

The Great Believers by Rebecca Makkai.

A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, this novel was selected New York Times Top Book of 2018.

Synopsis

The novel begins with a group of friends in Chicago in the 1980s. It is the height of the AIDS epidemic and the main character is a young man at the top of his career in a Chicago art gallery. His male partner is the editor of a pioneering newsletter geared at the gay community in Chicago. The book describes, in dramatic narratives, this environment of close friends and family members dealing with the impact of AIDS.

In alternating chapters, the book fast forwards 30 years to 2015 showing how the AIDS crisis impacted the lives of the main characters over time. Into this narrative, the author deftly includes a story about the arts scene in Paris in the 1920s. Some famous artists of that time -- some real, some fictional -- were subsequently discovered and honored by the Chicago art world 60 years later.

The author, Rebecca Makkai, does a wonderful job of weaving together these two timelines, revealing not only the urgency and devastation of the AIDS crisis as it was unfolding, but the lasting legacy for those who were touched by it.

There are three compelling reasons why this book was chosen as the OCR 2021 book of the year:

- The Great Believers accurately captures the terrifying fear and anxiety about AIDS, and the people who had AIDS, that gripped the country and the world in the 1980s. There was fear of being physically close or touching someone with AIDS, there was rampant homophobic behavior towards friends and family members with AIDS and there was often cruel discrimination and hatred. Dr. Anthony Fauci, who is so well-regarded in today's COVID-19 crisis, played a significant role during the AIDS crisis also. He recently said that during the AIDS crisis, there were usually only "bad outcomes" and "dark years." He stated during this recent interview in 2020 that the AIDS crisis changed his personal and professional life forever and has shaped his reactions to the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Great Believers is a book about the dynamics of family relations and captures the heartache and the love in families: mother and daughter, father and son, sister and brother. There are families we are born into, and families we choose. There is love that ends abruptly, and love that lasts a lifetime. The Great Believers is about all of that: about the bonds we form and the people in our lives who make us who we are.
- The Great Believers is a hopeful book, and we all need hope these days. It tells the story of a virus pandemic similar to what we have today. It is a hopeful book that reminds us that our country, and our world, survived the AIDS pandemic and came out on the other side (albeit with many tragic deaths in the process). While it is true that there is still no instant cure for AIDS, there are now remarkable medicines that can help manage it. We are no longer darkened and afflicted by the AIDS virus as we were in the 1980s and there is hope that a similar effect will happen with the Corona-19 virus and that we will turn a corner into brightness again.
- Finally, we note that this book was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the New York Times Top Book of 2018.

About the Author

Rebecca Makkai is the Chicago-based author of the story collection *Music for Wartime*, as well as the novels *The Hundred-Year House* (a BookPage “Best Book” of 2014 and winner of the Chicago Writers Association Award) and *The Borrower* (a Booklist Top Ten Debut).

Her short fiction was featured in *The Best American Short Stories* anthology in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, and appears regularly in publications such as *Harper’s*, *Tin House* and *Ploughshares*, and on public radio’s *This American Life* and *Selected Shorts*.

The recipient of a 2014 NEA Fellowship, Rebecca teaches at Northwestern University, Lake Forest College, and StoryStudio Chicago.