



Nietzsche and invented critical theory, added up literary form, politics and philosophy differently. They drew on the exaggerations and emotional resonances of expressionism, the playfulness of Dada or the fairytale, the enigmas of allegory and the sharp wit of [New Objectivity](#). One such was Walter Benjamin, with whom this top 10 begins.

### **1. The Storyteller by Walter Benjamin**

Benjamin is known for his complex Marxist and Messianic philosophy, which at times, as in his *On the Concept of History*, uses parable, metaphor and poetic description. Less well known is the fact that he dabbled in literary forms – writing many radio plays, sonnets, film treatments, genre fictions, novellas and an array of other, usually short, forms. There are Kafkaesque parables, skits that ironise the conditions of his own existence, surreal and fantastical tales, origin myths for children and psychologically realist stories. These deal with travel, play, gambling, love, fate, literary tradition, the relations between the generations, action and inaction, just as do his philosophical writings. One of his earliest stories is titled *Schiller and Goethe: A Layman's Vision*. It is a bizarre hallucination of German literary history dotted around a pyramid and brought to the brink of destruction by the devil.

### **2. Elective Affinities by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

The aforementioned Goethe is an immensity: a poet, an administrator, a statesman, a playwright, short story writer and a novelist. He is impelled by a philosophical vision that suffuses his literary writings as much as his natural-philosophical experiments in colour theory and optics, botany and evolution. This novel integrates his various interests in its exploration of human chemistry and its attractions, repulsions, affinities and reactions.

### **3. Scorpion and Félix: A Humouristic Novel by Karl Marx**

In 1837, aged 19, Marx wrote this portion of a novel. It is absurd, whimsical and full of wordplay, with elements of the style of *Tristram Shandy*. It is also part of a burgeoning discussion with German idealist philosophy and has a keen sense of the material needs of the self and the division of society into classes: “The ordinary mortal – that is: he who has no right of primogeniture – fights the storms of life, throws himself into the billowing sea and seizes pearls of Promethean rights from its depths, and before his eyes, the inner form of the Idea appears in glory, and he creates with greater boldness, but he who is entitled to primogenital inheritance lets only drops fall on him, for fear he might strain a limb, and so seats himself in a washcloset.”

### **4. Traces by Ernst Bloch**

Bloch did not write fiction, but some of his early philosophical writings, such as this collection, proceed by use of essays, stories, fairy tales and anecdotes, suitably inconclusive modes to pursue the “not yet” and “to bring light” into the obscurity of the lived moment. This is philosophy as poetry.

### **5. Ginster by Siegfried Kracauer**

An autobiographical novel with slapstick movie passages straight out of Chaplin and a bitterly ironic sense of the world, related by an outsider from a lost generation. In bleakly comic form it presents the contemporary fragmentation of the human body and the loss of individuality in mass society. Available only in German.



Adorno's co-author ... Thomas Mann. Photograph: Eric Schaal/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Image

## **6. Doctor Faustus by Thomas Mann**

Languishing under a hot sun in “German California”, Mann and Theodor Adorno worked together on this vast novel. This narrative about barbarity and rationality features a composer who is something like Arnold Schoenberg. The work of the fictional, demonic, syphilitic composer Adrian Leverkühn are described in lines from [Adorno’s Philosophy of New Music](#). Adorno himself makes an appearance as the devil, in the shape of a “theoretician and critic, who himself composes, so far as thinking allows him”.

## **7. The Treasure of Indian Joe by Theodor Adorno**

Adorno wrote this libretto in the early 1930s, enthused by Richard Hughes’s *A High Wind in Jamaica*. It deals with the friendship of two boys in rural America in the 19th century, but its themes are fear and guilt. It has murder, haunted houses, execution and it uses Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer to explore the possibilities, dear to Adorno, of “de-mythologisation”. Only in German.

## **8. Sketch for a Novel on Neville Chamberlain by Max Horkheimer**

A sociologist and theorist of [the Frankfurt School](#), Horkheimer also wrote *Dawn and Decline*, a poetic study of German society and its anti-revolutionary institutions using aphorisms and short essays. More curious, though, is this very unusual piece of writing. A satirical work, it tracks Chamberlain’s arrival in the afterlife and his meeting with the Almighty. God – contrary to his expectations – is a woman but, in line with his qualms, has socialist and democratic sympathies.

## **9. All the King’s Horses by Michèle Bernstein**

Bernstein was a situationist and therefore steeped in the philosophy of Hegel and Marx. This novel was allegedly written to raise cash and it deployed the trashy pop literary forms of the postwar teen romance: “We’re all characters in a novel, haven’t you noticed? You and I speak in dry little sentences. There’s even something unfinished about us. And that’s how novels are. They don’t give you everything. It’s the rules of the game. And our lives are as predictable as a novel, too.”

## **10. Dudley Zoo: An Elephant Story by Alfred Sohn-Rethel**

Sohn-Rethel is much better known for his epistemology of real abstraction than for his little children’s book set in the West Midlands. This is a short tale about an escaped elephant who crushes a bright red Mini. A fairytale cum media-worthy hard-luck story, it is witty and wry. It was published in German in 1987, when Sohn-Rethel was 88, and it comes with a lovely picture of Sohn-Rethel reading the *Sunday Times*, along with various sketches of just what it would look like if an elephant sat on a Mini.

• Esther Leslie is one of the translators, with Sam Dolbear and Sebastian Truskolaski, of *The Storyteller* by Walter Benjamin.

*The Storyteller* is published by Verso, priced £12.99. [It is available from the Guardian bookshop for £10.65.](#)