

Fiction Reading List

At the Security and Democracy Forum, we believe that learning does not come only from policy papers and history books. Fiction can sharpen judgment, expand perspective, and explore the human dimensions of conflict, leadership, and power in ways traditional analysis often cannot.

The works below use storytelling to examine themes of strategy, war, governance, technology, and moral decision-making. While fictional, they often illuminate real-world challenges in national security and democratic leadership.

This list is not exhaustive and is presented in no particular order. It is intended as a starting point for those looking to think more deeply, and more creatively, about the world we operate in.

War, Conflict, and Military Experience

- Hannah, Kristin. 2024. *The Women*. New York: St. Martin's Press. Follows U.S. Army nurses in Vietnam, highlighting the overlooked role of women in war and the long-term personal and societal costs of conflict.
- Heller, Joseph. 1961. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon & Schuster. A satirical but deeply serious critique of military bureaucracy and the absurd logic that can govern wartime decision-making.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. 1969. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Delacorte. Blends science fiction and memoir to explore trauma, memory, and the moral ambiguity of war through the bombing of Dresden.
- Nguyễn, Viet Thanh. 2015. *The Sympathizer*. New York: Grove Press. A gripping espionage novel that explores divided loyalties, ideology, and the human complexity of war and exile.
- Hosseini, Khaled. 2003. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books. A personal story set against decades of Afghan conflict, illustrating how political instability shapes individual lives and moral choices.

Intelligence, Power, and the State

- Le Carré, John. 1961. *Call for the Dead*. London: Victor Gollancz. Introduces George Smiley in a story that captures the quiet, morally ambiguous world of intelligence work during the Cold War.
- Silva, Daniel. 2006. *The Messenger*. New York: Putnam. A fast-paced look at modern counterterrorism and intelligence operations, highlighting the operational and ethical trade-offs of covert action.

- Hamid, Mohsin. 2007. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Orlando: Harcourt. A reflective narrative that examines identity, perception, and the global consequences of U.S. foreign policy after 9/11.
- Lewis, Jeffrey. 2018. *The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States*. New York: Mariner Books. Written as a fictional government report, this book models how strategic miscalculation and escalation can lead to catastrophic outcomes.

Dystopia, Technology, and Governance

- Orwell, George. 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker & Warburg. A foundational work on surveillance, authoritarianism, and the manipulation of truth in modern political systems.
- Lewis, Sinclair. 1935. *It Can't Happen Here*. New York: Doubleday. A prescient novel about the rise of fascism in America, tracing how democratic norms erode incrementally under a demagogic leader.
- Bradbury, Ray. 1953. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Ballantine Books. Explores censorship, information control, and the consequences of a society that abandons critical thought.
- Eggers, Dave. 2013. *The Circle*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. A cautionary tale about the concentration of power in technology companies and the erosion of privacy in a data-driven world.
- Alderman, Naomi. 2016. *The Power*. London: Viking. Examines how shifts in power dynamics can rapidly reshape political systems, social norms, and global stability.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. 2005. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber and Faber. A quiet but unsettling exploration of ethics, institutional control, and the human cost of technological and scientific advancement.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1974. *The Dispossessed*. New York: Harper & Row. A thought experiment on competing political systems, contrasting anarchism and capitalism through the lens of a divided society.

Collapse, Resilience, and the Future

- McCarthy, Cormac. 2006. *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. A stark portrayal of survival in a collapsed world, focusing on moral choice and human resilience amid total institutional failure.
- Butler, Octavia E. 1993. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows. Depicts state breakdown and social fragmentation, offering a grounded view of resilience and leadership in crisis.
- Atwood, Margaret. 2009. *The Year of the Flood*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. Explores environmental collapse and institutional fragility through interconnected lives navigating a deteriorating system.

- Robinson, Kim Stanley. 2020. *The Ministry for the Future*. New York: Orbit. A policy-oriented narrative examining global climate governance, financial tools, and international coordination under stress.
- Singer, P. W., and August Cole. 2015. *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. A detailed depiction of future warfare, integrating emerging technologies and strategic competition into a plausible conflict scenario.

Identity, Society, and Global Perspectives

- García Márquez, Gabriel. 1975. *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. New York: Harper & Row. A dense, hallucinatory portrait of a Caribbean dictator's decades-long reign, probing how power corrupts absolutely and how authoritarianism sustains itself.
- Farah, Nuruddin. 1986. *Maps*. London: Picador. Examines identity, nationalism, and borders through the lens of conflict in the Horn of Africa.
- Okri, Ben. 1991. *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape. Blends magical realism with political commentary to explore governance, corruption, and postcolonial state-building.