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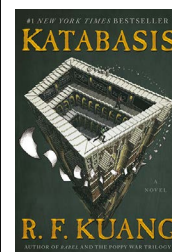


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## NINE LAB-LIFE NOVELS PERFECT FOR YOUR HOLIDAY READING

*Nature's* careers editors and contributors suggest fictional reads about science and academia that are great for the beach or curling up with by the fire.

**Katabasis**  
R. F. Kuang  
*Harper Voyager* (2025)



Graduate studies can be hell — metaphorically. In *Katabasis*, it's the literal truth.

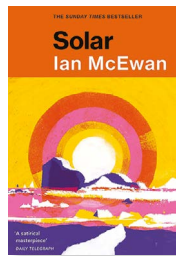
*Katabasis* is Greek for a descent to the underworld — think Dante's *Inferno*. But in R. F. Kuang's hands, these works are not literature but travel guides. Alice Law and Peter Murdoch are PhD students at the University of Cambridge, UK, the top institution in their field of analytical magick. Their mentor, Jacob Grimes, has died in an explosion caused by an imperfectly drawn chalk pentagram, and Law, who blames herself for the mistake, travels to hell to restore him to the land of the living. This is not out of fondness — Grimes was a toxic, abusive adviser — but so that she can graduate. Murdoch joins her for reasons of his own.

Armed with chalk, food and fluency in logic, Law and Murdoch traverse the Eight Courts of Hell, and the amnesic River Lethe, in search of Grimes and a way home. Several of these infernal courts mirror university towns such as Cambridge, and all are steeped in the minutiae of academia — and absurdity. Souls of the dead haggle over prewritten papers, submit dissertations on sin and toil in an endless library to prepare an oral defence on the nebulous topic of 'good'. If you are or have been a graduate student, give *Katabasis* a try — your scholarly journey will seem like Paradise by comparison.

**Jeffrey M. Perkel** is the technology editor at *Nature*.

## Solar

Ian McEwan  
*Jonathan Cape (2010)*



At the beginning of *Solar* — Ian McEwan's comic novel on climate change — physicist Michael Beard is “stricken”. His (fifth) wife is having an affair, he hasn't done any serious science in about 20 years and he is the unenthusiastic head of a government renewable-energy agency. Beard zips around the world to give after-dinner speeches and appear at conventions, but can't shake the feeling that his Nobel-prizewinning theory, the Beard–Einstein conflation, was a fluke.

So, when one of his postdocs dies unexpectedly, the lazy, libidinous Beard steals his research on artificial photosynthesis and passes it off as his own. Thus begins a droll tale of misadventure: on a trip to the Arctic, Beard urinates outside and panics that his frozen penis has fallen off. He becomes the subject of a media frenzy after what he believes to be bland remarks about the under-representation of women in physics. And he struggles to deliver what would have been a compelling lecture on climate change had he not been battling food poisoning.

*Solar* is funny on the business of science: the gossip, the warm white wine at conference dinners, the same lectures delivered on repeat. It also shows its age. Newspapers, not social media, lead public opinion, and the sexual politics are retrograde: the scientists are men and the female characters are mostly objects of Beard's lust. But a climate-change novel that will make you laugh rather than weep simply must be celebrated.

**Anne Gulland** is a freelance journalist in London.

## The Royal Free

Carl Shuker  
*Te Herenga Waka Univ. Press (2024)*



In August 2011, rioting and looting erupted in parts of London after the police killed Mark Duggan during an attempted arrest. The killing was later declared lawful, but for five sweltering days businesses were looted and there were violent clashes with police. Five more people died, with damage and loss claims estimated at up to £300 million (then US\$480 million).

Carl Shuker watched the riots with rising alarm between shifts as a freelance copy editor at what's now *The BMJ*. He draws on those experiences in *The Royal Free*, wrapping a workplace comedy about academic publishing and a motley cast of feuding editors inside a darker, dreamlike thriller about a city on the edge.

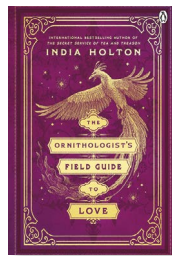
Shuker's protagonist, James, has been given the task of marshalling the journal's eccentric style guide into a single document to keep miscellaneous fragments of medical jargon and English oddities consistent and clear. Congruous lines are scattered throughout the pages: “fall off: two words: to deteriorate; to become detached and fall. A noun: deterioration”. (*Nature's* own style guide is overseen by subeditors: they care about such distinctions so you don't have to.)

Beyond work, however, life proves more difficult to marshal. A damaged and grieving single father, James must protect his family from the rioters: London's swirling summer winds come to life.

**Jack Leeming** is chief careers editor at *Nature*.

## The Ornithologist's Field Guide to Love

India Holton  
*Berkley Romance (2024)*



Come now, Miss Pickering... All may be fair in love and war, but this is ornithology. Cheating is practically one of our scientific principles.

Like her previous work, such as *The Wisteria Society of Lady Scoundrels* (2021), India Holton's *The Ornithologist's Field Guide to Love* is a whimsical send-up of Victorian manners, in which a young woman never spills her tea and disagreements are settled where they belong: in the academic literature. The novel follows bookish Beth Pickering (the United Kingdom's youngest-ever professor, at the University of Oxford) and rakish Devon Lockley, an academic rival at Cambridge, as they search for a mythical bird that can cure illnesses. The finder is promised fame, fortune — and tenure.

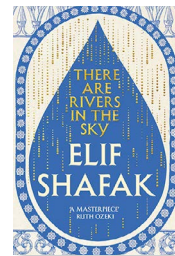
As Pickering and Lockley journey from Spain to France to the United Kingdom, they fend off villainous dilettante birders, scheming public-relations officers, an absurd twist on the ‘one room at the inn’ romantic-comedy trope and an awful lot of people who mispronounce ornithologist. Along the way, they unravel the mystery behind the bird's enigmatic appearance in the United Kingdom — and their own hearts.

A fun, breezy read, the novel is book one in Holton's Love's Academic series. *The Geographer's Map to Romance* appeared in 2025 and *The Antiquarian's Object of Desire* came out in April.

**Jeffrey M. Perkel** is the technology editor at *Nature*.

## There are Rivers in the Sky

Elif Shafak  
*Vintage (2024)*



Elif Shafak's novel travels from ancient Mesopotamia to modern London to show the precarity of water. It presents three characters who encounter the same raindrop at different times and places; the raindrop's first appearance triggers the flood that preceded the destruction of Nineveh, in what is now Iraq, in 612 BC.

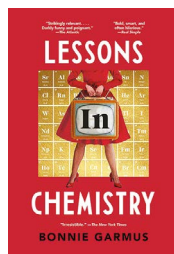
Zaleekhah Clarke is a hydrologist seeking refuge on a rented Thames riverboat after the end of her three-year marriage. Heartbroken after the sudden death of her mentor, whose research on ‘aquatic memory’ has been discredited, Clarke harbours serious imposter syndrome. She is dismissed as “zany” by a supervisor who regularly mispronounces her name and is forced to defend her career choice to her uncle Malek. A Turkish immigrant and self-made millionaire, he raised her when her parents drowned in the River Tigris. Malek questions her future in science, telling her: “People like us cannot afford to fail.” Clarke struggles to convey “the vastness of [science's] infinite possibilities and discoveries waiting to be made”, but ultimately finds both her voice and a new lover.

Critics described Shafak's multi-perspective novel as ‘mystical literature on a grand scale’, but also sprawling. Arthur, a nineteenth-century wunderkind who decodes the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from inscriptions found in Nineveh, is the novel's most successful character. But Shafak's treatment of the Yazidi genocide of 2014–17 feels rushed and merits a standalone novel.

**David Payne** is managing editor for careers and supplements at *Nature*.

## Lessons in Chemistry

Bonnie Garmus  
Doubleday (2022)



*Lessons in Chemistry* offers an escapist glimpse into the world of the Hastings Research Institute in southern California. Here, gender discrimination and sexual harassment run rampant. Ahem.

At least the book is set in the early 1960s, a device that Bonnie Garmus uses to explore how far science and society have come in terms of gender equality and how far there is to go. Elizabeth Zott is a chemist-turned-reluctant television host whose biggest challenge is to be taken seriously by the men around her.

Fired by the institute for being an unwed mother, Zott first becomes a freelance chemist advising her ex-colleagues from her home laboratory, aided by her precocious daughter Madeline and equally precocious dog, Six-Thirty. “That was how she made a living. By doing other people’s work without any credit. It was exactly like working at Hastings, but without the tax liability.”

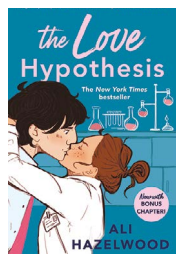
In Garmus’s hands, Zott reveals the ups and downs of being a working mother in science. It’s not all that different for the housewives who watch Zott’s cooking programme *Supper at Six*. Women can do anything, Zott shows, if society would let them.

That approach, along with its interwoven chemistry lessons, makes the show an unlikely, runaway success. The novel’s success comes from its deep dive into the human side of science. When asked why she keeps a pencil instead of a pen in her hair, Zott replies that pencil can be erased. “Scientists expect mistakes, and because of it, we embrace failure.”

**Kendall Powell** is a senior careers editor at *Nature*.

## The Love Hypothesis

Ali Hazelwood  
Berkley (2021)



*The Love Hypothesis* is, at heart, a classic romantic comedy dressed in a lab coat. Think fake dating, white lies piling into a snowy peak of deception and a heroine you’ll occasionally want to shake by the shoulders. If you’re anything like me, you’ll find yourself physically shaking the book (or your Kindle) to knock some sense into its protagonist.

Olive Smith is smart, albeit slightly naive, and spectacularly unaware of her own worth. A third-year PhD student navigating an obstacle course of academia dominated by white men, she has a small support system — a close friend and her roommate. But she is largely on her own, and has been for a long time. She’s well intentioned but chaotic and prone to making wrong assumptions. Like a bumbling Cupid, her best intentions get her into tricky situations.

Enter Adam Carlsen: tall, dark, handsome and profoundly serious. A brooding grump with a dry sense of humour, he brings calm to Olive’s chaos, and proves there’s more to him than his fearsome reputation suggests.

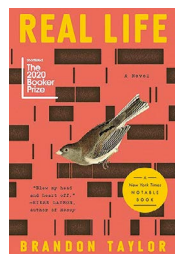
As fictitious romance gives way to real feelings, Olive keeps her reluctant crush firmly under wraps, because Adam couldn’t possibly feel the same, could he?

At times, the tale leans into romcom logic rather than realism, but it’s best enjoyed for what it is: a fun story. Smart and self-aware, *The Love Hypothesis* doesn’t take itself too seriously — and neither should you. If you like science, sarcasm and silly, self-deprecating humour, this is the perfect academic escape.

**Sophie McClarty** is an associate editor for Nature Partnerships.

## Real Life

Brandon Taylor  
Riverhead (2020)



With its sharp prose and tender imagery, *Real Life* is a timely exploration of race and sexuality in science. The book centres on Wallace, a queer Black man navigating postgraduate study and relationships at a Midwestern college in the United States. The writing echoes Wallace’s fatigue as he details the transgressions of his mostly white lab colleagues: some question his commitment to science and others seem to actively engage in sabotage. Throughout, he grapples with a growing apathy towards his work, noting that “only the prospect of greater unhappiness keeps them within the circumscribed world of graduate school”.

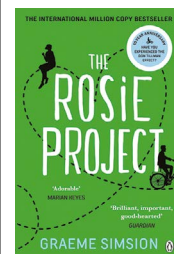
Outside the lab, Wallace manoeuvres through demeaning situations with his friends, also mostly white postgraduate students, around whom he remains guarded. A fledgling relationship with fellow researcher Miller proves to be a confusing one, with moments of vulnerability interspersed with violence. Wallace reflects on his reactions, which are often restrained, while recalling an abusive childhood in Alabama: “Cruelty, Wallace thinks, is really just the conduit of pain.”

In a 2020 interview with *The Guardian*, author Brandon Taylor described the book as an expansion on the campus novel, a genre that, he said, often lacked diverse characters. Punchy and laced with moments of observational humour, *Real Life* makes for a compelling read on the tensions and uncertainty of postgraduate research.

**Alexia Austin** is an associate careers editor at *Nature*.

## The Rosie Project

Graeme Simsion  
Text (2013)



There’s someone for everyone, right? Don Tillman would agree, not out of sentiment, but because it is statistically plausible and, in theory, quantifiable.

A geneticist in Melbourne, Australia, Tillman built his life on an unwavering allegiance to logic and efficiency. From meal plans to calendars, his life is less a routine than a controlled spreadsheet: tightly regulated and averse to unexpected inputs.

His love life, however, resists optimization. Having never progressed beyond a second date, Tillman applies logic to what he calls The Wife Problem. Where some might blame bad luck, Tillman blames the modern dating paradigm itself, deeming the process inefficient and irrational. So, he designs The Wife Project, a 16-page questionnaire to winnow out candidates on the basis of such incompatible attributes as an interest in astrology, creationism or sport. Who needs chemistry when you have statistics?

There is one variable Tillman fails to account for, however: Rosie Jarman. As their friendship grows, Tillman’s once predictable life is thrown into disarray, upended by drag bars, cocktails and a foray into unethical DNA testing. Whereas Tillman believes life can be optimized, Jarman proves that it can only be lived.

As his connection with “the world’s most statistically incompatible woman” deepens, Tillman is confronted with an unexpected conclusion: that choosing a partner might not be a matter of trusting his head, but rather listening, however irrationally, to his heart.

**Mary Craig** is a books and arts administrator at *Nature*.