

THE SHELF

6 books that I read at the end of last year... I hated 5 of them

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ARSHI IBSAN RADIFAH

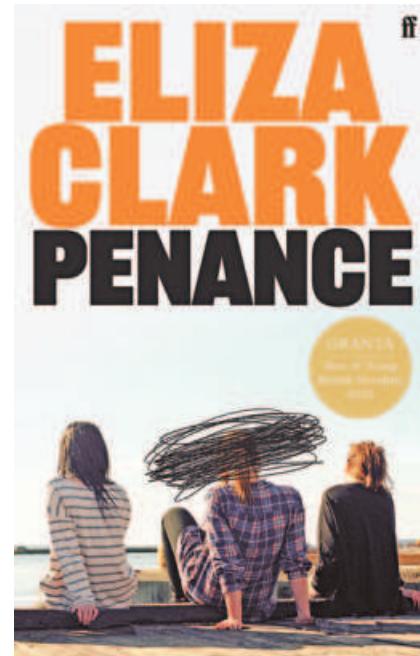
You know that feeling when you crack open a new book and you're convinced that this is the knight in all its paperback shining armour that will save you from your reading slump? Yeah. Well. I went six rounds with my TBR in December 2025 and walked away with exactly one survivor: *All's Well* (Simon & Schuster, 2021) by Mona Awad (bless her bizarre, slippery mind).

The rest? Collateral damage.

There are too many lists on the internet pretending to know me better than I know myself. Everywhere I turn, it's: If you liked X, you'll adore Y! Google anything, no matter how vague, and suddenly 12 different websites materialise like salespeople at a department store.

So in the spirit of gentle rebellion (or really just because I feel so duped and tired after this ordeal) I decided to curate my own little anti-list of sorts. Instead of a Booktok-blessed, algorithm-approved list of what you should read next, this is a list of books I absolutely *did not enjoy*.

Penance
Eliza Clark
Faber & Faber, 2023

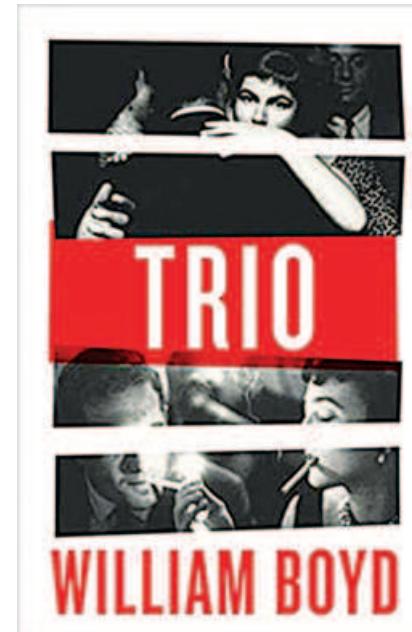


I went into *Penance* with real hope. The premise is incredible—a true-crime-style investigation into a teenage murder told through the eyes of a disgraced journalist trying to repair his reputation. The novel is framed as a nonfiction, complete with podcast transcriptions and interviews with the family. It really fits the eerie intimacy of the way we consume true crime these

days, especially with the in-universe "history" section; I remember stopping to Google fictional towns like an idiot because Clark made them feel real enough to check for Wikipedia pages.

Once that section ended though, the prose really lost steam for me. The pacing started to get swampy and the narrative tried to be many things at once. The Brexit commentary felt wedged in like a random aside, and the "prison" interview chapters which were written as breathless, unbroken monologues made it tough to keep track of all the characters and tangents. I understand that it was a stylistic choice but the payoff fell flat, and for a 300-plus page count, I really wanted it to be more of the book I was promised when I started it.

Trio
William Boyd
Viking, 2020



'Behind the scenes of a failing film production' is my Achilles heel and William Boyd is one of those writers I've been hearing about for years—a very British, very 'masterful' author that everyone speaks highly of. So, of course I picked *Trio*—a behind-the-scenes dramedy about the making of a film in 1968 where the titular trio features an alcoholic novelist desperate to start her newest book (Elfrida Wing), a closeted film producer living a double-life (Talbot Kydd), and an actress on the brink of stardom (Anny Viklund). This is exactly the sort of ensemble, showbiz-adjacent character study I love watching on a screen, which means reading it immediately makes it a hundred times better.

It started out promising as well. It

had everything you expected (artistic failure, terrorism panic, the queer loneliness of the '60s) and then some (the looming shadow of organised crime with estranged ex-husbands showing up outside hotels and cameramen stealing film rolls for their own illegal side-projects). There are many genuinely interesting conflicts throughout but the execution really falls flat. Boyd just scratches the surface and pulls away, every crisis dissolved into the next scene far too quickly. It's 350-something pages of gentle shuffling, especially after you are through the first two parts of the book. Elfrida Wing absolutely carried the book on her fragile, alcoholic shoulders for me. I kept turning pages mostly out of loyalty to her arc, otherwise I wouldn't even have gotten through the book.

The New Me
Halle Butler
Penguin, 2019



Not to be petty but my first thought once I finished this book was, "Didn't Ottessa Moshfegh do this already?" *The New Me* is basically 200 pages of a woman hating her job, her boss, her life, and herself—and that can be good when done right, but this one cycled around the same internal monologues like one single, baritone note held indefinitely. I don't mind an unhinged, miserable narrator but Millie really lacked the charisma. Butler nailed some of the specific details of temp-work life, and there are a few snappy one-liners that I underlined but otherwise I was restlessly skimming through to finish this book.

Then again, I'm fortunately not

(yet) stuck in a desk-job I absolutely loathe, so maybe if I read this again during an existential crisis when I'm trapped in my own horrible job, I'd find enlightenment. For now, I'd rather read something else.

We All Want Impossible Things
Catherine Newman
Harper, 2022



A woman caring for her lifelong best friend during her final days of ovarian cancer—I went in expecting a tender, grown-up novel about grief, and to come out of it a bit wrecked in the way good grief books often leave you devastated.

But Ashley, our protagonist, is difficult in all the wrong ways. Even though she is the one caring for her friend, Edi, in hospice, she hijacks every emotional beat and is one of the most exasperating protagonists I've encountered in a long time. I cannot imagine a world where your best friend is dying of ovarian cancer, and you, one of her primary caregivers, somehow is able to make it all about yourself. I kept wanting to reach into the book and shake her by the shoulders.

What's wild is that Newman seems like she knows this—there is a part where Edi literally tells Ash not to make the eulogy "all about herself". The writing is also incredibly choppy, every paragraph read like four different conversations happening at once.

Everything You'll Ever Need (You Can Find Within Yourself)
Charlotte Freeman
Thought Catalog Books, 2020

And finally, I have saved the best for last, my piece de resistance, the one

Goodreads has sitting at a whopping 4.1, which made me stare at my screen for a full minute wondering if I bought the right book, because, surely, something had gone wrong.

Charlotte Freeman's book is marketed like a raw, honest, vulnerable debut but this is actually a self-help book written in short, Instagram-ready affirmations that feel like the captions under wellness influencer reels. I'm not kidding. Every page is a fortune cookie: "Choose yourself." "Live with purpose." "Wake up and make the best of your short time on earth." And that's all. I get that sometimes people genuinely need to read those words but when you are expecting people to pay money for said "advice" it has to be better than this, especially when you can just whisper all 200 pages of advice to yourself, in the mirror, for free. I kept flipping the pages hoping for some kind of a narrative or a

Everything
You'll Ever
Need
Within Yourself

fresh angle, anything resembling craft and it never arrived. "Life is too damn short to live in a mediocre way." Yes! Okay! Sure! Now what? Nothing here feels earned, or even edited.

This was, hands down, the worst book I've read in years. If this helps someone in crisis, more power to you. But as a reading experience? Absolutely not.

Arshi Ibsan Radifah is a Literature major who loves unreliable narrators and Wes Anderson movie sets. If she had it her way she would have liked to play bass for a girl band in the 90s, but for now she'll suffice by rewatching Empire Records.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Love letters written in zero gravity

Review of 'Atmosphere: A Love Story' (Ballantine Books, 2025) by Taylor Jenkins Reid

JONAH KENT RICHARDS

Like many American kids who grew up between 1981 and 2011, I dreamed of becoming an astronaut and orbiting the Earth in a Space Shuttle. I read and watched everything I could about the different spacecraft and astronauts. So, I was intrigued when American novelist Taylor Jenkins Reid published her 2025 historical novel, *Atmosphere: A Love Story* about two of the first American women to join the astronaut corps and fly aboard the space shuttle. While the novel frames itself as a sapphic romance set to the backdrop of space, the story is better read as a love letter to these glass-ceiling-breaking astronauts. It is striking how closely the novel's protagonist resembles Sally Ride, the first American woman to fly into space. Reid does a skillful job exploring these women's battles with sexism and homophobia. The one area where Reid could have gone further was in exploring NASA's role in her fictional depiction of an explosion on the shuttle *Navigator*, which was clearly modelled after the 1986 tragedy.

The story centred around astronomer Joan Goodwin. She left her professorship at Rice University in the late 1970s to join the astronaut corps just as it was beginning to open to women and people of color for the new shuttle programme. Reid describes Joan hearing about an actual 1977 recruitment commercial starring Star Trek actress Nichelle Nichols targeting women and racial minorities. "This is your NASA, a space agency embarked on a mission to improve the quality of life on planet Earth

right now." A romantic and an idealist, this language spoke directly to Joan's core identity. She had been trying to touch the stars ever since she was a little girl. For Joan, humanity and the universe are inherently interconnected. She argues that humans as a species are custom built to explore the stars. Reid writes in her 'Author's Note' that she hopes Joan will inspire her readers to look up at the stars in wonder.

Despite Joan's idealism, Reid doesn't shy away from the real challenges that she and the other women astronauts faced.

Some members of the all-male, military pilot section of the astronaut corps bristled at the women's presence. Joan and the other women had to endure comments about their resiliency and a string of barely veiled sexual innuendos. While most of the women in Joan's group chose to ignore the comments or even laugh at them for fear of showing weakness, Joan directly



confronted anyone she perceived as making a sexist comment or action. Nor does Joan deny feeling the weight of the intense public scrutiny that she and the other women faced. Joan and her colleagues discussed among themselves how if anything went wrong on Ride's history-making flight, she would be blamed and future missions involving women could be set back. Reid rightly reminds her readers of the many obstacles that these first American women astronauts had to overcome and the pressure that they felt from the historical precedent-setting nature of their missions.

Reid brings much deserved attention to the presence and contributions of members of the LGBTQ+ community amongst the first women astronauts and the unspoken

but very real discrimination they faced. Joan falls in love with fellow astronaut Vanessa Ford. While Joan is initially unaware of her own sexuality, she is drawn to Vanessa and the two share an unspoken attraction. Their relationship starts as a friendship before blossoming into a full-blown romance.

Joan and Vanessa lived under the constant fear of being outed and potentially losing their jobs. At the time, NASA considered same sex relationships a security risk, potentially exposing employees to blackmail. The two women are forced to recognise the fact that if they continue their relationship, they risk their careers. Reid captures the dilemma of queer astronauts. Reid herself famously kept her sexual orientation hidden from the public until

her death in 2012; when she announced her partnership with Tam O'Shaughnessy in her obituary—the first coming out of a NASA astronaut.

Another aspect that feels underexplored is Reid's portrayal of a fictional 1984 satellite explosion aboard the shuttle *Navigator*, which killed or incapacitated everyone onboard except for Ford. The accident was clearly inspired by the Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy that happened in 1986, where a malfunction in one of the shuttle's solid rocket boosters led to an explosion that destroyed the spacecraft, killing the entire crew. Reid portrays the *Navigator* explosion as a random accident that couldn't have been predicted. However, a presidential commission determined that NASA's decision to launch Challenger in cold temperatures was flawed and unknowingly went against the advice of the contractors who built the solid rocket boosters. I would have liked Reid to explore any role that NASA may have played in the explosion.

Ultimately, I enjoyed reading about Joan's journey to become an astronaut and the evolution of her relationship with Vanessa. The novel offers a unique window into the experiences of the first generation of women in the astronaut corps and the various challenges that they faced. I just wish Reid had gone deeper in exploring NASA's role in the *Navigator* explosion.

Jonah Kent Richards is a Shakespeare screen adaptation scholar, an English teacher, and contributor for Star Books and Literature.