

## **Getting Up to Speed in Gentle Reads**

**By Bethany Latham**

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### **What are Gentle Reads?**

Gentle Reads pretty much nutshell it -- this fiction is gently themed, with protagonists (often female) who experience hardship, but triumph through positivity, kindness, strength, love, and compassion. There are various subgenres that fit comfortably under this umbrella: Classics, cozy mysteries, some women's commercial fiction, and inspirational romance.

### **What happens in a Gentle Reads novel?**

Historical Gentle Reads idealize the past, and regardless of time period, the urban is eschewed in favor of small-town life. These novels feature a happy ending or, at worst, a bittersweet one. While romantic love is a major component, it isn't of the explicit variety. Nothing in Gentle Reads is explicit, be it sex, language, or violence. Even in Gentle Reads mysteries (i.e., cozies) the crime is bloodless, and there is little suspense -- this is about a clever detective (often an amateur) pondering to discover and unveil the perpetrator.

Classic Gentle Reads are timeless; their protagonists have universal appeal that renders them continually relevant and endearing, ensuring these stories remain in print regardless of how times change. While originally penned for adults, Classic Gentle Reads are often marketed to young adults and children, since their content renders them "safe" for youngsters.

Women's lives and relationships make up a significant portion of the titles in this genre. They rely on culture-centric settings and characterization, featuring folksy or eccentric secondary characters. In these small towns, women who have faced various hardships come into their own, gaining independence and finding love. They encounter difficulties, but instead of foundering, they find reserves of inner strength and support in the form of caring friends and family.

### **Why do people like Gentle Reads?**

Modern life is frequently unpleasant: discourtesy, stress, cruelty, and violence can bombard from a variety of angles. Gentle Reads offer a welcome refuge. They harken back to simpler, slower, milder times, they showcase compassion and kindness -- and people love them for it. They help readers decompress, make them laugh, help them find inspiration and warmth in the triumph over adversity and happily-ever-after themes, as well as characters' personal growth. There's a great deal of humor in many of these novels.

Gentle Reads come pre-excised of elements which Christian readers might find objectionable, and Inspirational fiction offers heartwarming stories whose characters rely on their faith in God to see them through. Gentle Reads provide protagonists readers can relate to as well as admire, upbeat and fun characters readers root for and enjoy spending time with.

Gentle Reads prose can be elegant, but never dense. These works are about closure and satisfactory resolutions. Small towns in geographical regions with a distinct cultural flavor attract readers with their unique atmospheres. The plotting can be heavily influenced by the cultural constructs of the setting -- classic Regencies (by masters such as Jane Austen or Georgette Heyer), upstairs-downstairs Edwardian tales, and women's fiction with Southern settings are novels of manners in a strictly-delineated society; plot points revolve on a chance meeting at an assembly or a turn of phrase in conversation.

Fans of cozy mysteries like the lack of gore, and the crime is almost incidental -- setting figures heavily in these novels as well, with a body in the library and the suspects lined up in the conservatory of the posh manor house for the big reveal. The village setting is also popular, whether it be a medieval or modern English model village -- everyone knows everyone else, and secrets bubble beneath the placid exterior, waiting to burst forth as motive to the investigator clever enough to suss them out. Suspense and nail-biting isn't the goal; it's spending time with an intriguing detective as he/she puzzles out the solution to a whodunit.

### **Key titles:**

#### ***Anne of Green Gables***

L. M. Montgomery

Montgomery's Classic, *Anne of Green Gables*, introduced the world to a carrot-topped orphan whose pluck and creativity gets her into and out of trouble in the idyllic setting of the village of Avonlea on Prince Edward Island at the turn of the 20th century. Readers can follow Anne through the years with Montgomery's other books about this most endearing of characters.

Series: Anne of Green Gables

#### ***The Mysterious Affair at Styles***

Agatha Christie

There has been a murder at Styles Court. Detective Hercule Poirot comes out of retirement to solve who would want the rich heiress Emily Inglethorp dead. The plot turns keep Poirot -- and the reader -- guessing as suspicion shifts from one peculiar character to the next.

Series: Hercule Poirot mysteries

#### ***Christy***

Catherine Marshall

Published in 1967, *Christy* is the template for inspirational fiction on shelves today. Inspired by her own mother, Marshall's story follows young and well-to-do Christy Huddleston, who gives up her easy life in Asheville, NC to become a teacher in the Appalachian village of Cutter's Gap, TN. There she must cling to her faith in order to help the primitive and sometimes violent inhabitants, while becoming part of a romantic triangle involving the local minister and a physician.

#### ***At Home in Mitford***

Jan Karon

The phenomenally popular Mitford series features an Episcopal priest in small-town North Carolina, and begins with *At Home in Mitford*. Readers can follow the town's engaging characters in these stories which incorporate heart-warming themes of friendship, love, and faith, served up with gentle humor.

Series: Mitford years

### ***Miss Julia Speaks Her Mind***

Ann B. Ross

Miss Julia is a pillar of the community in her charming, small Southern town, but when she's widowed, scandal flows from her husband's death. Dignified Miss Julia must rely on her wits to find her way again in a town full of eccentric Southern characters.

Series: Miss Julia series

### **Key authors:**

Prolific author **Debbie Macomber** has sold over 170 million copies of her books. Macomber focuses on family and relationships in uplifting tales of overcoming adversity to find happiness and fulfillment through deep connections with other human beings.

With a flair for comedy at once witty and gentle, **P.G. Wodehouse's** novels and short stories introduce readers to hilarious situations and characters, amongst them the long-suffering valet Jeeves and his posh, scatterbrained employer, Bertram Wooster. Wodehouse employed his sparkling prose in over 90 books, offering an abundance of literary riches.

**Alexander McCall Smith** defies all expectations with his multiple cozy mystery series. The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series, featuring Botswanan sleuth Precious Ramotswe, is truly unique. With a keen ear for African cadence and a protagonist who has an uncanny and compassionate insight into the psyche of everyone she meets, McCall Smith's creations have a warming factor right up there with a mug of Precious' honeybush tea.

**Fannie Flagg's** novels are comedic, with abiding themes of family, friendship, and love. Most are steeped in Southern culture, with a focus on strong, resourceful women, who nevertheless experience dysfunction and hardship. This gives her works a bit of a sharp edge, but one blunted by her masterful use of comedy and tenderness.

**Jennifer Chiaverini** is the author of a well-loved series of Elm Creek Quilts novels, set in small-town Pennsylvania. She has also branched out into biographical historical fiction, exploring foundational relationships between women (e.g. Mary Todd Lincoln and her African-American dressmaker) and their search for intellectual and emotional fulfillment (e.g., Ada, daughter of Lord Byron).

### **How do I help Gentle Reads fans?**

Gentle Reads fans may be some of the easier to advise, since most Gentle Reads authors are prolific, and many write in series. A familiarity with the genre is helpful, but a quick NoveList search on a reader's favorite Gentle Reads author should provide a plethora of choices for read-alikes and further exploration.

Talk with patrons about the elements they deem important (would they prefer romance, or comedy? Should a mystery of some kind figure? Evangelical/inspirational elements?). While all Gentle Reads share a lack of sex, violence, and graphic themes, there is great variation in plotting between the subgenres -- you don't want to hand someone an inspirational romance if they're looking for a cozy mystery.

There are a number of publishers whose title lists are inspirational: Tyndale, WaterBrook, Bethany House, Howard, Thomas Nelson, and FaithWords are some of the more readily recognizable. Check out their

websites for new publishing lists and catalogs. Another fantastic source: titles/authors who win the annual INSPY awards. The shortlists for these blogger-based awards ([www.inspys.com](http://www.inspys.com)) offer curated lists broken down by type (e.g., general and literary, historical fiction, mystery, romance, and YA).

Go-to publishers specializing in cozy mysteries include Poisoned Pen, Kensington, Berkley, and Severn House, and many of the large publishing houses (e.g., Penguin Random House) have subsections in their "mystery/suspense" lists for cozies.

An invaluable source for Gentle Reads with historical settings is the Historical Novel Society ([www.historicalnovelsociety.org](http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org)). The Society has published thousands of reviews, and the website offers a genre tag entirely for inspirationals, making for one-click review lists of hundreds of these titles. A keyword search for "cozy" in the site's reviews section will also provide a variety of other titles/authors to pursue.

When advising for Gentle Reads, there can be issues with terminology. Seldom will a reader ask for a "Gentle Read" the way she might ask for a "mystery." Clues that this is the correct genre will come when patrons talk about what they *don't* want -- sex, obscene/profane language, blood and gore.

You'll encounter concerned parents who are helping their children transition into more mature reading material, but don't want them exposed to anything too graphic. Classic Gentle Reads are good places to start them off, especially Classics featuring a younger protagonist.

Since setting is a major draw for the Gentle Reads bunch, talk with them about the settings they enjoy -- quaint coastal village, small Southern town? Historical or contemporary? Understanding the setting that draws a particular reader is a large part of getting recommendations right in this genre: readers who love manor house settings might balk at an offering set in the poverty-stricken Appalachians.

## Notable Trends

Gentle Reads are less susceptible to shifting trends than some genres -- their essential character stays the same. Yet these books see ebb and flow, especially the popularity of certain settings or cultural elements. Inspirational romance originally surged due to Amish fiction and prairie romances, but other settings have since come into vogue for this subgenre: the Gilded Age and Edwardian period, the US Civil War, and World War II. For cozy mysteries, the Victorian era, Gilded Age and Edwardian Period, Jazz Age, and Great Depression are on trend -- mysteries beyond this temporal point (but set before the present) skew towards the hard-boiled or thriller.

Though many genres receive the cinematic treatment, demand for Gentle Reads titles can be particularly affected when a movie version is released; those who might not have been interested in the genre will come clamoring after having seen a movie version of, say, *A Man Called Ove* or *Wonder*. Titles find new life, and renewed interest in their authors is sparked by movie adaptations.

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