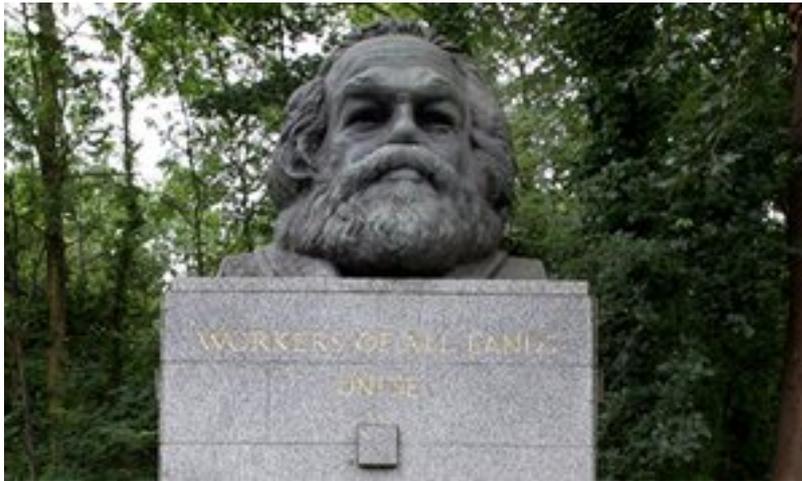


Top 10 philosophers' fictions

[Esther Leslie](#) - The Guardian - Wednesday 3 August 2016 11.30 BST

From Marx to Mann and Adorno, some thinkers have made brilliant use of the imaginative techniques of novels and stories to frame their reflections. Here are some of the most interesting and unexpected



'Humouristic' ... the tomb of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London. Photograph: Paul Grover / Rex Features)

Philosophy tends to be arid, more related to mathematics or dispatches from the courtroom than art, but some philosophy exhibits playfulness or poetic sensibility in relation to language or narrative form and some has even been speculative in a literary or imaginative sense. Jean Baudrillard, for one, coined the term “[theory fiction](#)” and speculated on scenarios for future real worlds that were more wild and improbable than science fiction. In his case, it was part of a quest to exacerbate the groundlessness of signs and meaning.

But postmodern suspicion is not the only way in which philosophers have used the strategies of fiction to further their projects. Hegel's great work [Phenomenology of Spirit](#) can be read as a vast novel in which the characters, avatars of the spirit, move progressively through the world and through history. Its French translator, Jean Hippolyte, called it a “philosophical novel”: in one section the characters of Lord and Bondsman struggle dramatically over questions of recognition. Nietzsche was a stylist and his Thus Spoke Zarathustra often appears in lists of top philosophers' novels. It has a protagonist and a plot that resembles something like a bildungsroman, as the tragic teacher hero learns lessons in life through his failures.

As industrial capitalism, with its wars and its factories, shook Europe up, literary form loomed as a crucial issue for disaffected philosophers – especially those in war-broken Germany, who were schooled in the Hegelian tradition, with its sense of universal history and dialectical method. Some understood the epic poetry of a seemingly harmonious and integrated ancient world to be unobtainable in the modern epoch that had birthed the novel, a form that is individually composed and consumed. [Georg Lukács's Theory of the Novel](#), written as the first world war raged, described the fallen personages of modern life as transcendentally homeless and barred from greater meanings.

The novel developed its forms in a world in which the inner life of individuals, revolution and disenchantment clash and combine. By the early 20th century the novel was frayed and had absorbed the chaos, clatter and clutter of modern life. As a communist, Lukács turned to recommending that novelists invent rational and functioning worlds, like those once embodied in the work of a Walter Scott or a Balzac. In short, for Lukács, the choice was Thomas Mann over Franz Kafka. Others, those philosopher-poets who montaged Hegel, Marx and

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.](#)