



Books That Made a Difference to Natalie Portman

The luminous star of *The Other Boleyn Girl* finds beauty, struggle, and recognition in works that shed light on who we are—whether we're protesting in Argentina, living in downtown Jerusalem, or navigating the perils of Sudan.



WHEN YOU'RE IN a film that's based on a novel—I play Anne Boleyn in *The Other Boleyn Girl*—you want to do justice to the book and, in this case, to the character, who was a real person. To me, the story is about family rivalries but also so much about capitalism. Everyone in Tudor England buys into this system, and the girls are used to advance the family. They're commodities, but conscious commodities, because they can choose their fate. Anne goes after the goals her family and the society have set—power and wealth—whereas Mary leaves that system. Even though the sisters have limited choices, they are not confined. It's easy to think, *Well, I could do this, or I could do that.* But those aren't the only two options. I think it's so interesting—how we don't have to get trapped by our own conventions. I studied psychology in school, and the best psychology is in literature. It's so much easier to understand a character than a theory. You can recognize yourself—or other people—in a different way.

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Natalie Portman is the Ambassador of Hope for the Foundation for International Community Assistance, a microlending organization that helps fund women-owned businesses in developing countries.

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Natalie Portman's Bookshelf

The Ministry of Special Cases

By Nathan Englander

In Argentina's "dirty war" in the '70s, the military government had thousands of activists and political opponents "disappeared." This novel is about a mother and father dealing with the disappearance of their son. It's a moving book that also has a lot of dark comedy in it. For instance, the parents accept free nose jobs in exchange for a debt. It also captures the comic absurdity of the bureaucracy of a dictatorship. What's most interesting to me is, as one character makes clear, the truth tellers in life are so often written off as crazy.

Sun Under Wood

By Robert Hass

In college I took a poetry class with Jorie Graham, an amazing poet. She directed me to Hass, and his stuff moved me so much. His writing is very American, spare, clean. And manly. There's a ruggedness to his poems. One in particular I've always loved is called "Dragonflies Mating." It combines a sense of abandonment in childhood with natural images. I don't even know exactly what it means, but I think that's what poetry does—it evokes all these feelings without our really understanding why or how it's done.

Cloud Atlas

By David Mitchell

This was the present I gave everyone I knew for three years. It's six different stories told in different time periods and genres: One is historical fiction, another is a '70s thriller mystery, the sixth is a postapocalyptic story. It's one of the most beautiful, entertaining, challenging books—something that takes all your attention. I think the stories are meditations on violence, specifically the necessity of

violence. The book ends with a beautiful exchange: "...only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean! Yet what is an ocean but a multitude of drops."

What Is the What

By Dave Eggers

I read about Sudan every day, and I didn't understand what was going on there until this book. Dave Eggers tells the story of Valentino Achak Deng, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, who walked across the country, the largest in Africa. And then Deng spent 13 years in refugee camps before being resettled in Atlanta. It's a powerful story of what he survived. There are lighter moments in the book: He and his roommates buy a tampon box because they think it's so pretty. And there are less-kind instances of American behavior in the book—Deng was held hostage in his home and robbed. I didn't know that church groups had sponsored these men. There's so much anti-immigration stuff going on in the States right now, it's

heartening to see that people worked to reach out to others who are in need of what our country has to offer.

A Tale of Love and Darkness

By Amos Oz

I'm planning on directing a film of this book, which is essentially an autobiography tracing the author's own family's move from Europe to what is now Israel and the disappointment of immigration. His mother killed herself, and he's spent much of his life creating scenarios of why that happened. The process of meditating on her life makes him into a writer. The book is also about the birth of a language. He talks about his great-uncle, who was one of the architects of modern Hebrew, and how there didn't used to be a word for *shirt* until he created it, because Hebrew had been a biblical language. It's so interesting to think about what comes before the process of naming something—how you struggle when you don't have the words to say what you feel.

—As told to Mamie Healey

