

BY THE BOOK

# Sarah Sze Wishes She Could Hear Gertrude Stein Pick a Fight

The artist, whose monograph “Sarah Sze: Paintings” came out in March and whose exhibition “Timelapse” is at the Guggenheim through September, would invite Stein to dinner with Cervantes and Murasaki Shikibu: “Stein might instigate a ... debate on the origin of the modern novel.”



Rebecca Clarke

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## What books are on your night stand?

Stacked in a tower: “Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt,” edited by Veronica Roberts; “If Beale Street Could Talk,” by James Baldwin; “Tadao Ando: The Colours of Light,” by Richard Pare; “Anni & Josef Albers: Equal and Unequal,” by Nicholas Fox Weber; “The Outsiders,” by S.E. Hinton; “The Accursed,” by Joyce Carol Oates.

## What’s the last great book you read?

“Rhinocéros,” by Eugène Ionesco.

## Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?

“Anna Karenina,” Leo Tolstoy.

## Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

Emily Dickinson, in a hammock, a light breeze, no clocks in sight.

## What’s your favorite book no one else has heard of?

“Flowers for Algernon,” by Daniel Keyes, was an influential book for me when I was growing up, and I’ve found that few people seem to have read it. It’s written in an epistolary style, and I was taken by how the writing itself uses spelling, grammar, punctuation and diction to indicate the rise and loss of the fictive author’s cognitive skills, reflecting the story line. I’m still struck with the novel’s opening epigraph from Plato, taken from Book 7 of “The Republic”: “Any one who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eye are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind’s eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye.”

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## Which writers — novelists, playwrights, critics, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most?

So many, but to name just a few: Hilton Als, Zadie Smith, Alice Munro, Jennifer Egan, Lynn Nottage, Jhumpa Lahiri, Molly Nesbit, Susan Choi, Billy Collins, Rana Dasgupta, Geraldine Brooks, Kazuo Ishiguro, Amitav Ghosh.

## What books, if any, have inspired you in your art?

“A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,” by James Joyce. “The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.” “Envelope Poems,” also by Emily Dickinson. “Ukiyo-E: 250 Years of Japanese Art,” by Roni Neuer, Herbert Libertson and Susugu Yoshida. “Invisible Cities,” by Italo Calvino. “The Collected Poems,” by Sylvia Plath.

## Are there writers you see as especially compatible with your work?

Carson McCullers, Mary Shelley, William Faulkner, Willa Cather, Nella Larsen, Flannery O’Connor, Toni Morrison, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Nikolai Gogol.

## What books or writers are especially good on the art world?

“On Photography,” by Susan Sontag. “Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations,” edited by Clark Coolidge. “The Lives of Artists: Collected Profiles,” by Calvin Tomkins. “Passages in Modern Sculpture,” by Rosalind E. Krauss. “How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art,” by Serge Guilbaut. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” by Linda Nochlin.

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## Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?

I recently loved reading René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” with my 17-year-old daughter, and “A Raisin in the Sun,” by Lorraine Hansberry, with my 13-year-old daughter.

## What’s the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?

In Carlo Rovelli’s “The Order of Time” I learned that time passes faster in the mountains than it does at sea level. As Rovelli explains, “lower down, all processes are slower. Two friends separate, with one of them living in the plains and the other going to live in the mountains. They meet up again years later: The one who has stayed down has lived less, aged less, the mechanism of his cuckoo clock has oscillated fewer times.”

## How do you organize your books?

Poorly. In piles and piles everywhere.

## What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

“Slaughterhouse-Five,” by Kurt Vonnegut, “Fahrenheit 451,” by Ray Bradbury, “1984,” by George Orwell, “Survival in Auschwitz,” by Primo Levi.

## What’s the best book you’ve ever received as a gift?

I recently happily received three beautiful original-edition books as gifts: “Powers of Ten: About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe,” by Philip Morrison and Phylis Morrison and the office of Charles and Ray Eames, “The Masters’ Book of Ikebana,” including lessons from Sofu Teshigahara, edited by Donald Richie and Meredith Weatherby, and “Piero Della Francesca,” by Carlo Bertelli.

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## What was the last book you recommended to a member of your family?

Virginia Woolf’s “To the Lighthouse,” to my 17-year-old daughter.

## You’re organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

Murasaki Shikibu, Miguel de Cervantes and Gertrude Stein, with the hopes that Stein might instigate a dinner table debate on the origin of the modern novel between Cervantes’s “Don Quixote,” of 1605, and Murasaki’s much earlier “The Tale of Genji,” written around 1021.

## What do you plan to read next?

A friend just gave me “Tell Them of Battles, Kings & Elephants,” by Mathias Énard, and I’m looking forward to rereading Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein” and Salman Rushdie’s “Midnight’s Children.”

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