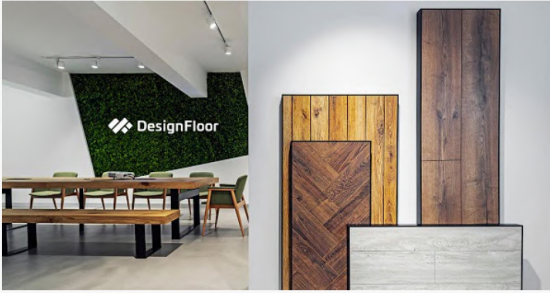


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Read Your Way Through Istanbul

Istanbul is unfathomable: old and new, real and surreal, melancholic and absurd. Elif Shafak, one of its foremost novelists, reveals its secrets.

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By Elif Shafak

Oct. 26, 2022



Raphaëlle Macaron

Ever since the Byzantine times, Istanbul has been home to artists, poets and storytellers. It is a city of abundant tales and legends, but also of too many secrets, buried deep. As a novelist, I find it important to pay attention to not only its stories but also its silences. Those silences matter greatly — the voices of the marginalized, the forgotten or the ones who have been pushed to the periphery. These are the stories that are never mentioned in the official history.

Perhaps the very first thing to grasp about this mesmerizing metropolis is that there is no such thing as Istanbul. In truth, there are multiple Istanbuls — clashing competing struggling and at

the multiple realities — existing, competing, overlapping and at times, coexisting. The old and the new, the real and the surreal, the melancholic and the absurd, the factual and the fictitious are all blended here — blended and dissolved as if in flowing water. This is a liquid city, where nothing is yet settled. Imbued with a restless energy, spanning two continents, it is constantly changing, still searching for itself.

Istanbul inspired and captivated me from an early age; it both made and broke me. It was there that [I was put on trial for writing “The Bastard of Istanbul,”](#) a novel that reflected on minorities, memory and collective amnesia, and that unspeakable taboo, the [Armenian genocide](#). From sexuality to politics to everyday life, the lack of freedom of speech in every sphere and the sway of populist authoritarianism make it increasingly hard for Turkey’s authors and artists to tell their stories freely. One thing I’ve learned ever since I left Istanbul is that we do not forget the places we love. We do not stop hearing the heartbeat of our motherlands: We simply carry them with us into exile.

What should I read before I go?

There are many wonderful books that provide valuable insight into the city’s complex past. Bettany Hughes’s “[Istanbul: A Tale of Three Cities](#)” is a brilliant and beautifully written urban biography. Jason Goodwin’s “[Lord of the Horizons](#)” will stay with you long after you have finished. “[The Lion House](#),” by [Christopher de Bellaigue](#), flows like a river. The 19th century Italian traveler Edmondo de Amicis’ iconic work “[Constantinople](#)” is one of the best sources for anyone interested in the cosmopolitan heritage of Istanbul. Philip Mansel’s “[Constantinople: City of the World’s Desire, 1453-1924](#)” is rich with information and offers a fabulous treat for the mind. And for those who would like to learn more about the city’s cultural and architectural heritage, Gulru Necipoglu’s “[The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire](#)” is simply outstanding.

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How can I explore facets of the city, and of the country, that have been silenced?

Turkey has a long and complex social, cultural and political history. That doesn’t mean, however, that as a nation we have a strong memory or nuanced understanding of the past. It is the exact opposite, in fact.

We are a society of collective amnesia and nowhere does this manifest itself more strikingly than in Istanbul. You may walk by a historic building now in ruins, and you won’t find a single sign or placard offering an explanation as to what it is. There are barely any signs of “urban memory” — especially when it comes to the stories of women and marginalized groups, whether they be cultural, ethnic or sexual minorities. Statues and monuments are

generally dedicated to men. Streets and public squares are almost always named after men. The urban space overall is shaped by and for men. One needs to work harder to trace the enormous contributions to culture by women writers and artists from minority backgrounds.

So much of the diversity inherent in the past is not only lost today, but also erased from narratives. Literature, therefore, must fight against the convenient and collective amnesia that is imposed from above and shaped by ultranationalism. A great place to start studying Turkey is the oeuvre of the incomparable poet, literary giant and public intellectual [Nazim Hikmet](#). I would also wholeheartedly recommend tracing the literary legacy of the Kurdish novelist and intellectual [Yasar Kemal](#).

I also love reading about late Ottoman female novelists and poets. I find the writings of the Armenian feminist, novelist and intellectual [Zabel Yesayan](#) important and illuminating. Incredibly brave and ahead of her time, she was a survivor herself, and left us a significant oeuvre of fiction and nonfiction.

In a country where the government has [withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention](#), which protects women and L.G.B.T.Q. communities from violence, and at a time when femicides are on the rise, the satirical magazine **Bayan Yani** is noteworthy. This magazine, in Turkish, is published by [female cartoonists](#) and tackles sexism and misogyny with wittiness and bravery.

Editors' Picks



Mahler's Having a Moment. He's Got Lydia Tár to Thank for It.



Meet the Woman Planning an Underwater Highline



You See a Venomous Black Widow. These Lizards See a Snack.

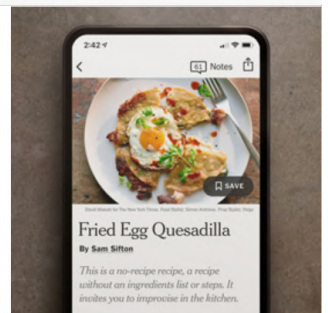
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What books will take me deeper, and help me explore some of the many facets of Istanbul?

Fiction makes the invisible a bit more invisible and rehumanizes those who have been dehumanized. It is in novels that the underbelly of the city can be found — its side streets and narrow alleys. “[Madonna in a Fur Coat](#),” by Sabahattin Ali, a prominent left-wing author who was jailed for his writings, is one of the most important Turkish classics, with a brilliant translation by Maureen Freely and Alexander Dawe.

“[The Sultan's Seal](#),” by Jenny White, is a murder mystery that brilliantly captures the political and cultural upheavals of the late Ottoman Empire. If you were wondering what would have happened if Michelangelo had accepted an invitation from the Ottoman sultan to work in Constantinople, you must read Mathias Énard’s “[Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants](#).” It offers a fascinating read on the exchange between East and West. The Greek author Nektaria Anastasiadou’s “[A Recipe for Daphne](#)” sheds courageous light on the lives of the Greek Orthodox Christian communities of Istanbul, including the memory of the [horrific 1955 pogrom](#). Anthony Doerr’s “[Cloud Cuckoo Land](#)” is a

mesmerizing book with multiple storylines that takes us back to 1453, the siege of Constantinople. Defne Suman's "**At the Breakfast Table**" is a dazzling narrative of family secrets, and both Burhan Sonmez's "**Sins and Innocents**" and Mario Levi's "**Madame Floridis May Not Return**" are brave and brilliant books that explore notions of belonging, discrimination and displacement. One thing that doesn't get enough attention is the growing body of L.G.B.T.Q. literature in Turkey. There are many fabulous young voices whose works have not been translated yet.

No reading list on Istanbul is complete without cookbooks, and there are so many good ones: "**Sefarad Yemekleri**," by Viki Koronyo and Sima Ovadya; "**Istanbul and Beyond: Exploring the Diverse Cuisines of Turkey**," by [Robyn Eckhardt](#); and Musa Dagdeviren's "**The Turkish Cookbook**," just to name a few.

What literary landmarks and bookshops should I consider visiting?

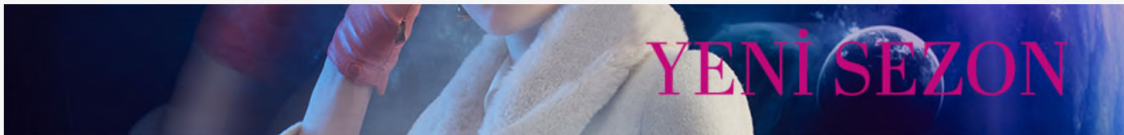
In Balat, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Istanbul, the [Women's Library and Information Centre Foundation](#) collects books, magazines and documents related to women's rights and women's history in Turkey. The library also organizes cultural and literary activities.

Another important literary landmark of Istanbul — the last stop on the Orient Express — is the [Pera Palace Hotel](#). This is where Agatha Christie would stay when she visited the city. The iconic building has hosted many authors and artists throughout its history, including Ernest Hemingway, Mata Hari and Greta Garbo.

On the idyllic island of Heybeliada, try to see the house of the prolific Turkish author Huseyin Rahmi Gurpınar, which is fighting to maintain the official "museum status" that it deserves.

The Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar Literature Museum Library, dedicated to Turkish literature and named after the novelist and essayist, is another great literary landmark. You can sit by the window and read as you enjoy a view of Gulhane Park. The [Museum of Innocence](#), created by the Nobel laureate [Orhan Pamuk](#) (in tandem with his [novel of the same name](#)), is a significant cultural address, situated in Cukurcuma amid antique shops.

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Along the Istiklal Avenue and down the side streets opening to Galata Tower, as well as on the Asian side of the city, in neighborhoods such as Kadikoy, there used to be many secondhand bookstores with neighborhood cats sleeping on the shelves. I used to love to sift through these shops. Many of them are closed now, turned into cafes or kebab and falafel eateries. Without any financial support, it is extremely hard for bookshops and cultural centers to survive.

And yet that's precisely what Istanbulites do, day in and day out. In this fascinating city, where the living and the ghosts of the past reside together, life is all about survival. The best way to understand Istanbul is via eclectic and diverse reading lists and by becoming a better listener — of both its stories and silences.

Elif Shafak's Istanbul Reading List

- **"Istanbul: A Tale of Three Cities,"** Bettany Hughes
- **"Lord of the Horizons,"** Jason Goodwin
- **"The Lion House,"** Christopher de Bellaigue
- **"Constantinople,"** Edmondo de Amicis
- **"Constantinople: City of the World's Desire, 1453-1924,"** Philip Mansel
- **"The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire,"** Gulru Necipoglu
- Poetry by Nazim Hikmet
- Novels by Yasar Kemal
- Fiction and nonfiction by Zabel Yesayan
- **Bayan Yani** magazine
- **"Madonna in a Fur Coat,"** Sabahattin Ali
- **"The Sultan's Seal,"** Jenny White
- **"Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants,"** Mathias Énard
- **"A Recipe for Daphne,"** Nektaria Anastasiadou
- **"Cloud Cuckoo Land,"** Anthony Doerr
- **"At the Breakfast Table,"** Defne Suman
- **"Sins and Innocents,"** Burhan Sonmez
- **"Madame Floridis May Not Return,"** Mario Levi
- **"Sefarad Yemekleri,"** Viki Koronyo and Sima Ovadya
- **"Istanbul and Beyond: Exploring the Diverse Cuisines of Turkey,"** Robyn Eckhardt
- **"The Turkish Cookbook,"** Musa Dagdeviren

Elif Shafak has published 19 books, which have been translated into dozens languages. Her novel "[10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World](#)" was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and "The Forty Rules of Love" was chosen by BBC as one of its "[100 Novels That Shaped Our World](#)."

Let Books Take You to Your Next Destination

We asked renowned writers from around the world to compile literary guides to the places close to their hearts.

- **Istanbul:** One of the Turkish city's foremost novelists, Elif Shafak, offers book recommendations that [help readers navigate its many layers](#).
- **Rome:** Igiaba Scego, an author born in the Italian capital to Somali parents, recommends books that [draw readers through the rich layers that make up her hometown](#).
- **Helsinki:** The Finnish writer Pajtim Statovci [shares his love for the country's literature](#) and the books that helped him, a child of immigrants, to find his voice.
- **Newfoundland:** The author Michael Crummey, whose poetry and prose explore