From One Reader to Another

An invitation to read internationally

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of its Writers in Translation programme, English PEN is teaming up with The Reading Agency and Free Word to invite book groups to read and discuss titles from the World Bookshelf, a unique online showcase of the most exciting contemporary literature available in English translation.

There are over 100 books on the World Bookshelf but here is a suggested reading list to get you started:

- *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany (Egypt, Arabic)
- *Dreams from the Endz* by Faïza Guène (France, French)
- *Arab Jazz* by Karim Miské (France, French)
- *Compartment No.6* by Rosa Liksom (Finland, Finnish)
- *The Lady from Tel Aviv* by Rabai al-Madhoun (Palestine, Arabic)
- *Vango: Between Sky and Earth* by Timothée de Fombelle (France, French)
- *The Devil’s Workshop* by Jachym Topol (Czech Republic, Czech)
- *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* (for younger readers) by Fabio Geda (Italy, Italian)
- *Bronze and Sunflower* (for younger readers) by Cao Wenxuan (China, Mandarin)
- *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* by Saša Stanišić (Bosnia-Herzegovina, German)
- *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* by Alain Mabanckou (Congo, French)
- *The Goddess Chronicle* by Natsuo Kirino (Japan, Japanese)
- *Allah Is Not Obliged* by Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast, French)
- *The Iraqi Christ* by Hassan Blasim (Iraq, Arabic)
- *Morning Sea* by Margaret Mazzantini (Italy, Italian)
- *Sworn Virgin* by Elvira Dones (Albania, Italian)
- *A Perfect Crime* by A Yi (China, Mandarin)
- *The End of Days* by Jenny Erpenbeck (Germany, German)
- *The Sound of Things Falling* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Colombia, Spanish)
- *The Whispering City* by Sara Moliner (Spain, Spanish)

Share your thoughts about these books by leaving a comment on the website or by getting in touch on Twitter: @englishpen, @readingagency, @FreeWordCentre
The Sound of Things Falling by Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Disaffected Colombian lawyer Antonio Yammara's fascination with the life of ex-pilot Ricardo Laverde begins by casual acquaintance in a seedy Bogotá billiard hall and grows until the day Ricardo receives a cassette tape in an unmarked envelope. Asking Antonio to find him somewhere private to play it, they go to a library. The first time he glances up from his seat in the next booth, Antonio sees tears running down Laverde's cheeks; the next, the ex-pilot is gone. Shortly afterwards, Ricardo is shot dead on a street corner in Bogotá by a man on the back of a motorbike and Antonio is caught in the hail of bullets. He starts asking questions until the questions become an obsession that leads all the way back to the early 1960s, marijuana smuggling and a time before the cocaine trade trapped a whole generation of Colombians in a living nightmare of fear and random death.

About the author

Juan Gabriel Vásquez was born in Bogotá, Colombia in 1973. He has translated works by E. M. Forster and Victor Hugo, amongst others, into Spanish. He was nominated as one of the Bogotá 39, South America’s most promising writers of the new generation. His books include The Informers, which was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, and The Secret History of Costaguana, which won the Qwerty Prize in Barcelona. His books have been published in 15 languages worldwide.

About the translator

Anne McLean has translated works by many Spanish and Latin American authors including Hector Abad, Carmen Martín Gaite, Julio Cortázar, Ignacio Martínez de Pisón, Enrique Vila-Matas, Tomás Eloy Martínez and Juan Gabriel Vásquez.

For discussion

1. You could say that the shadow of Garcia Márquez's magic realism still hangs over Latin American literature. Vásquez, a fellow Colombian, has said that he finds the idea of Latin America as a magical and marvellous place absurd. How did you respond to his realist style of writing?

2. Did you find the novel shocking? Why or why not?

3. Vásquez has said that he considers this novel to be autobiographical, not in the sense that these things happened to him, but in the sense that they are things he witnessed. Is this a useful way to think about fiction written about the recent past?

4. Is it possible for anyone to escape the repercussions of a drug culture? Is drug smuggling a political or economic issue?

5. The novel opens with a hippopotamus. What does it represent for you?