Author, Title (historical figure)

Melanie Benjamin, The Aviator's Wife (Anne Morrow Lindbergh) and Alice I Have Been (Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell)

Adam Braver, November 22, 1963 (Jackie Kennedy)

Cathy Marie Buchanan, The Painted Girls (Marie van Goethem/Edgar Degas)

Jessie Burton, The Miniaturist (Nella Oortman)

Emma Donoghue, Frog Music (Jenny Bonnet)

Philippa Gregory, The Other Boleyn Girl (Mary Boleyn, Anne Boleyn/Henry VIII)

Nancy Horan, Loving Frank (Mamah Borthwick Cheney/Frank Lloyd Wright) and Under the Wide and Starry Sky (Robert Louis Stevenson/Fanny Osbourne)

Therese Anne Fowler, Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald (Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald)

Jennie Fields, The Age of Desire (Edith Wharton)

Mary Beth Keane, Fever (Mary Mallon, a.k.a. Typhoid Mary)

Sue Monk Kidd, The Invention of Wings (Sarah Grimke)


Hilary Mantel, Wolf Hall, Bring Up the Bodies, [The Mirror and the Light] (Thomas Cromwell)

Paula McLain, The Paris Wife (Hadley and Ernest Hemingway) and Circling the Sun (Beryl Markham)

J.R. Moehringer, Sutton (Willie Sutton)

Priya Parmar, Vanessa and Her Sister (Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf)

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The Aviator’s Wife

I enjoyed Melanie Benjamin's earlier novel, ALICE I HAVE BEEN, and THE AVIATOR'S WIFE may be even better. It's a superb imagining of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the daughter of an ambassador, graduate of Smith College, and wife of Charles Lindbergh. In a reasonable page count, it covers a large scope: from Anne's first meeting with Charles through Charles' death. In between is their courtship, marriage, the tragedy of their first child's kidnapping and death, infidelities on both sides, accomplishments and disappointments and compromises. A great read for lovers of historical fiction.

Quotes:
...dreams may have been the paintings on my walls, but doubts and fears were the bars on my windows. (42)

And I understand that betrayal is more enormous than forgiveness. (74)

He led, I followed, and that meant I had to keep up with him. Now I had proved that I could. (89)

And I needed to see through my own eyes, not Charles's. I was so used to seeing the world from behind him, or beside him; our view was always exactly the same. It was as if there was only one set of goggles between us. (109)

No married woman had a separate identity... (110)

I felt my heart begin to form a fault line, and I knew it would be forever split in this way. (124)

My husband, the father of my child, vanished before my eyes. Now he was the hero we all needed; that he needed, most of all. (160)

He needed me to be hopeful; I needed him to be strong. These were the roles we had assigned to each other. (163)

She allowed me my despair; I had to allow her happiness. (178)

...in Mother's terribly aged face, sadness pulling every feature down like a giant hand had erased everything good that had ever happened to her. My heart - it disappeared. (180)

What if...I had the time to think for myself? To have the honest courage of my own convictions, and not the false courage of borrowed ones? (221)

I saw myself through her eyes, I saw myself through Charles's eyes, always; I never looked into a mirror and saw myself through my own. (270)

For I knew my husband too well; I knew that he wanted me to succeed, to be strong and brave, only in the abstract. In practicality, he needed me to remain weak. Content to look at the world through his goggles, not my own. (271)

"You need to stop looking for heroes, Anne. Only the weak need heroes, and heroes need those around them to remain weak. You're not weak." (Anne's mother, 272)

...I was still so often afraid in my life. Afraid to anger my husband. Afraid to disappoint him. Afraid to recognize that he had disappointed me. (279)

It astonished me that still, after all that had happened, he was the first person I wanted to share everything with; good and bad. Somehow, a thing never seemed real until he saw it or experienced it, too - and then told me how to think about it. (289)

No longer the aviator's wife, I will be the ambassador's daughter once more; the bridge between who Charles was, and who he was assumed to be. (316)

The Age of Desire
Exceeded my expectations (which had admittedly been lowered by the other recent Wharton-inspired novel, *The Innocents* by Francesca Segal).

Edith Wharton and her governess-turned-assistant Anna Bahlman share center stage in this novel, and it is a credit to author Jennie Fields that their stories are equally compelling. Edith has neither love, nor intimacy, nor even any longer affection for her husband Teddy; Anna does not see how Edith can treat "a good man" so carelessly and coldly. When Edith meets and begins a friendship and then a relationship with American journalist Morton Fullerton, Anna's disapproval - though barely expressed - threatens the women's lifelong friendship. However, as Teddy becomes moody, unpredictable, and eventually violent and irresponsible, Anna takes Edith's side again, and Edith, in turn, eventually concludes her affair with Fullerton.

Edith's decisions are not without consequences, but given the constrictions on women at the time, and her own mother's icy contempt (in part a mask for her own shame or ignorance, at least on the topic of marital relations), it is difficult for the reader to judge her harshly. Even Anna - though she intuits Fullerton's true character immediately - wants most of all for Edith to be happy.

It is not an action-packed narrative, though there is much travel - mostly between Paris, New York, and Massachusetts, though Anna has adventures of her own in Europe and visits her family in Missouri. There are also letters and journal entries throughout, some (all?) Wharton's own; Fields weaves these in so effortlessly that they blend with her own beautiful and observant writing.

I would recommend *The Age of Desire* to lovers of history and literature (Henry James is also a character), and those who enjoyed Wharton's own *The Age of Innocence*, Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife*, Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* and Selden Edwards' *The Little Book*.

Quotes:

"What can be more tragic than someone destroying his own chance at happiness? It's the classic theme. The seductive glow of the wrong option. Wrong options always seem to have ribbons on them for me." (Fullerton, p. 50)

"restlessness without bravery means dissatisfaction. She wants something, but is she willing to take the risk to find it?" (Edith, 66)

She feels dented by him. He marks her soul more than anyone she's ever known. (Edith, 86)

To get just what one wants when one wants it: has it ever happened to her before? How rare, how deeply satisfying it feels...she feels so utterly understood. (Edith, 129)

"I should like to be to you, friend of my heart, like a touch of wings brushing by you in the darkness, or like the scent of an invisible garden, that no one passes on an unknown road at night." (Edith, 131)

"The first time I was able to read a book, I thought, This is what I want to do every day for the rest of my life. I lose myself in reading." "I find myself in reading!" (Fullerton and Edith, 132)

"If only one could put a day into a potion and drink it whenever one likes," Henry says. "I would choose today..." (Henry James, 179)

And why should we worship purity, Edith wonders? Her own purity, or at least her blindness to the sensual, has happily and finally been removed like a stone from her shoe. An ocean can part her from Morton, and time can sway his heart from hers, but nothing can take away the power of the knowledge he's given her or the exquisiteness of its memory. (Edith, 193)

...her letters begin as one long howl of pain...Then somehow, she gathers herself...just to undercut the obvious grief written all over the first page. (Edith, 212)

Edith was born to be a lady. And a lady never pursues, never complains, never makes a scene and certainly never makes a
She knows she must imprint this moment on her memory like a painting seen at auction but bought by someone else. (Edith, 305)

She has never been able to hide her feelings from him. She has never learned to dissemble. (Edith, 315)

...as a reflection is often infinitely more beautiful than the object it reflects. (Edith, 315)

Her joy has nowhere to go if she can't share it with him! (334)

But now, she feels nothing but the steady pound of her breaking heart. (336-337)

How ironic that a friendship so unwavering is the one more easily taken for granted. (346)

Perhaps there were no right options. Perhaps there never are. (346)

**Fever**

Top-notch historical fiction. I had heard the phrase "Typhoid Mary," of course, but didn't know its origin. This is a marvelous, sympathetic portrait of Mary herself, an Irish immigrant to New York who loves to cook; it is her livelihood and her calling. Yet, she is a carrier of typhoid, and the government captures and quarantines her, without much in the way of due process. After three years in captivity on North Brother island, she is released, thanks to the help of a lawyer, but only on the condition that she not cook again.

I adored this book from cover to cover, and highly recommend it for historical fiction fans (early 1900s New York).

Quotes:

From the moment she was forced into the police wagon and taken to Willard Parker, she felt like she'd been flipping through a book to find a single sentence, running her finger along a page to find a single word, but when her mind lighted on that hat, she stopped. Her stomach sank. Sometimes one thing leads to another even if the line isn't direct. (62)

Sometimes...Mary felt she'd tripped into a space beyond fury, a place where all of this was so astonishing that perhaps she was the one who was wrong. (99)

They talked late at night over coffee, when they went to bed, when they woke up, and when they weren't together they stored up all the things the other would be interested in and carried those items home. (Mary and Alfred, 117)

...[F]or him, and for everyone else in the courtroom, the hearing was no more than a handful of days, a set of hours, an errand on a list. For Mary, it was her entire life....each person here has complete freedom, except for me. When she thought about going back...it all seemed inevitable, and all the other possibilities she'd imagined...were just dreams behind locked doors. (127)

At the center of everything, like a selection of notes played at a lower register while the rest of the song sways and dives around it, was the fact that she loved him. She'd loved him since she was seventeen, and even when she wanted to take her skillet and and swing it at him, even that time when she did take her skillet and swing it at him, she loved him. Everything would be easier if she didn't. (142)

"I'm not telling you this for you to say sorry, Mary. Any decent person is sad to hear such a thing so it's useless to say anything in response." (Mila Borriello, 203)

Alfred turned and turned and turned again until before him was the Brooklyn Bridge, that shining, massive jewel suspended over the water and held there, it seemed from Alfred's vantage, by magic, by a simple crosshatch of wire and string. (206)

Mary moved forward quickly as if she was going to hit him, all that rage simmering just below the features of her face, leaving a mottle of her cheeks, a man's rage, as they'd noted in the newspapers, an animal's rage, and immigrant's rage,
something that required four, five, six generations to be properly bred out. But it was only a flicker... (214)

[She] wondered if this was a sign of her guilt, a sign of admitting that she knew something that she could not face. (229)

Women said it so easily. When I get married. When I have a child. And then to find herself a forty-three-year-old woman who would not have a child, to know that that future had arrived already, was already part of her past. (270)

But all she could do was stare, and where a moment earlier her body had felt full of turmoil, now it felt perfectly still, like everything within her had paused, like a dancer who leaps and is suspended over the stage for one single second, halfway between one place and another but knowing she is on her way and will have arrived there as soon as she opens her eyes. (289)

...she also wondered whether it was possible for a person to know something and not know something at the same time. She wondered whether it was possible to know a truth, and then quickly un-know it, bricking up that portal of knowledge until every point of light was covered over. And yet, and yet, and yet. As if crouched behind a small door that didn't draw attention to itself, sat a different truth. And now...she closed her eyes and looked at that door, nondescriptive as it was, unadorned, just sitting, waiting to be opened. (294)

...at an actual, physical distance...she seemed to be able to see it better - like backing away from a picture to take in the whole scene and not just the image at the center. (296)

"Before, it was carelessness. This time, it's criminal."
"I know that," she said, and when she said it she realized she wasn't just being agreeable; she did know. And that it had been a risk worth taking was something they would never be able to understand. 
...It was possible to live in such a way as to keep one's back to the things that were not convenient...She'd taken a risk, but living was itself a risk, and more people agreed it was a risk worth taking. (297)

Every part of life feels strange, and every part of life feels inevitable. (297-298)

*Wolf Hall*

This is an incredible novel. So much historical fiction about this time period is focused on Anne Boleyn or on Henry or told from their points of view; here we get the point of view of Thomas Cromwell (every "he" and "him" refers to Cromwell - at times confusing). It is not an objective view, but it is a great story; it's a long book, but the superb writing made me want to keep reading (it's also surprisingly filled with dry observational humor). However, after 530 pages, I was a little surprised as to where it ended; Cromwell is more or less at the peak of his power and influence, but only five years later he was executed.

Beneath every history, another history. (55)

He wonders again if the dead need translators; perhaps in a moment, in a simple twist of unbecoming, they know everything they need to know. (125)

He sees it; then he doesn't. The moment is fleeting. But insight cannot be taken back. You cannot return to the moment you were in before. (168)

But it is no use to justify yourself. It is no good to explain. It is weak to be anecdotal. It is wise to conceal the past even if there is nothing to conceal. A man's power is in the half-light, in the half-seen movements of his hand and the unguessed-at expression of his face. It is the absence of facts that frightens people: the gap you open, into which they pour their fears, fantasies, desires. (294)

"...anything that is precise is beautiful, anything that balances in all its parts, anything that is proportionate..." (298)

When a woman withdraws to give birth the sun may be shining but the shutters of her room are closed so she can make her own weather. She is kept in the dark so she can dream. Her dreams drift her far away, from terra firma to a marshy tract of land, to a landing state, to a river where a mist closes over the farther bank, and earth and sky are inseparable; there she must embark toward life and death, a muffled figure in the stern directing the oars. In this vessel prayers are said that
men never hear. Bargains are struck between a woman and her God. The river is tidal, and between one feather-stroke and the next, her tide may turn. (394)

**Bring Up the Bodies**

Did not disappoint! This continuation of *Wolf Hall* is expertly done, and Mantel has dropped the grammatical quirk of the pronoun "he" always referring to Cromwell. With that cleared up, it's easier to read, and *Bring Up the Bodies* is also a bit shorter.

As in the first book, Cromwell is effective, efficient, and dryly humorous.* He embodies the dilemma of serving the king and of serving justice; for the king is not constant, and those who do not move quickly enough feel the consequences. "[Cromwell] needs guilty men. So he has found men who are guilty. Though perhaps not guilty as charged" (330).

Through Cromwell, Mantel sidesteps having to declare the accused men's guilt or innocence of the crimes for which they were brought to trial. On a darker note, Cromwell has a personal grudge against these men, for their role in bringing down his mentor, father-figure, and friend Cardinal Wolsey in *Wolf Hall.*

In general, I think *Bring Up the Bodies* can stand alone for those who haven't read *Wolf Hall*, though they will be missing much of Cromwell's backstory. *Bring Up the Bodies* also contained a note or two of foreshadowing that seem to point forward to the next book. Likely, to appreciate the books fully, it would be best to read them all in a row. Perhaps, when the third book is published, I'll re-read the first two.

*He was going to say, if I were kind I'd defenestrate you. Gardiner says, "Why are you looking out of the window?" (33)

The feeling of venturing into a watery place, where soil and marsh are the same colour and nothing is solid under your feet. (80)

He has noticed this: that men who have not met him dislike him, but when they have met him, only some of them do. (81)

What is the nature of the border between truth and lies. It is permeable and blurred because it is planted thick with rumour, confabulation, misunderstandings and twisted tales. Truth can break the gates down, truth can howl in the street; unless truth is pleasing, personable and easy to like, she is condemned to stay whimpering at the back door. (159)

They are like two men crossing thin ice; leaning into each other, taking tiny, timid steps. As if that will do you any good, when it begins to crack on every side. (185)

The things you think are the disasters in your life are not the disasters really. Almost anything can be turned around: out of every ditch, a path, if you can only see it. (281)

**At least, he thinks, the fellow has the wit to see what this is about: not one year's grudge or two, but a fat extract from the book of grief, kept since the cardinal came down. (330)

A statute is written to entrap meaning, a poem to escape it. (348)

**Vanessa and Her Sister**

As usual when approaching a historical fiction book which takes a real person as its main character, I began with cautious optimism, but *Vanessa and Her Sister* is a delight. As the author points out in her note, "It is not easy to fictionalize the Bloomsbury Group, as their lives are so well documented," but she does a beautiful job bringing Nessa to life, creating a believable dynamic between her and Virginia, and portraying her marriage to Clive.

The novel covers the years 1905-1912, with a helpful "cast of characters" in the front and a "what became of them" section at the end. It's an interesting period to choose, starting with the four Stephen siblings (Thoby, Vanessa, Virginia, Adrian) living together and beginning to host their "at homes," continuing through Clive's proposal to Vanessa and their marriage, the birth of two children, and a couple affairs, and ending before Virginia and Leonard Woolf meet.

Most of the story comes from Vanessa's diary entries, but there are also letters between various other characters, particularly Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf. It is an effective way to tell the story of the group as well as the
individual.

Quotes

Writing is Virginia's engine. She thrums with purpose when she writes. Her scattershot joy and frantic distraction refocus, and she funnels into her purest form. Her centre holds until the piece is over, and she comes apart again. (27)

It is true that we do not understand the boundaries and dimensions of what we have created until it is consumed by another. (29)

In conversation, [Clive] is like the dancer who lifts the ballerina with great, invisible skill. He makes the lifted partner feel beautiful. (40)

Virginia envies her sister's deeply anchored moorings. Nessa is powered by some internal metronome that keeps perfect time... (Lytton to Duncan, 46)

Vanessa might not know herself what she wants, but she will show you her muddle. I like that about her. (Lytton to Bell, 57)

I worry that life is always in the future and I am always here, in the preamble, straightening up the cushions so that life will go smoothly once it does begin. How does it start? (67)

It is not that I do not like him, because I do....It is that once the choice is made, it cannot be unmade. (93)

Telling the whole bald, messy, unflattering truth suits me....Easy to remember and unnecessary to defend. (96)

I had not realised until now that I have been lonely all my life. (149)

I did not think I had rooms enough in me for this kind of love. (162)

Moving a family is exhausting. Clive will help when I ask him to but cannot seem to be able to look around and notice what needs to be done... (170)

A year since the wedding, and I had hoped Virginia would have accepted that marriages are restricted to two people, but so far this essential truth has eluded her. (172)

Sharing is anathema when love is involved. (Lytton to Nessa, 175)

Nothing good ever comes from retiring from what you love. (178)

He is so beautiful, I think he must be doomed. The gods do not give such gifts for long. (Lytton to Nessa, 184)

I do believe truth heals, but sometimes only after it desperately wounds. It is a risky cure. (199)

But we never spoke of what trust is broken when freedom is taken rather than given. (Nessa to Lytton, 215)

...betrayal is betrayal, whether the betrayed knows it or not. (Nessa to Lytton, 216)

"Hope is an unbreakable habit." (Nessa to Desmond, 303)

"You cannot help yourself. You do not want something of your own. You want what is mine." (Vanessa to Virginia, 332)

Love and forgiveness are not the same thing. (Vanessa to Virginia, 339)