

1. *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

They are an unlikely pair: George is "small and quick and dark of face"; Lennie, a man of tremendous size, has the mind of a young child. Yet they have formed a "family," clinging together in the face of loneliness and alienation.

Laborers in California's dusty vegetable fields, they hustle work when they can, living a hand-to-mouth existence. For George and Lennie have a plan: to own an acre of land and a shack they can call their own. When they land jobs on a ranch in the Salinas Valley, the fulfillment of their dream seems to be within their grasp. But even George cannot guard Lennie from the provocations of a flirtatious woman, nor predict the consequences of Lennie's unswerving obedience to the things George taught him.

2. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

The hero-narrator of THE CATCHER IN THE RYE is an ancient child of sixteen, a native New Yorker named Holden Caulfield. Through circumstances that tend to preclude adult, secondhand description, he leaves his prep school in Pennsylvania and goes underground in New York City for three days. The boy himself is at once too simple and too complex for us to make any final comment about him or his story. Perhaps the safest thing we can say about Holden is that he was born in the world not just strongly attracted to beauty but, almost, hopelessly impaled on it. There are many voices in this novel: children's voices, adult voices, underground voices-but Holden's voice is the most eloquent of all. Transcending his own vernacular, yet remaining marvelously faithful to it, he issues a perfectly articulated cry of mixed pain and pleasure. However, like most lovers and clowns and poets of the higher orders, he keeps most of the pain to, and for, himself. The pleasure he gives away, or sets aside, with all his heart. It is there for the reader who can handle it to keep.

3. *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

Guy Montag is a fireman. In his world, where television rules and literature is on the brink of extinction, firemen start fires rather than put them out. His job is to destroy the most illegal of commodities, the printed book, along with the houses in which they are hidden.

Montag never questions the destruction and ruin his actions produce, returning each day to his bland life and wife, Mildred, who spends all day with her television "family." But then he meets an eccentric young neighbor, Clarisse, who introduces him to a past where people didn't live in fear and to a present where one sees the world through the ideas in books instead of the mindless chatter of television.

4. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey

In this classic novel, Ken Kesey's hero is Randle Patrick McMurphy, a boisterous, brawling, fun-loving rebel who swaggers into the world of a mental hospital and takes over. A lusty, life-affirming fighter, McMurphy rallies the other patients around him by challenging the dictatorship of Nurse Ratched. He promotes gambling in the ward, smuggles in wine and women, and openly defies the rules at every turn. But this defiance, which starts as a sport, soon develops into a grim struggle, an all-out war between two relentless opponents: Nurse Ratched, backed by the full power of authority, and McMurphy, who has only his own indomitable will. What happens when Nurse Ratched uses her ultimate weapon against McMurphy provides the story's shocking climax.

5. *Slaughterhouse-five* by Kurt Vonnegut

Slaughterhouse-Five, an American classic, is one of the world's great antiwar books. Centering on the infamous firebombing of Dresden, Billy Pilgrim's odyssey through time reflects the mythic journey of our own fractured lives as we search for meaning in what we fear most.

6. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, prays every day for beauty. Mocked by other children for the dark skin, curly hair, and brown eyes that set her apart, she yearns for normalcy, for the blond hair and blue eyes that she believes will allow her to finally fit in. Yet as her dream grows more fervent, her life slowly starts to disintegrate in the face of adversity and strife. A powerful examination of our obsession with beauty and conformity, Toni Morrison's virtuosic first novel asks powerful questions about race, class, and gender with the subtlety and grace that have always characterized her writing.

7. *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller

Set in Italy during World War II, this is the story of the incomparable, malingering bombardier, Yossarian, a hero who is furious because thousands of people he has never met are trying to kill him. But his real problem is not the enemy—it is his own army, which keeps increasing the number of missions the men must fly to complete their service. Yet if Yossarian makes any attempt to excuse himself from the perilous missions he's assigned, he'll be in violation of Catch-22, a hilariously sinister bureaucratic rule: a man is considered insane if he willingly continues to fly dangerous combat missions, but if he makes a formal request to be removed from duty, he is proven sane and therefore ineligible to be relieved.

8. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

A father and his son walk alone through burned America. Nothing moves in the ravaged landscape save the ash on the wind. It is cold enough to crack stones, and when the snow falls it is gray. The sky is dark. Their destination is the coast, although they don't know what, if anything, awaits them there. They have nothing; just a pistol to defend themselves against the lawless bands that stalk the road, the clothes they are wearing, a cart of scavenged food—and each other.

9. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie

Bestselling author Sherman Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to take his future into his own hands, Junior leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school where the only other Indian is the school mascot.

Heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which is based on the author's own experiences, coupled with poignant drawings by Ellen Forney that reflect the character's art, chronicles the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he was destined to live.

10. *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

Thirty years since its original publication, *Ceremony* remains one of the most profound and moving works of Native American literature, a novel that is itself a ceremony of healing. Tayo, a World War II veteran of mixed ancestry, returns to the Laguna Pueblo Reservation. He is deeply scarred by his experience as a prisoner of the Japanese and further wounded by the rejection he encounters from his people. Only by immersing himself in the Indian past can he begin to regain the peace that was taken from him. Masterfully written, filled with the somber majesty of Pueblo myth, *Ceremony* is a work of enduring power.

11. *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse

This gripping story, written in sparse first-person, free-verse poems, is the compelling tale of Billie Jo's struggle to survive during the dust bowl years of the Depression. With stoic courage, she learns to cope with the loss of her mother and her grieving father's slow deterioration. There is hope at the end when Billie Jo's badly burned hands are healed, and she is able to play her beloved piano again. The 1998 Newbery Medal winner.

12. *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck

Like his father and grandfather before him, Kino is a poor diver, gathering pearls from the gulf beds that once brought great wealth to the Kings of Spain and now provide Kino, Juana, and their infant son with meager subsistence. Then, on a day like any other, Kino emerges from the sea with a pearl as large as a sea gull's egg, as "perfect as the moon." With the pearl comes hope, the promise of comfort and of security....

A story of classic simplicity, based on a Mexican folk tale, *The Pearl* explores the secrets of man's nature, the darkest depths of evil, and the luminous possibilities of love.

13. *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers

A coming-of-age tale for young adults set in the trenches of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, this is the story of Perry, a Harlem teenager who volunteers for the service when his dream of attending college falls through. Sent to the front lines, Perry and his platoon come face-to-face with the Vietcong and the real horror of warfare. But violence and death aren't the only hardships. As Perry struggles to find virtue in himself and his comrades, he questions why black troops are given the most dangerous assignments, and why the U.S. is even there at all.

14. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

Esther Greenwood is brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful, but slowly going under—maybe for the last time. In her acclaimed and enduring masterwork, Sylvia Plath brilliantly draws the reader into Esther's breakdown with such intensity that her insanity becomes palpably real, even rational—as accessible an experience as going to the movies. A deep penetration into the darkest and most harrowing corners of the human psyche, *The Bell Jar* is an extraordinary accomplishment and a haunting American classic.

15. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway

The story of Robert Jordan, a young American in the International Brigades attached to an antifascist guerilla unit in the mountains of Spain, it tells of loyalty and courage, love and defeat, and the tragic death of an ideal. In his portrayal of Jordan's love for the beautiful Maria and his superb account of El Sordo's last stand, in his brilliant travesty of La Pasionaria and his unwillingness to believe in blind faith, Hemingway surpasses his achievement in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* to create a work at once rare and beautiful, strong and brutal, compassionate, moving and wise.

16. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

A gripping, heart-wrenching, and wholly remarkable tale of coming-of-age in a South poisoned by virulent prejudice, it views a world of great beauty and savage inequities through the eyes of a young girl, as her father—a crusading local lawyer—risks everything to defend a black man unjustly accused of a terrible crime.

17. *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne

America's first psychological novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a dark tale of love, crime, and revenge set in colonial New England. It revolves around a single, forbidden act of passion that forever alters the lives of three members of a small Puritan community: Hester Prynne, an ardent and fierce woman who bears the punishment of her sin in humble silence; the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, a respected public figure who is inwardly tormented by long-hidden guilt; and the malevolent Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband—a man who seethes with an Ahab-like lust for vengeance.

The landscape of this classic novel is uniquely American, but the themes it explores are universal—the nature of sin, guilt, and penitence, the clash between our private and public selves, and the spiritual and psychological cost of living outside society. Constructed with the elegance of a Greek tragedy, *The Scarlet Letter* brilliantly illuminates the truth that lies deep within the human heart.

18. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain

Huckleberry Finn, rebel against school and church, casual inheritor of gold treasure, rafter of the Mississippi, and savior of Jim the runaway slave, is the archetypical American maverick. Fleeing the respectable society that wants to "sivilize" him, Huck Finn shoves off with Jim on a rhapsodic raft journey down the Mississippi River. The two bind themselves to one another, becoming intimate friends and agreeing "there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft."

As Huck learns about love, responsibility, and morality, the trip becomes a metaphoric voyage through his own soul, culminating in the glorious moment when he decides to "go to hell" rather than return Jim to slavery.

Mark Twain defined classic as "a book which people praise and don't read"; *Huckleberry Finn* is a happy exception to his own rule. Twain's mastery of dialect, coupled with his famous wit, has made *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* one of the most loved and distinctly American classics ever written.

19. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Nearly every young author dreams of writing a book that will literally change the world. A few have succeeded, and Harriet Beecher Stowe is such a marvel. Although the American anti-slavery movement had existed at least as long as the nation itself, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) galvanized public opinion as nothing had before. The book sold 10,000 copies in its first week and 300,000 in its first year. Its vivid dramatization of slavery's cruelties so aroused readers that it is said Abraham Lincoln told Stowe her work had been a catalyst for the Civil War.

Today the novel is often labeled condescending, but its characters—Tom, Topsy, Little Eva, Eliza, and the evil Simon Legree—still have the power to move our hearts. Though “Uncle Tom” has become a synonym for a fawning black yes-man, Stowe's Tom is actually American literature's first black hero, a man who suffers for refusing to obey his white oppressors. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a living, relevant story, passionate in its vivid depiction of the cruelest forms of injustice and inhumanity—and the courage it takes to fight against them.

20. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain

This childhood classic relates a small-town boy's pranks and escapades with timeless humor and wisdom. In addition to his everyday stunts (searching for buried treasure, trying to impress the adored Becky Thatcher), Tom experiences a dramatic turn of events when he witnesses a murder, runs away, and returns to attend his own funeral and testify in court.

21. *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway

The Old Man and the Sea is one of Hemingway's most enduring works. Told in language of great simplicity and power, it is the story of an old Cuban fisherman, down on his luck, and his supreme ordeal—a relentless, agonizing battle with a giant marlin far out in the Gulf Stream. Here Hemingway recasts, in strikingly contemporary style, the classic theme of courage in the face of defeat, of personal triumph won from loss. Written in 1952, this hugely successful novella confirmed his power and presence in the literary world and played a large part in his winning the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature.

22. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller

In the rigid theocracy of Salem, rumors that women are practicing witchcraft galvanize the town's most basic fears and suspicions; and when a young girl accuses Elizabeth Proctor of being a witch, self-righteous church leaders and townspeople insist that Elizabeth be brought to trial. The ruthlessness of the prosecutors and the eagerness of neighbor to testify against neighbor brilliantly illuminate the destructive power of socially sanctioned violence.

Written in 1953, *The Crucible* is a mirror Miller uses to reflect the anti-communist hysteria inspired by Senator Joseph McCarthy's "witch-hunts" in the United States. Within the text itself, Miller contemplates the parallels, writing: "Political opposition...is given an inhumane overlay, which then justifies the abrogation of all normally applied customs of civilized behavior. A political policy is equated with moral right, and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence."

23. *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

First published in 1899, this controversial novel of a New Orleans wife's search for love outside a stifling marriage shocked readers. Today, it remains a first-rate narrative with superb characterization.

24. *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain

When Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* was published in 1881, the Atlanta Constitution sang its praises in no uncertain terms: "The book comes upon the reading public in the shape of a revelation." A timeless tale of switched identities, Twain's story revolves around the miserably poor Tom Canty "of Offal Court," who is lucky enough to trade his rags for the gilded robes of England's prince, Edward Tudor. As each boy is mistaken for the other, Tom enters a realm of privilege and pleasure beyond his most delirious dreams, while Edward plunges into a cruel, dangerous world of beggars and thieves, cutthroats and killers. Befriended by the heroic Miles Hendon, Edward struggles to survive on the squalid streets of London, in the process learning about the underside of life in "Merry England." With its mixing of high adventure, raucous comedy, and scathing social criticism, presented in a hilarious faux-sixteenth-century vernacular that only Mark Twain could fashion, *The Prince and the Pauper* remains one of this incomparable humorist's most popular and oft-dramatized tales.

25. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

Sent by their mother to live with their devout, self-sufficient grandmother in a small Southern town, Maya and her brother, Bailey, endure the ache of abandonment and the prejudice of the local "powhitetrash." At eight years old and back at her mother's side in St. Louis, Maya is attacked by a man many times her age—and has to live with the consequences for a lifetime. Years later, in San Francisco, Maya learns about love for herself and the kindness of others, her own strong spirit, and the ideas of great authors ("I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare") will allow her to be free instead of imprisoned. Poetic and powerful, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a modern American classic that will touch hearts and change minds for as long as people read

26. *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien

A classic work of American literature that has not stopped changing minds and lives since it burst onto the literary scene, *The Things They Carried* is a ground-breaking meditation on war, memory, imagination, and the redemptive power of storytelling.

27. *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane

Henry Fleming is a young private in the Union army during the American Civil War—a farm boy untested by battle.

Faced with charging rebels, he flees. With his ideals shattered and his heart burdened by shame, Henry seeks an opportunity to redeem himself, even hoping for a wound—a “red badge of courage”—to prove his bravery.

Focusing on the inner psychological struggles and sensory perceptions of an individual soldier, Stephen Crane introduced a new kind of war novel to American literature. With heightened impressionism, he captured the emotional reality of war as no novelist before him had

28. *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote

On November 15, 1959, in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas, four members of the Clutter family were savagely murdered by blasts from a shotgun held a few inches from their faces. There was no apparent motive for the crime, and there were almost no clues.

As Truman Capote reconstructs the murder and the investigation that led to the capture, trial, and execution of the killers, he generates both mesmerizing suspense and astonishing empathy. *In Cold Blood* is a work that transcends its moment, yielding poignant insights into the nature of American violence.

29. *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton

Ponyboy can count on his brothers. And on his friends. But not on much else besides trouble with the Socs, a vicious gang of rich kids whose idea of a good time is beating up on “greasers” like Ponyboy. At least he knows what to expect—until the night someone takes things too far.

30. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Staring unflinchingly into the abyss of slavery, this spellbinding novel transforms history into a story as powerful as *Exodus* and as intimate as a lullaby. Sethe, its protagonist, was born a slave and escaped to Ohio, but eighteen years later she is still not free. She has too many memories of Sweet Home, the beautiful farm where so many hideous things happened. And Sethe’s new home is haunted by the ghost of her baby, who died nameless and whose tombstone is engraved with a single word: *Beloved*. Filled with bitter poetry and suspense as taut as a rope, *Beloved* is a towering achievement.

31. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

The Giver, the 1994 Newbery Medal winner, has become one of the most influential novels of our time. The haunting story centers on twelve-year-old Jonas, who lives in a seemingly ideal, if colorless, world of conformity and contentment. Not until he is given his life assignment as the Receiver of Memory does he begin to understand the dark, complex secrets behind his fragile community.

32. *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac

Inspired by Jack Kerouac's adventures with Neal Cassady, *On the Road* tells the story of two friends whose cross-country road trips are a quest for meaning and true experience. Written with a mixture of sad-eyed naiveté and wild ambition and imbued with Kerouac's love of America, his compassion for humanity, and his sense of language as jazz, *On the Road* is the quintessential American vision of freedom and hope, a book that changed American literature and changed anyone who has ever picked it up.

33. *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier

Some reviewers have argued it is one of the best young adult novels of all time. Set at a fictional Catholic high school, the story depicts a secret student organization's manipulation of the student body, which descends into cruel and ugly mob mentality against a lone, non-conforming student. Because of the novel's language, the concept of a high school secret society's intimidation to enforce the cultural norms of the school and various characters' sexual ponderings, it has been embroiled in censorship controversies and appeared as third on the American Library Association's list of the "Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books in 2000–2009." A sequel was published in 1985 called *Beyond the Chocolate War*.

34. *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London

Jack London's novels and ruggedly individual life seemed to embody American hopes, frustrations, and romantic longings in the turbulent first years of the twentieth century, years infused with the wonder and excitement of great technological and historic change. The author's restless spirit, taste for a life of excitement, and probing mind led him on a series of hard-edged adventures from the Klondike to the South Seas. Out of these sometimes harrowing experiences — and his fascination with the theories of such thinkers as Darwin, Spencer, and Marx — came the inspiration for novels of adventure that would make him one of America's most popular writers.

The Call of the Wild, considered by many London's greatest novel, is a gripping tale of a heroic dog that, thrust into the brutal life of the Alaska Gold Rush, ultimately faces a choice between living in man's world and returning to nature. Adventure and dog-story enthusiasts as well as students and devotees of American literature will find this classic work a thrilling, memorable reading experience.

35. *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

First published in 1939, Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning epic of the Great Depression chronicles the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s and tells the story of one Oklahoma farm family, the Joads—driven from their homestead and forced to travel west to the promised land of California. Out of their trials and their repeated collisions against the hard realities of an America divided into Haves and Have-Nots evolves a drama that is intensely human yet majestic in its scale and moral vision, elemental yet plainspoken, tragic but ultimately stirring in its human dignity. A portrait of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, of one man's fierce reaction to injustice, and of one woman's stoical strength, the novel captures the

horrors of the Great Depression and probes into the very nature of equality and justice in America. At once a naturalistic epic, captivity narrative, road novel, and transcendental gospel, Steinbeck's powerful landmark novel is perhaps the most American of American Classics.

36. *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

This Side of Paradise is the debut novel of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Published in 1920, and taking its title from a line of the Rupert Brooke poem *Tiare Tahiti*, the book examines the lives and morality of post-World War I youth. Its protagonist, Amory Blaine, is an attractive Princeton University student who dabbles in literature. The novel explores the theme of love warped by greed and status-seeking.

37. *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway

The quintessential novel of the Lost Generation, *The Sun Also Rises* is one of Ernest Hemingway's masterpieces and a classic example of his spare but powerful writing style. A poignant look at the disillusionment and angst of the post-World War I generation, the novel introduces two of Hemingway's most unforgettable characters: Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley. The story follows the flamboyant Brett and the hapless Jake as they journey from the wild nightlife of 1920s Paris to the brutal bullfighting rings of Spain with a motley group of expatriates. It is an age of moral bankruptcy, spiritual dissolution, unrealized love, and vanishing illusions. First published in 1926, *The Sun Also Rises* helped to establish Hemingway as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.

38. *Native Son* by Richard Wright

Right from the start, Bigger Thomas had been headed for jail. It could have been for assault or petty larceny; by chance, it was for murder and rape. *Native Son* tells the story of this young black man caught in a downward spiral after he kills a young white woman in a brief moment of panic. Set in Chicago in the 1930s, Wright's powerful novel is an unsparing reflection on the poverty and feelings of hopelessness experienced by people in inner cities across the country and of what it means to be black in America.

39. *Lake Wobegon Days* by Garrison Keillor

Keillor develops two main opposing themes, the nostalgic theme of how memory perfects childhood life in a small town, and the voluntary exile theme of how small town narrowness can be destructive of the spirit. Keillor as narrator fondly remembers both the fun and the terrors of childhood in Lake Wobegon, the fun of cat funerals, tomato fights, and the sleepwalking Lundberg family, and the terrors of walking to school in winter and of performing in school programs. On the other hand, he creates characters, many of whom are adolescents, who dream of a greater, more imaginative and adventurous life, a sort of life which is actively discouraged by the conservative culture of his town.

40. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass

Former slave, impassioned abolitionist, brilliant writer, newspaper editor and eloquent orator whose speeches fired the abolitionist cause, Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) led an astounding life.

Physical abuse, deprivation and tragedy plagued his early years, yet through sheer force of character he was able to overcome these obstacles to become a leading spokesman for his people. In this, the first and most frequently read of his three autobiographies, Douglass provides graphic descriptions of his childhood and horrifying experiences as a slave as well as a harrowing record of his dramatic escape to the North and eventual freedom.

Published in 1845 to quell doubts about his origins — since few slaves of that period could write — the *Narrative* is admired today for its extraordinary passion, sensitive and vivid descriptions and storytelling power. It belongs in the library of anyone interested in African-American history and the life of one of the country's most courageous and influential champions of civil rights.