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Best psychological horror books 2020

by [Laurie R. King](#)

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Courtney We’re still a few months out—at least—from being able to get our thrills at amusement parks, sporting events, and escape rooms, but adrenaline junkies still have one place to turn to get their fix: the bookshelf. For fans of heart-pounding stories of crime and suspense, nothing makes for a better escape from reality than a good thriller novel. Fortunately for such people, we’ve kept track of the very best. Read on for a list of our top 16 thrillers from the 21st century and beyond. Advertisement - Continue Reading Below
1 Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn There’s a reason Gillian Flynn is a household name: She is the queen of the 21st-century suspense novel, her prose compulsively readable, her troubled heroines—and villainesses—cultural icons in themselves. Whichever of her books is your favorite, there’s no denying that Gone Girl, the zeitgeist-shaping story of a missing woman and the husband under suspicion for her disappearance, is a post-recession classic.
2 The Woman in Cabin 10 by Ruth Ware If Gillian Flynn is the queen of modern suspense, Ruth Ware is the knight presiding over the Round Table. Oft likened to a modern-day Agatha Christie, Ware excels at thrillers set within the confines of close spaces—such as The Woman in Cabin 10, set aboard a cruise ship where a travel journalist witnesses a murder. When she can find no evidence that the victim was ever aboard, writer Lo begins to question her own sanity.
3 Your House Will Pay by Steph Cha barnesandnoble.com \$24.50 We’ve featured this novel before, because it’s just that good: An urgent (and suddenly timely) examination of racial tensions in Los Angeles, Steph Cha’s latest is a page-turner about two families—one Black and one Korean—who must grapple with the legacy of a crime that shook both their families in the months leading up to the 1992 L.A. riots.
4 The Guest List by Lucy Foley barnesandnoble.com \$22.00 Relative newcomer Lucy Foley has honed her unique brand of reverse-whodunit suspense down to a science—and thank goodness for that. As in The Hunting Party, Foley’s breakout thriller from 2018, The Guest List—set at a ritzy wedding-gone-wrong on a remote Scottish isle—starts with a murder, and then plays a game of keep-away with the victim’s identity until the very last pages.
5 You, Volume 1 by Caroline Kepnes We all owe Caroline Kepnes a debt for penning the source material that gave us Penn Badgley’s terrifying performance as Joe Goldberg on the hit Netflix serial-killer show You—but the original book is nothing to sneeze at either. The first in a series (Books 3 and 4 are on the way, according to Kepnes), this pitch-perfect thriller bucks genre conventions by taking us inside the mind of the killer himself.
6 The Talented Mr. Ripley by Patricia Highsmith God is a woman, but make it “the original master of the psychological thriller.” Though Patricia Highsmith may be best known today as the author of the classic lesbian romance Carol, she actually made a name for herself in the mid-20th century as the author of gripping suspense novels like Strangers on a Train (yes, as in the Hitchcock film) and Deep Water. Not to mention, she is the pen behind the fantastic Ripliad series, which traces the footsteps of a brilliant—and dangerous—con artist.
7 Black Water Rising by Attica Locke barnesandnoble.com \$13.50 You already know Attica Locke’s work, whether or not you realize it: The author is also an accomplished screenwriter who counts Empire, When They See Us, and Little Fires Everywhere among her TV credits. But it’s her acclaimed debut novel, set in 1980s Texas and following a down-on-his-luck lawyer who gets in over his head after saving a woman from drowning, that you should know now.
8 An Untamed State by Roxane Gay barnesandnoble.com \$16.00 Bad Feminist, this is not. Released the same year as her breakout essay collection, Roxane Gay’s debut novel tells the story of a Haitian-American woman who is kidnapped and subjected to brutal torture when her wealthy Haitian developer father refuses to pay her ransom.
9 The Perfect Nanny by Leïla Slimani barnesandnoble.com \$15.49 Remember The Nanny Diaries? Well, this is like if someone brushed the pages of that book with arsenic. Inspired by a real-life event that took place on the Upper West Side in 2012, Leïla Slimani’s first book to be published in the United States starts with the unthinkable: A nanny murders the two children in her charge, then attempts to kill herself. The story then jumps back in time several months, inviting readers to try and figure out how—and why—this terrible thing happened.
10 They All Fall Down by Rachel Howzell Hall barnesandnoble.com \$27.00 Who doesn’t love a good “strangers united by a horrifying secret” thriller? In one-time James Patterson collaborator Rachel Howzell Hall’s heart-pumping standalone novel, seven people are invited to travel to a remote private island, only to find that they have been summoned there under false pretenses—and their mysterious host has a deadly agenda.
11 Misery by Stephen King When it comes to books that thrill and terrify, Stephen King is the GOAT. Newcomers to his work could do worse than to start with Misery, which follows popular writer Paul Sheldon as he gets rescued from a snowy car accident by superfan and former nurse Annie Wilkes—only to discover that he is now in even greater danger.
12 The Vegetarian by Han Kang barnesandnoble.com \$14.49 Part domestic thriller, part Kafka-esque allegory, Han Kang’s Man Booker International Prize–winning three-part novel centers on a woman who decides to become a vegetarian after waking from an awful, blood-drenched nightmare. Sounds innocuous, right? It’s not: The Vegetarian is brutal and unrelenting, following its main character through sexual assault, eating disorders, and psychological torment.
13 The Good Son by You-Jeong Jeong barnesandnoble.com \$16.00 Ah, the unreliable narrator—a staple trope of the suspense genre. When 25-year-old Yu-jin wakes to the discovery of his mother’s dead body at the bottom of the stairs of their sleek apartment, he realizes that he has no recollection of the night before other than the vague memory of his mom calling his name. As he desperately searches for the truth of what happened that night, Yu-jin unearths some family secrets that can’t be reburied.
14 Those Bones Are Not My Child by Toni Cade Bambara barnesandnoble.com \$24.00 Toni Cade Bambara’s These Bones Are Not My Child isn’t just a gripping thriller; it’s a masterwork of American literature. (Just ask Toni Morrison—she was Bambara’s editor and longtime friend.) Published posthumously and set against the backdrop of the Atlanta child murders of 1979-1981, Bambara’s last novel follows a mother whose worst nightmare is realized when her teenage son goes missing.
15 The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Stieg Larsson Released in Stieg Larsson’s native Swedish in 2005 and in English in 2008, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo introduced the world to hacker-vigilante Lisbeth Salander—and became a near-instant literary phenomenon in the process. The first novel of Larsson’s posthumously published Millennium series sets Lisbeth and her co-protagonist Mikael Blomkvist on the trail of a woman from a wealthy family who mysteriously disappeared 40 years prior.
16 You Will Know Me by Megan Abbott Megan Abbott’s name may not be as widely known as that of Gillian Flynn, but she is equally as essential a writer for fans of suspense and thriller fiction, and You Will Know Me showcases the author at her best. Abbott’s novel follows Katie and Eric Knox, the intense stage parents of a 15-year-old gymnastics star, as news of a violent death disrupts the community of Olympic gymnastics hopefuls to which the Knoxes belong. This content is created and maintained by a third party, and imported onto this page to help users provide their email addresses. You may be able to find more information about this and similar content at piano.io
From Agatha Christie to Val McDermid, crime fiction is the most popular literary genre of all. There’s nothing better than a gripping crime novel or a tense psychological thriller to keep you turning the pages to discover “whodunit.”Not surprisingly, the genre soared in popularity during lockdown. Research has shown that as well as an increase in the overall number of crime novels and thrillers in the bestseller charts, a growing number of 18 to 44-year-olds have become hooked on the genre over the past four months. July is an important month for crime fiction. The winner of the 2020 Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year prize will be announced in a virtual awards ceremony on July 23. The six shortlisted books, which were all published in paperback between May 2018 and April 2019, are My Sister the Serial Killer by Oyinkan Braithwaite, Worst Case Scenario by Helen Fitzgerald, The Lost Man by Jane Harper, Joe Country by Mick Herron, The Chain by Adrian McKinty and Smoke and Ashes by Abir Mukherjee.If you’re looking for a brilliant crime novel that has been published in hardback or paperback this year you’ll be spoiled for choice. Our selection below is based on originality, readability and the books’ ability to keep us on the edge of our seats. You can trust our independent reviews. We may earn commission from some of the retailers, but we never allow this to influence selections, which are formed from real-world testing and expert advice. This revenue helps to fund journalism across The Independent. If you love crime fiction and haven’t discovered Susie Steiner’s superb Manon Bradshaw series you’re in for a treat. Remain Silent is the third book and follows the story of Manon, a detective inspector in the Cambridgeshire police, after she discovers the body of a young migrant hanging from a tree in a local park. There are no signs of a struggle and no indication that his death was anything other than a tragic suicide – except for a note pinned to his trousers, written in Lithuanian and saying “the dead cannot speak”. Manon is a larger-than-life character – often impetuous and chaotic but brilliant at her job. Steiner is a wonderful writer and her books combine compelling plots with astute social commentary.Buy now £4.50. Amazon {{#hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}Former criminal barrister Harriet Tyce soared up the bestseller charts last year with her first novel, Blood Orange. Now she’s back with her second book – and it’s equally addictive. Barrister Sadie Roper has moved back to London so her 10-year-old daughter Robin can go to the ultra-competitive school she attended herself. But as she tries to get Robin settled and navigate the fraught politics of the school gate Sadie has also started work as a junior brief on a case involving a male teacher and his teenage student.As if that wasn’t enough to contend with, Sadie’s estranged husband is clearly up to no good and she and Robin are living in her dead mother’s house – a place that holds poisonous memories. With lots of twists and turns along the way, this psychological thriller, out on August 20, is impossible to put down.Buy now £9.62. Amazon {{#hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}Mark Billingham has built up a huge following for his crime novels starring detective inspective Tom Thorne – and rightly so. Cry Baby is a prequel to Sleepyhead, the first Tom Thorne Story, and sees the detective investigating the disappearance of a seven-year-old boy. It’s 1996 and two little boys are playing hide and seek in a London playground. They run into the adjoining woods and to their mothers’ horror only one comes out. The case becomes even more sinister when two people connected to the missing child are found murdered in grisly circumstances. As always with Billingham’s books, this is a snappily-written and superbly-crafted read and we loved the 1990s detail – like video recorders, smoking in pubs and “yuppies” brandishing brick-like mobile phones.Buy now £7.49. Waterstones {{#hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} Louise Candlish’s new novel is set in London’s docklands. Forty-something barista Jamie lives in a swanky house on the river with his partner Clare, a partner in a firm of estate agents. After they strike up a friendship with the charismatic Kit and his girlfriend Melia, Jamie and Kit start commuting to work together by riverbus. But one morning Kit doesn’t turn up for the boat and an unknown passenger says they saw Kit and Jamie arguing the night before. Before he knows it, Jamie is in the frame for murder. He vehemently protests his innocence but what is the truth? Yet again, Candlish – who’s dubbed the queen of domestic noir – has produced a clever, pacy novel that we read in one sitting.Buy now £7.49. Amazon {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}Lisa Jewell excels at writing psychological thrillers that keep you guessing till the very end. Invisible Girl is her 18th novel and focuses on Saffyre Maddox, a 17-year-old Londoner with “a dark past” and “dark thoughts”. Something “really, really bad” happened to her when she was ten and she’s carried the pain of it ever since.Meanwhile computer science lecturer Owen Pick is 33 and has never had a friend, let alone a girlfriend. When Saffyre disappears from opposite his Hampstead flat one night neighbours immediately start pointing the finger at him. Jewell’s story of secrets and injustices isn’t quite as gripping as The Family Upstairs, her previous novel, but it’s a must read all the same.Buy now £14.99. Waterstones {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}When it comes to writing thrillers with dizzying plot twists Jeffery Deaver is second to none. The Never Game is the first of a new series featuring enigmatic investigator Colter Shaw. He’s from a survivalist family and makes his living as “a reward seeker”, travelling around the country to solve crimes and find missing people. When a distraught father hires Shaw to find his teenage daughter, who’s vanished in the Silicon Valley, the case looks straightforward.But when a second victim is kidnapped Shaw realises the crimes are connected to a sinister video game where victims are abandoned in the middle of nowhere with five random objects. If they want to survive they must use the objects to get out alive. This is an ingenious thriller with an unusual lead character. The follow-up, The Goodbye Man, is out in hardback now.Buy now £6.55. Amazon {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}Uber-stylish Margot Jones appears to have everything. As well as being the fashion editor of Haute, a glossy magazine, she has a loving husband, a gorgeous house and she’s pregnant with her first child. But after the birth of her baby daughter Margot is constantly fearful. Her oldest friend doesn’t want anything to do with her, she’s being trolled and she’s worried that Maggie, the freelance journalist covering her maternity leave, will do her job better than she does. This stylish psychological thriller brilliantly portrays female friendships and rivalries, new parenthood and the glamorous world of fashion. Harriet Walker is a fashion editor herself so this is essential reading for anyone fascinated by fashion shoots, page layouts, catwalk shows and high-end designers.Buy now £10.59. Blackwell’s {{#hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} Sarah Vaughan’s third novel, Anatomy of a Scandal, is being turned into a six-part Netflix series, telling the story of a high-flying politician whose marriage unravels when he is accused of rape. Her fourth book, Little Disasters, focuses on the complexities and demands of motherhood and is equally enthralling.Liz is a senior registrar in paediatrics at a London hospital and has always regarded her friend Jess as a woman with boundless patience, energy and love for her three young children – the perfect mother in other words. But when Jess brings her 10-month-old daughter Betsey into A&E one night Liz starts to question everything she thought she knew about her friend. An insightful story of every mother’s nightmare.Buy now £10.99. Amazon {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}Lee Child’s Jack Reacher novels have sold a staggering 100 million copies around the world – and we can’t get enough of them. In the 24th Reacher story the 6ft 5in ex-US army cop is on board a Greyhound bus when he spots an old man across the aisle. The man is fast asleep but he has a fat envelope of cash sticking out of his jacket pocket – and it’s clear that another passenger has spotted it too. When the bus stops and the mugger makes his move Reacher rushes to the rescue. He discovers that the petrified pensioner owes thousands to loan sharks and before long he’s mixed up in a bitter vendetta between two deadly criminal gangs. Sentinel, the next Jack Reacher thriller, is co-written with Child’s younger brother Andrew and will be out in October.Buy now £4.50. Amazon {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}Former journalist Michael Connelly has written 35 novels, with worldwide sales of more than 74 million. He’s a first-rate storyteller and his latest hooks you from the very first page. Fair Warning (named after a real-life online news site that reports on consumer issues) is his third thriller featuring Jack McEvoy, a veteran news hack.McEvoy is drawn into a Los Angeles police investigation after a woman he had a one-night stand with is murdered. After using his journalistic skills to find out more about her he’s rapidly on the trail of a vicious killer who selects and stalks his victims by using genetic data they have shared themselves.Buy now £20. Waterstones {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}} {{#items}} {{ merchant }} £{{ price }} Buy now {{/items}} {{#hasItems}} {{/hasItems}}IndyBest product reviews are unbiased, independent advice you can trust. On some occasions, we earn revenue if you click the links and buy the products, but we never allow this to bias our coverage. The reviews are compiled through a mix of expert opinion and real-world testing.indybestbookscrime booksFictionFrom murder mysteries to gripping police investigations, these books will hold you in suspense

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