

JEFFREY ARCHER'S TOP 10 ROMANS-FLEUVES

By Jeffrey Archer

Roman-fleuve sounds a very French sort of thing. Britannica defines it as "a series of novels, each one complete in itself, that deals with an era of national life, or successive generations of a family". There are of course French examples, but the novels I've chosen are all English, with the kind of solid storytelling and unforgettable characters that inspire me.

And I can't talk about romans-fleuves, without mentioning my own five-book series, The Clifton Chronicles. The first book, *Only Time Will Tell*, opens in 1920 and takes Harry Clifton, a docker's son from the backstreets of Bristol, through to Oxford University, after he wins a scholarship because of his magnificent singing voice. He meets Emma at the age of nine, and she decides they will be married. And although, years later, they reach the church, the marriage never takes place. Book two, *The Sins of the Father* (published this week), picks up the Clifton and Barrington family saga and takes Harry and Giles through to the end of the second world war, when they have to make decisions that will affect the rest of their lives.

1. The Palliser novels by Anthony Trollope

The Oxford Companion to English Literature tells me that "Trollope established the novel sequence in English fiction". Many would choose his Barchester novels for a survey of this sort, but I've preferred the six Palliser novels because the Palace of Westminster is more to my taste than the cathedral close. A large cast of characters is common to all six novels, but Trollope ensures that each can be enjoyed on its own. Trollope stood unsuccessfully for parliament and did not enjoy the experience - and he uses this first-hand knowledge with great verve.

2. The Forsyte Saga by John Galsworthy

The Forsyte Saga was the greatest success of Galsworthy's career, and largely responsible for the exceptional honours he received - among them the Nobel prize for literature in 1932 and the Order of Merit in 1929. Much of the social detail has dated, and the passing of time has made some of his characters' concerns less immediate, but the characters themselves are recognisable and compelling, and Galsworthy still hits his targets - materialism, selfishness, insensitivity, possessiveness - with force and accuracy. And the first mini-series set new standards for television drama.

3. The Sword of Honour trilogy by Evelyn Waugh

Recognisably based on some of the author's own experiences in the second world war, this trilogy has at its centre the figure of Guy Crouchback, an upper-class English Catholic in his 30s. The failure of his marriage and a general weariness with life disposes him to see war as a noble thing and a welcome opportunity to do something worthwhile with himself. Over the three novels, Waugh deftly strips him of this illusion in ways that are tragic, touching and savagely funny. Probably the best thing in English literature to be inspired by the second world war.

4. Strangers and Brothers by CP Snow

The 11 novels that make up *Strangers and Brothers* appeared between 1940 and 1970, and trace the career of Lewis Eliot, a barrister, who progresses from provincial origins to positions of influence in national life; this progression to some extent mirrors Snow's own career. Perhaps the most successful of the



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novels are *The Masters*, a well-informed account of the election of a new head of a Cambridge college, and *The Affair*, about a scientific scandal. The title of one of the novels introduced a useful phrase into the language: "the corridors of power". Together, the sequence presents a vivid portrait of British academic, political and public life. Snow was that rare thing, a scientist and novelist.

5. The Hornblower novels by CS Forester

These 11 magnificent novels trace the naval career of Horatio Hornblower, from

teenage beginnings to his appointment as admiral and award of a peerage. Along the way, Forester's mastery of his subject tells us much about British history and society in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hornblower's character is plausibly developed, and Forester's handling of the war scenes is skilful and exciting. Like the work of all great storytellers, it transfers well to the screen.

6. A Dance to the Music of Time by Anthony Powell

Twelve novels make up *A Dance to the*

Music of Time, probably the most ambitious scheme in postwar English writing. Through the eyes of the narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, we see the English upper-class and bohemian life as it was lived by a generation growing up in the shadow of the great war and then grappling with the horrors of another conflict and the profound social changes of a postwar world: the years covered range from the 1920s to the 1970s. Powell's characterisation and dialogue are deft, his eye for detail is sharp, and he is often very funny, but in truth I found it quite a struggle.

7. The Swann saga by RF Delderfield

Delderfield was a particularly skilful writer of multi-volume sequences. The three-book *A Horseman Riding By* was a great success in the 1960s, and he followed it between 1970 and 1973 with the three volumes of the "Swann saga": *God Is an Englishman*, *Theirs Was the Kingdom and Give Us This Day*. The story of the Swann family and their haulage business runs from the latter half of the 19th century into the early 20th, and the pace never flags.

8. The Smiley trilogy by John le Carré

In *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, *The Honourable Schoolboy* and *Smiley's People*, Le Carré achieves a perfect blend between the novel of manners and the sophisticated spy story. Future generations will be able to learn all they need to know about the attitudes and obsessions of a certain part of British society in the 1960s and 1970s from these novels. At the centre stands the unforgettable character of George Smiley - decent, intelligent, thoughtful, relentless, self-questioning - who uncovers a mole in the secret service, attempts to restore the service's prestige and takes on the great Soviet spymaster Karla. When it comes to spies, Le Carré has no equal.

9. The Raj Quartet by Paul Scott

You could fill a good few shelves with novels concerned with the relationship between Britain and India, but not many would come close to Paul Scott's achievement. Covering a fairly short time-span (the rape that is the key event in the first novel takes place in 1942, and the series ends only five years later, with the partition of India in 1947), Scott nevertheless probes deeply into his story's conflicts of cultures and loyalties. Ronald Merrick, presented by Scott as an epitome of what was wrong with British rule in India, is a memorable villain, but generally Scott's treatment of his characters is insightful and even-handed.

10. The Clayhanger novels by Arnold Bennett

Bennett was a contemporary of Galsworthy, and the four novels that make up his *Clayhanger* series were published between 1910 and 1918, at the same time as the *Forsyte Saga* was appearing. Bennett's main literary inspiration was the writing of French realists such as Zola and Balzac, but nothing could be more English than the industrial Staffordshire setting of the *Clayhanger* novels. They are rich in memorable characters but the principal ones are Darius Clayhanger, a domineering self-made man; his son Edwin, whose ambition to become an architect is frustrated by his father; and Hilda Lessways, whom Edwin loves and who becomes the innocent victim of a bigamous marriage. Good old-fashioned storytelling.

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