

A Guide to Ukrainian Classical
Literature by Tamara Hundorova

MUST-READ BOOKS



“What should I know about Ukrainian literature”? “Who are the most important Ukrainian writers”? “Which Ukrainian authors should be translated, published, and read”? “Did Ukraine have literature before 1991”?

These questions frequently arise at international literary events and book fairs, both from industry professionals and curious foreign readers. To provide clear and timely answers, raise awareness of Ukrainian literary history, we launched this brochure.

Every year, we publish updated recommended reading lists of Ukrainian classics, prepared by Ukrainian or international literary scholars.

This list of 11 books was compiled by Tamara Hundorova, literary scholar and cultural historian, professor at Princeton University. Mentioned titles are essential for anyone looking to explore Ukrainian literature.

Photo by
Julia Weber,
The Ukrainians



Tamara Hundorova is a Ukrainian literary critic, culturologist, and writer. She has authored numerous publications on topics such as modernism, postmodernism, feminism, postcolonial studies, nuclear criticism, and trauma studies. Professor Hundorova is a lecturer in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University (USA). She has also taught at Harvard University (USA), the University of Toronto (Canada), Greifswald University (Germany), the Ukrainian Free University (Germany), Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Ukraine), and Kyiv National University (Ukraine).

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Yuriy Shevelyov

**I – Me –
To Me...**

Ivan Franko

**Withered
Leaves**

Ivan Franko

**The Pillars
of Society**

*Panteleimon
Kulish*

**The Black
Council**

*Olga
Kobylanska*

Diaries

*Mykola
Khvylovy*

**Sanatorium
Zone**

*Viktor
Domontovych*

**Doctor
Seraficus**

Yuriy Kosach

**Regina
Pontica**

*Ivan
Kotlyarevsky*

The Aeneid

*Volodymyr
Vynnychenko*

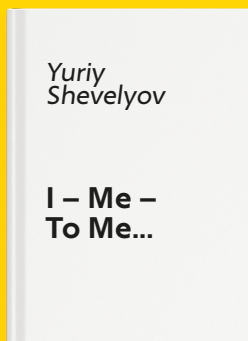
**The Solar
Machine**

*Agathangel
Krymsky*

**Andrii
Lahovskyi**

Yuriy Shevelyov

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Genre: Biography, Memoirs

Year of publication: 1999

In 3 books

Language: Ukrainian

Key words: 20th century history, Stalinist terror, World War II, Ukrainian studies.

Among the brilliant examples of Ukrainian essay writing, Yuriy Shevelyov's name stands out. Shevelyov is known as a scholar, linguist, and professor at Columbia University. He is also an outstanding intellectual and essayist, and his biography offers a commentary on the catastrophic events that marked the 20th century: Stalinist terror, World War II, and postwar Munich. In his essays, he does not only analyze individual figures in Ukrainian literature but also enriches his analysis with his own memories, commentary and stories from his own life, turning them into mini novels.

I – Me – To Me...

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1908-2002

Yuriy Shevelov (pen name Sherekh) is an Ukrainian linguist, literary scholar, culturologist, essayist, and a cultural figure. His longest lecturing career lasted at Columbia University (1954–1977). He was the President of the Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences in the USA, editor-in-chief of the “Suchasnist” journal.

Ivan Franko

8



Genre: Biography, Memoirs

Year of publication: 1999

In 3 books

Language: Ukrainian

Key words: 20th century history, Stalinist terror, World War II, Ukrainian studies.

Ivan Franko, a celebrated Ukrainian writer, cultural and political figure, was deeply influenced by Emile Zola, French naturalism, and German romanticism. During the 1890s, while pursuing his dissertation at the University of Vienna, Vienna's themes and the emerging ideas of Secession imperiously enter in his works. Fin de siècle influences are particularly pronounced in his poetry collection *Withered Leaves*, which he treats as a "lyrical drama." This polyphonic, philosophical-psychological poetic drama explores the anguish of a young man who takes his own life due to unrequited love. Yet, this central storyline is only of the man. *Withered Leaves* resonates with the symphonic depth, interwoven with direct references to Goethe, Dante, Baudelaire, Heine, Schopenhauer, and others.

Withered Leaves

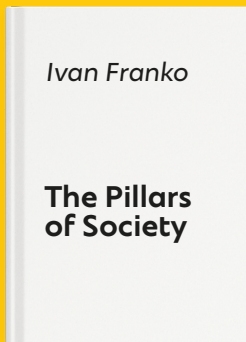
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(1856-1916)

Ivan Franko was a poet, writer, philosopher, critic, journalist, political activist, and one of the founding figures of Ukrainian literature. He authored over 6,000 works which could be filled into 100 books. His legacy forms a cornerstone of Ukraine's literary canon.

Ivan Franko

10



Genre: Novel

Years of publication: 1894-1899

Language: Ukrainian

Key words: 19th-century
detective fiction, crime novel,
psychological portrayals, class
conflict.

Ivan Franko's novella *The Pillars of Society* is both a detective story and a nuanced psychological portrait of ideas and feelings of a Galician village at the close of the 19th century. Rich with psychological insight, the novella portrays the lives of various social classes: Polish nobility, Ukrainian clergy, privileged youth, peasants, and those on the fringes of society. At the heart of the plot is the murder of a village priest and the complex chain of events leading to the crime. Franko's novella was inspired by a real-life criminal case Franko covered as a correspondent for a Polish newspaper.

The Pillars of Society

11

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Panteleimon Kulish

12



Genre: Novel
Years of publication: 1845
Language: Ukrainian

Key words: historical novel, romanticism, Cossack history, 17th-century Ukraine.

The Black Council, a Chronicle of the Year 1663 is a historical novel inspired by the works of Sir Walter Scott. The author viewed it as a polemic against Mykola Hohol's Taras Bulba. Kulish's romantic Gothic narrative delves into historical events, centered around a real Cossack council in Nizhyn where a new hetman is elected, and the conflicting interests of various groups are revealed. Kulish's idea was to illustrate the period of "The Ruin", particularly the split between the lowland Zaporizhian Cossacks and the ones who settled down, adopting noble customs. The novel explores the rise of loyalty to the Russian Empire, the bourgeoisification of society, and the de-heroization of Cossack history.

The Black Council

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(1819-1897)

Prominent Ukrainian writer, historian, critic, poet, folklorist, and translator. The Black Council is the first historical novel written in Ukrainian. Kulish translated of William Shakespeare and the Bible, and was a founder of Osnova Publishing House.

Olga Kobylanska

14



Genre: Memoirs
Years of publication: 1883-1891
Language: German

Key words: historical novel, romanticism, Cossack history, 17th-century Ukraine.

Olga Kobylanska's works exemplify neoromantic female writing at the turn of the century, blending feminist ideas, sensuality, and Nietzschean themes of the "overman" and aristocracy. Her diary, written in German between the ages of 20 and 28, stands out in Ukrainian literature for its deep subjectivity and sensuality. Translated into Ukrainian, her diaries reveal the psychology of a fin-de-siècle woman: an active, desire-driven individual who fantasizes, invents and analyzes herself, referring to herself as a "psychological enigma." The diary's pages vividly portray the multinational world of Bukovyna, the life and customs of a Ukrainian middle-class family, and the evolution of new forms of relationships between men and women.

Diaries

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(1863-1942)

She was prominent Ukrainian modernist writer and one of the first feminists. Her works are known for their impressionistic, lyrical descriptions of nature and subtle psychological portrayals. For most of her life, Olga Kobylanska lived in Chernivtsi, in the west of Ukraine.

Mykola Khvylovy

16



Genre: Novel
Years of publication: 1924
Language: Ukrainian

Key words: expressionism,
psychological fiction, modernism,
Ukrainian literature of the 1920s.

Mykola Khvylovy, renowned for his political pamphlets, is also celebrated as one of the leading writers of the 1920s. His novellas *Sentimental Story* and *Sanatorium Zone* exemplify expressionist literary style and intense psychological exploration. Khvylovy described his distinctive artistic approach as the “smell of words”, emphasizing the rich, sensual atmosphere that pervades his works. In *Sanatorium Zone*, the central theme is illness, explored through the fragmented and nearly schizophrenic consciousness of Anarch, a former revolutionary and communist. Anarch finds himself in a sanatorium zone that embodies a dual meaning: a place of healing and a space of control. Ultimately, the novella chronicles Anarch’s futile battle to escape the increasingly oppressive and monstrous reality.

Sanatorium Zone

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(1893-1933)

Mykola Khvylovy was a Ukrainian novelist, poet, publicist, and political activist, one of the founders of post-revolutionary Ukrainian prose, and one of the most famous representatives of the Ukrainian Renaissance in literature of the 1920s–1930s.

Viktor Domontovych

18



Genre: Novel
Years of publication: 1947
Language: Ukrainian

Key words: intellectual novel, Ukrainian modernism, philosophical fiction, experimental prose, Ukrainian avant-garde.

One of the 20th century's intellectual novels, *Doctor Seraphicus* by V. Petrov (Domontovich) brings to mind the techniques of Suprematism and Cubism. Both schematic and symbolic, it tells the story of the peculiar adventures of an anachoretic professor, creating an image of modern Frankenstein — a person-function ruled by reason, eccentric who lives inside his jottings, asexual, and lost in the complexities of reality. The writer is interested in the story of the character's "sentimental education", set against the expansive backdrop of pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Kyiv. Written as a novel-essay in the 1929 and published in 1947, it encapsulated half an era, documenting its anatomy and archeology.

Doctor Seraficus

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(1894-1969)

Pen names: Viktor Domontovych, Viktor Ber.
He was a prominent Ukrainian writer. One of the founders of the Ukrainian intellectual novel. He wrote papers on archaeology, anthropology, history, philosophy and literature.

Yuriy Kosach

20



Genre: Novel
Years of publication: 1987
Language: Ukrainian

Key words: intellectual novel, adventures, historical fiction, 18th-century Europe, baroque aesthetics, rococo spirit, romantic escapade.

Ukrainian literature's unique intellectual-adventure novel, *Regina Pontica* revives the 18th century as a time of mystifications, romantic escapades, and political intrigue. The narrative unfolds across the whole of Europe and centers on the fate of the Russian Empire, namely on the audacious claims of the so-called "Princess Tarakanova," the daughter of Oleksii Rozumovsky and Tsarina Elizabeth Petrovna. Seeking to claim the Russian throne, the princess journeys through Europe in search of support and protection. Through relentless travels, escapes, pursuits, ploys and encounters, the novel depicts Europe's court intrigues and political games. The vigor of Baroque era's intellectual search, clashes and converges with the adventurous spirit of the Rococo period on the pages of Kosach's novel.

Regina Pontica

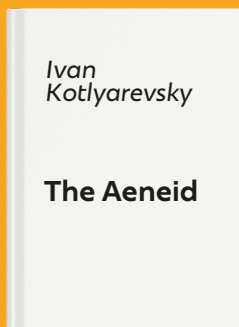
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(1908-90)

Yurii Kosach was a Ukrainian émigré poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, and editor. He originated from a noble Ukrainian family, the Kosach-Drahomanov family, which was an aristocratic family. He immigrated to Europe in 1933. In 1949, he immigrated to the US.

Ivan Kotlyarevsky

22



Genre: Poem
Years of publication: 1842
Language: Ukrainian

Key words: travesty, satirical poetry, Cossack heroism, carnival aesthetics, Poltava, 18th-century Ukraine.

Ivan Kotliarevsky's poem is a travesty of Virgil's Aeneid which combines Ukrainian humor, satire, and Cossack heroism. It reimagines ancient heroes as Ukrainians and relocates them to the landscapes of Poltava. Written in the colloquial vernacular, Eneida is a dictionary of the Ukrainian language and an encyclopedia of Ukrainian life. The adventures of Aeneas and the search for a new Troy bring to life the Cossack myth of Ukraine. The poem pictures the everyday lives of the petty nobility interiors, food, fashion, men's wars, and women's quarrels, all of which lead us into the historic world of the late 18th century. The poem's vibrant and colorful scenes, coexistence of Gods, heroes and humans in the same world, and playful use of language — including tarabarshchyna (a whimsical nonsense language) and the fusion of Latin and Ukrainian from seminarist folklore — add a distinctive carnival-like quality.

The Aeneid

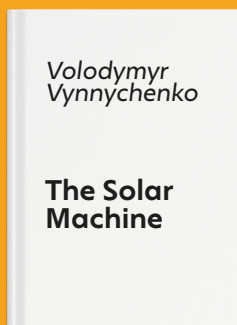
23

(1769-1838)

Ivan Kotlyarevsky is one of the central authors of modern Ukrainian literature. He was a writer, poet, playwright, and social activist.

Volodymyr Vynnychenko

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Genre: Novel
Years of publication: 1922-1924
Language: Ukrainian

Key words: utopian fiction,
science fiction, 1920s Berlin,
Ukrainian modernism,
expressionist cityscape.

The invention of a solar machine by a loner engineer provides people with energy, frees them from the need to work, and brings happiness. This is how the socialist utopia is realized in Vynnychenko's fantasy novel. Set in 1920s Berlin, the novel presents a rich tapestry of perspectives: the lives of artistic bohemians, working-class families, the old aristocracy, and new millionaires. Social issues there coexist with Freudianism, and a love story is blended with revolutionary violence. Decadence, vegetarianism, and bucolism are combined with futuristic visions and expressionist pictures of the cityscape. The text was written as a script for an unrealized film and as a showpiece of the Ukrainian European novel. The Solar Machine was a bestseller in Ukraine in the 1920s.

The Solar Machine

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(1880-1951)

Volodymyr Vynnychenko was a Ukrainian statesman, political activist, writer, playwright and artist. As a writer, Vynnychenko is recognized in Ukrainian literature as a leading modernist writer in pre-revolutionary Ukraine, who wrote short stories, novels, and plays.

Agathangel Krymsky

26



Genre: Novel

Years of publication: 1895, 1972

Language: Ukrainian

Key words: intellectual novel, Ukrainian modernism, colonization trauma, empire and identity, same-sex love, psychological fiction.

One of the first intellectual novels in 20th-century Ukrainian literature, Krymsky's unfinished *Andriy Lahovskyi* traces the upbringing and self-discovery of its titular character. Andriy Lahovskyi, a former gymnasium student who becomes a professor at Moscow University, evolves from a radical nihilist to a Ukrainianophile. Torn between loyalty to the empire and his roots, his journey reflects the trauma of colonization experienced by Ukrainians in the Russian Empire during the 19th century. The novel is structured into three parts, set across Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Moscow. Rich in both direct and indirect references and cultural associations, the novel offers a mosaic of languages and ethnonational characters. It also touches upon the questions of same-sex love and scandalizes with its erotic scenes.

Andrii Lahovskyi

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(1871-1942)

Agathangel Krymsky was a Ukrainian Orientalist, linguist, polyglot (knowing up to 35 languages), literary scholar, folklorist, writer, and translator. He was one of the founders of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in 1918. Ahatanhel Krymsky became victim of political repressions. In July 1941 he was again arrested and deported to Kustanay, Kazakhstan, where he died at the age of 71.

