies in how oppression is disguised as benevolence. And perhaps the sharpest instrument in this disguise is the figure of the Aunt. These are women appointed to police other women—tasked with teaching compliance and legitimising the regime through the authority of familiar faces. Resistance feels harder when the oppressor looks like you, speaks like you, and claims to know what is

determination. In Rabinranath Tagore's *Shesher Kobita* (1929), Labonno emerges not as a passive participant in a romantic narrative but as a deliberate, self-aware agent navigating cultural standards. Unlike the conventional female characters of early 20th century Bangla literature, Labonno actively shapes her own life rather than letting love define her existence. She pursues education and cultivates her professional and personal identity alongside her relationships. Her choices unsettle Amit, the male protagonist, because they challenge the ingrained notion that a woman's ultimate purpose is domestic. She refuses to allow prescribed norms to dictate her path. Labonno's stance

calculation, implying that women do not need, or deserve, the same scope for effort and achievement as men. Not all labour is performed for money alone. Many women, like Satyabati, pursue education and strive to work to hone their skills, assert self-reliance, or pursue passion projects. The policy implies that women's presence in the workforce is negotiable, that full engagement is optional, and that ambition may be deferred in favour of domestic recognition.

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) offers a timeless portrait of women navigating established conventions while fiercely claiming their own voice. Jo March is the embodiment of defiance against gendered limitation. From the moment she declares her desire to write and earn her own living, Jo challenges the 19th century notion that a woman's ultimate purpose is domesticity and marriage. Her ambition is not merely professional—it is a declaration of selfhood. Jo asserts that a woman's intellectual labour is as vital and legitimate as any man's, demanding recognition in a society that frequently undermines female voices.

In contrast, Meg March chooses marriage and motherhood. Yet Alcott does not portray her choice as inferior or passive. Instead, Meg embodies a conscious, reflective exercise of agency. She evaluates her desires, understands the sacrifices involved, and embraces the responsibilities of domestic life with dignity and intentionality. Alcott demonstrates that autonomy does not require rebellion; it requires consent and clarity of purpose. The narrative highlights that the value of a woman's life is not contingent upon her adherence to a single model of success. Both Jo and Meg exemplify freedom in different forms. Alcott also depicts the social pressures that constrain choice. Jo's ambition is often met with scepticism or gentle censure from family and society, reflecting the cultural anxieties surrounding women who prioritise work

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is profoundly relevant: independence of will, whether exercised in the workplace or at home, cannot be dictated by policy or societal pressure without eroding the essence of freedom. Her character reminds readers that genuine care for women means supporting their ability to make informed choices, not glorifying one lifestyle at the expense of another.

And in Ashapura Devi's *Prothom Pratisruti* (1964), Satyabati grows up in a society where aspirations for women are circumscribed by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. From a young age, she



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

best for you. When the voice of repression comes in a familiar tone, the violence becomes easier to swallow.

The parallels with today's rhetoric are uncomfortable. A proposal that takes away a woman's autonomy over her working hours has been presented as empathy, and the celebration of stay-at-home mothers as 'rotnogorbha' operates much like Gilead's symbolic rewards—constructed to reinforce a hierarchy of femininity where domesticity sits at the top and ambition is gently, implicitly asked to step aside. Atwood warns that societies rarely lose freedom through violence alone; they lose it through portrayal of care and honour that conceal the gradual removal of agency.

Bangla literature, too, has long grappled with the tension between societal expectation and women's self-

questions the injustices and superstitions that limit women's lives, particularly the denial of education. The novel captures how coercion can appear voluntary when familial forces persuade women to internalise their confinement as moral responsibility. Satyabati confronts the constant weight of societal judgment and the pervasive message that obedience is virtue. Her struggle is for the ability to define herself on her own terms. Here, oppression is not physical but emotional, shaping choices before they are even made. Similarly, by offering full pay for just five hours of work, with the government covering the remaining three, the policy frames women's labour as a commodity to be subsidised rather than a manifestation of ambition or personal growth. It reduces meaningful work to a transactional

over domesticity. Meg faces expectations to marry and care for a household, pressures that, if accepted unthinkingly, could limit her independence. Jo sometimes questions her place in society, while Meg occasionally wonders if her choice is enough in a world that privileges men's achievements. "Just because my dreams are different than yours does not mean they are unimportant"—*Little Women* reminds us that neither path is inherently superior; what matters is that the choice belongs to the woman herself.

This is an excerpt. Read the full essay on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.

Agnila Roy is listening closely to the voices that never fit neatly into a box. Send her your thoughts at agnilaroy@gmail.com.