

## Suggested Reading “*Back to Classics*”

To indicate increasing level of challenge, one, two, or three stars follow each book title.

ε *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain \*\* (required summer reading for students enrolling in Eng 3H)

Huck Finn is a homeless rebel who loves freedom more than respectability. He isn't above lying and stealing, but he faces a battle with his conscience when he meets up with a runaway slave named Jim, who provides him with his first experience of love, acceptance, and a sense of responsibility. The title character of this famous novel tells his own story in a straightforward narrative laced with shrewd, sharp comments on human nature. The boy's adventures along the Mississippi River form the framework of a series of moral lessons, revelations of a corrupt society, and contrasts of innocence and hypocrisy. This sequel to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* became an instant success in the year of its publication, 1884, but was seen by some as unfit for children to read because of its language, grammar, and "uncivilized hero." The book has sparked controversy ever since, but most scholars continue to praise it as a modern masterpiece, an essential read, and one of the greatest novels in all of American literature. Twain's satiric treatment of racism, religious excess, and rural simplicity, along with his accuracy in presenting dialects, mark his novel as a classic.

ε *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner \*\*\*

This novel is the harrowing account of the Bundren family's odyssey across the Mississippi countryside to bury Addie, their wife and mother. Told in turns by each of the family members—including Addie herself—the novel ranges in mood from dark comedy to the deepest pathos.

ε *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* by Cormac McCarthy \*\*\*

This contemporary American classic is a perverse, picaresque Western about bounty hunters for Indian scalps near the Texas-Mexico border in the 1850s—a ragged caravan of indiscriminate killers led by an unforgettable human monster called "The Judge." Imagine the imagery of Sam Peckinpah and Heironymus Bosch as written by William Faulkner, and you'll have just an inkling of this novel's power. From the opening scenes of this horror novel about a 14-year-old Tennessee boy who joins the band of hunters to the extraordinary, mythic ending, this is McCarthy at his best.

ε *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley \*\*\*

This satirically titled book depicts a future society where humans emerge from test tubes, families are obsolete, and every pleasure is regulated. When a so-called savage, who believes in spirituality, is found and imported into the society, he struggles in his attempt to adapt.

ε *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller \*\*

Set in the closing months of World War II in an American bomber squadron off Italy, *Catch-22* is the story of a bombardier named Yossarian, who is frantic and furious because thousands of people he hasn't even met keep trying to kill him. *Catch-22* is a microcosm of the twentieth-century world as it might look to someone dangerously sane.

ε *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok \*

In 1940s Brooklyn, New York, an accident throws Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders together. Despite their differences (Reuven is a Modern Orthodox Jew with an intellectual, Zionist father; Danny is the brilliant son and rightful heir to a Hasidic rebbe), the young men form a deep, if unlikely, friendship. Together they negotiate adolescence, family conflicts, the crisis of faith engendered when Holocaust stories begin to emerge in the U.S., loss, love, and the journey to adulthood. The intellectual and spiritual clashes between fathers, between each son and his own father, and between the two young men, provide a unique backdrop for this exploration of fathers, sons, faith, loyalty, and, ultimately, the power of love.

ε *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker \*\*

Celie is a poor black woman whose letters tell the story of 20 years of her life, beginning at age 14 when she is being abused and raped by her father and attempting to protect her sister from the same fate and continuing through her marriage to "Mister," a brutal man who terrorizes her. Celie eventually learns that her abusive husband has been keeping her sister's letters from her, and the rage she feels, combined with an example of love and independence provided by her close friend Shug, pushes her finally toward an awakening of her creative and loving self.

ε *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens \*\*

This is the story of a young man's adventures on his journey from an unhappy and impoverished childhood to the discovery of his vocation as a successful novelist. Among the gloriously vivid cast of characters he encounters are his tyrannical stepfather, Mr. Murdstone; his formidable aunt, Betsey Trotwood; the eternally humble yet treacherous Uriah Heep; frivolous, enchanting Dora; and the magnificently impecunious Micawber, one of literature's great comic creations. Filled with tragedy and comedy in equal measure, this novel draws revealingly on the author's own experiences to create one of his most exuberant and enduringly popular works.

ε *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway \*\*

Spain in the 1930s is the place to be for a man of action like Robert Jordan. There is a civil war going on and Jordan who has joined up on the side that appeals most to idealists of that era ~ like Ernest Hemingway and his friends ~ has been given a high-risk assignment up in the mountains. He awaits the right time to blow up a bridge in a cave. Pilar, who is in charge there, has an ability to foretell the future. And so that night she encourages Maria, a young girl ravaged by enemy soldiers, to join Jordan who has decided to spend the night under the stars.

ε *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley \*\*\*

A masterpiece of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Gothicism and the prototype of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century science fiction novel, *Frankenstein* was conceived in 1816, after Mary Shelley's late-night conversation with Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron about bringing corpses to life and her subsequent nightmare about a student who built a human being and "woke him up" with machinery. The monster's culpability for various horrific acts and his powerlessness in the face of ostracism from society, combined with Dr. Frankenstein's lies and abdication of responsibility, raised chilling questions that made the novel both an instant bestseller and a timeless classic.

ε *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck \*\*

This 1939 masterpiece indelibly captured America during the Great Depression through the story of one Oklahoma farm family, the Joads. Intensely human yet majestic in its scale and moral vision, tragic but ultimately stirring in its insistence on human dignity, this landmark American novel created an extraordinary moment in the history of our national conscience.

ε *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens \*\*

In what may be Dickens's best novel, humble, orphaned Pip is apprenticed to the dirty work of the forge but dares to dream of becoming a gentleman—and one day, under sudden and enigmatic circumstances, he finds himself in possession of “great expectations.” In this gripping tale of crime and guilt, revenge and reward, the compelling characters include Magwitch, the fearful and fearsome convict; Estella, whose beauty is excelled only by her haughtiness; and the embittered Miss Havisham, an eccentric jilted bride.

ε *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway \*\*

After 85 days of fishing, Santiago, an aged Cuban fisherman, hooks a giant marlin far out in the Gulf Stream; after a three-day fight with the fish, he manages to reel it in, but his tale does not end there ... In the end, this is a story of courage in the face of defeat and of personal triumph won from loss.

ε *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez \*\*\*

Probably Márquez's finest and most famous work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tells the story of the rise and fall, birth and death of the mythical town of Macondo through the history of the Buendía family. Inventive, amusing, magnetic, sad, alive with unforgettable men and women, and with a truth and understanding that strike the soul, this book is a masterpiece of the art of fiction.

ε *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov \*\*\*

Nabokov, best-known for *Lolita*, creates in this contemporary classic what is at first glance the publication of a 999-line poem in four cantos ("Pale Fire") by fictional American poet John Shade. The Foreword, extensive Commentary, and Index are by Shade's self-appointed editor, Charles Kinbote, who is Shade's neighbor in the small college town of New Wye. Shade is murdered and, according to Kinbote, the poem as he left it remains unfinished. Kinbote takes it upon himself to oversee its publication, telling readers that it lacks only one line. In the Commentary and Index, Kinbote concentrates surprisingly little on explicating the poem. Instead he tells his own story and the story of Charles Xavier, the deposed king of the "distant northern land" of Zembla. The reader soon realizes that Kinbote is Charles Xavier, living incognito—or that he is insane and his identification with Charles and perhaps all of Zembla are his delusions. Kinbote's apparatus criticus, especially his Commentary (in the form of notes to various lines) and Index, is full of cross-references and narrates his stories in a highly non-linear way.

-Wikipedia

ε *Rabbit Angstrom: Rabbit, Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit Is Rich, Rabbit at Rest* by John Updike \*\*\*

When we first met him in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the book that established John Updike as a major novelist, Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom is playing basketball with some boys in an alley in Pennsylvania during the tail end of the Eisenhower era, reliving for a moment his past as a star high school athlete. Athleticism of a different sort is on display throughout these four magnificent novels—the athleticism of an imagination possessed of the ability to lay bare, with a seemingly effortless animal grace, the enchantments and disenchantments of life. Updike revisited his hero toward the end of each of the following decades in the second half of this American century; and in each of the subsequent novels, as Rabbit, his wife, Janice, his son, Nelson, and the people around them grow, these characters take on the lineaments of our common existence. In prose that is one of the glories of contemporary literature, Updike has chronicled the frustrations and ambiguous triumphs, the loves and frenzies, the betrayals and reconciliations of our era. He has given us our representative American story.

ε *The Razor's Edge* by W. Somerset Maugham \*\*

Larry Darrell returns from the battlefields of World War I to America a different person. His fiancée (Isabel) resigns herself to a delay in the wedding plans when Larry heads off to Paris. There he finds he prefers a simpler existence and begins to read. One book inspires him to visit India and on to Nepal where he finds

spiritual help from a lama. On returning to Paris he finds Isabel and some old friends. Everyone has changed.

ε ***The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane \***

Following its initial appearance in serial form, this novel was published as a complete work in 1895 and quickly became the benchmark for modern anti-war literature. Although the exact battle is never identified, Crane based this story of a soldier's experiences during the American Civil War on the 1863 Battle of Chancellorsville. Many veterans, both Union and Confederate, praised the book's accurate representation of war, and critics consider its stylistic strength the mark of a literary classic.

ε ***A Separate Peace* by John Knowles \***

The volatile world of male adolescence provides the backdrop for John Knowles' engrossing tale of love, hate, war, and peace. Sharing a room at Devon, an exclusive New England prep school, in the summer prior to World War II, Gene and Phineas form a complex bond of friendship that draws out both the best and worst characteristics of each boy and leads ultimately to violence, a confession, and the betrayal of trust.

ε ***Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut \*\***

Kurt Vonnegut's absurdist classic introduces us to Billy Pilgrim, a man who becomes unstuck in time after he is abducted by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. In a plot-scrambling display of virtuosity, we follow Pilgrim simultaneously through all phases of his life, concentrating on his (and Vonnegut's) shattering experience as an American prisoner of war who witnesses the firebombing of Dresden, Germany.

ε ***Studs Lonigan: A Trilogy* by James T. Farrell \*\***

An unparalleled example of American naturalism, the Studs Lonigan trilogy follows the hopes and dissipations of its remarkable main character—a would-be “tough guy” and archetypal adolescent, born to Irish-American parents on Chicago's South Side—through the turbulent years of World War I, the Roaring Twenties, and the Great Depression. The three novels—*Young Lonigan*, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, and *Judgement Day*—offer a vivid sense of the textures of real life: of the institutions of Catholicism, the poolroom and the dance marathon, romance and marriage, gangsterism and ethnic rivalry, and the slang of the street corner.

ε ***Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe \*\*\***

First published in 1958, just two years before Nigeria declared independence from Great Britain, *Things Fall Apart* eschews the obvious temptation of depicting pre-colonial life as a kind of Eden. Instead, Achebe sketches a world in which violence, war, and suffering exist, but are balanced by a strong sense of tradition, ritual, and social coherence. Deceptively simple in its prose, this relentlessly unsentimental rendering of Nigerian tribal life before and after the coming of colonialism packs a powerful punch as Achebe holds up the ruin of one proud man to stand for the destruction of an entire culture.

ε ***The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass \*\*\***

Meet Oskar Matzerath, “the eternal three-year-old drummer.” Here is a Peter Pan story with a vengeance. But instead of Never-Never Land, Gunter Grass gives us Danzig, a contested city on the Polish-German border; instead of Captain Hook and his pirates, we have the Nazis. And in place of Peter himself is Oskar, a twisted *puer aeternis* with a scream that can shatter glass and a drum rather than a shadow. When Grass published *The Tin Drum* in 1959, it was as if German literature had been granted a new beginning after decades of linguistic and moral destruction.

ε ***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee \***

This Pulitzer Prize winning book of 1960 tells the story of Atticus Finch, a lawyer in a racially divided Alabama town in the 1930s. Finch agrees to defend a young black man who is accused of raping a white woman. Many of the townspeople try to get Atticus to pull out of the trial, but he decides to go ahead.

ε ***Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe** \*

Often referred to as the book that sparked the Civil War, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the story of the hard life and cruel death of an enslaved man called Uncle Tom, who is devoted to Little Eva, the daughter of the plantation owner. Though Uncle Tom's name has come to be a pejorative term, he is, in fact, a character of immense human dignity. More polemical than literary, the novel strengthened the abolitionists' argument against slavery.

-Book description from *Elements in Literature, 5<sup>th</sup> Course*

*Note: Unless otherwise noted, book descriptions are reprinted in full or part from amazon.com.*