

## LITERARY FICTION

### Five Author Challenge<sup>1</sup>

As originally conceived by Joyce Saricks

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**Margaret Atwood:** Like many writers in this genre, the Canadian Atwood, writes in many formats, essays, novels, short stories and poetry. Atwood first became popular with 1985's *The Handmaid's Tale* about a future America where the government has been overthrown and replaced by a society built on strict biblical teaching and radical social adjustment. Atwood makes her social comment through one young woman and her bondage to a family where she is to give birth to their children. Amidst Atwood's elegant prose and complicated and engaging characters, her layered and compelling story lines draw readers in and keep them entranced. In fact, enchantment is part of her appeal, since many of her novels draw on fairy tale images and mythical characters, updating and setting them in her modern universe. Provocative imagery and ideas fill her books but never overpower the narrative or detract from the masterful storytelling. Another example is the Booker Prize-winning *Blind Assassin*. Here three interwoven story lines, including a novel within the novel, an intriguing protagonist who is not what she seems, and family stories along with reports of historical events (not to mention murder, power struggles, and greed) combine to creating a fascinating tour de force.<sup>2</sup>

**Michael Chabon:** Chabon, entered the upper echelon of the Literary Fiction world with his best selling and Pulitzer Prize winning "great American novel," *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). This epic is a story of the history of comic books in America, a social commentary on the life of Jews during WW II, a touching tale a family ties, and a critique of the moral and social constraints of the 1950s, all wrapped into one impressive tome. Much of his writing, he says, has focused on the idea of "lost worlds and failed utopias," as well as coming-of-age stories of various types, and works about the meaning and creative aspects of writing itself. Chabon is known for his glisteningly precise and graceful prose, but he is also blessed with a wickedly imaginative and energetic sense of humor. Although his style is still evolving, Chabon creates memorable characters and puts them in quirky storylines-- like the failed writing professor in *Wonder Boys* who manages to ruin two marriages, cause the death of a boa constrictor and a dog, save a student's life, attend a disastrous Seder and a chaotic writers' conference, and lose the only copy of his manuscript, all in less than 400 pages. Even when his works delve into more serious issues, Chabon always infuses humor into his stories.

**Ian McEwan:** McEwan is a British citizen, who traveled the world as the child of a British Military Officer. He has written close to a dozen books dealing with darkly comic themes of sexual aberration, obsession, and familial dysfunction. Though he writes about such macabre and violent subject matter, McEwan's writing style is rather matter of fact, indeed, almost "clinical" in a way that makes the violence and oddity seem to be just another part of normal life. His first book, *The Cement Garden* (1978), details the sordid

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<sup>1</sup> With help from NoveList

<sup>2</sup> Compiled using Saricks' read alike for Atwood on NoveList

lives of a group of orphaned children. He followed this with *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), a novel about a British couple staying in Venice and the sinister events they encounter there. His prizes for fiction have been numerous, but the most prestigious was the Booker Prize he was awarded for *Amsterdam*. It was with *Amsterdam* that McEwan turned his hand to social satire, satirizing the wealthy and powerful of society and saying goodbye to the type of conservative government that had dominated Britain throughout the 1980's under Margaret Thatcher. Despite McEwan's deep subject matter his books are short, but obviously dense and gaining in sales with each new work. His most recent book, *Saturday* (2005), was his bestseller to date in America, landing on the NY Times bestseller list.

**Toni Morrison:** Morrison's evocative novels explore our painful history of racial and sexual oppression, and our personal and societal search for self, reaching beyond the natural world into the realm of myth and spirit. Her beguiling and challenging books, woven with a lyrical style that is both immediate and timeless, have won her widespread acclaim and recognition, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize for Literature. She continues to be one of the most influential and formidable figures in literature today. Morrison is becoming a household name in America because her books appear on high school and college reading lists all over the country. She is often the first contemporary Literary Fiction author American children encounter. She is also one of Oprah's favorite writers, and many of her novels have appeared on Oprah's show. Each of her novels is intensely personal, giving voice to hidden memories, emotions and depths of soul. While they are informed by issues, the author's stories are driven by complex individuals, and Morrison's unwillingness to draw tidy conclusions or judge her characters make her novels thought-provoking choices for book group discussions. In terms of helping your patrons, it is important to note that Morrison often uses supernatural elements, such as ghosts, omens and mystical powers in her books. Needless to say, her novel's rich prose and unconventional plot structures can make her books challenging.<sup>3</sup>

**Joyce Carol Oates:** In publishing circles, Oates, a Professor at Princeton, is known as the most prolific and versatile writer alive. In her over 70 books, Oates covers too many genres (horror, women's lives, romance, historical fiction, young adult) and formats (novels, short story collections, poetry volumes, plays, literary criticism, essays) to keep track of, but all of her books are densely written and character centered. She has won the National Book Award for *Them* (1969) and has been nominated for the Nobel Prize two times. You can usually find an Oates book on the *New York Times* Notable Book list at the end of each year. *We Were the Mulvaney's*, where a child looks back through his memories to tell the secrets that eventually ripped apart his family, was an Oprah book. Oates' novels have been about Marilyn Monroe (*Blonde*), anti-Semitism (*The Tattooed Girl*), Colonial con-artists (*My Heart Laid Bare*), gang rape (*Rape*), and serial killers (*Zombie*), just to name a few topics. Oates began her career writing short stories and although she mostly publishes novels now, Oates' works bear the mark of a short story writer, including exquisite character development.

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<sup>3</sup> Compiled using David Wright's read alike for the author