

THE 100 MOST RECOMMENDED WORKS

This list of the 100 works most frequently recommended by colleges and universities is compiled from the pre-college reading lists, freshmen syllabi, and core programs detailed in Chapter 4, “The College and University Lists.” The annotations will help you decide which books you’d like to read first. The author’s nationality and the date of publication are in parentheses before each annotation. If you are interested in other works by the same author, alternate suggestions that were consistently mentioned by the colleges appear in parentheses at the end of the annotation.

NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

Austen, Jane, *Pride and Prejudice* (British, 1813): A novel about love and marriage among the English country gentry of Austen’s day. The hero’s pride in his social class conflicts with the heroine’s prejudice against him based on first impressions. (*Emma*)

Baldwin, James, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (American, 1953): This semi-autobiographical novel about a 14-year-old black youth’s religious conversion based on Baldwin’s experience as a young storefront preacher in Harlem. (*Notes of a Native Son*)

Bellow, Saul, *Seize the Day* (American, 1956): In this novella, a son grapples his love and hate for an unworthy father. When he won the Nobel Prize in 1976, Bellow was cited for “the human understanding and the analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work.” (*Henderson the Rain King*)

Bronte, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre* (British, 1847): This romantic novel introduced a new type of heroine to English fiction. Jane Eyre is an intelligent, passionate, and not especially beautiful young woman who falls in love with a strange moody man tormented by dark secrets.

Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights* (British, 1847): One of the masterpieces of English romanticism, this is a novel of love and revenge. The demonic passion the hero-villain Heathcliff destroys his beloved Catherine, her family, and eventually himself.

Camus, Albert, *The Stranger* (French, 1942): An existential novel in which a young man, observing rather than participating in life, commits a senseless murder. While in prison awaiting execution, he comes to value life. Camus won the Nobel Prize in 1957.

Carroll, Lewis, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (British, 1865): A fantasy in which Alice follows the White Rabbit to a dream world. The characters she encounters (the Mad Hatter, the Queen of Hearts, and others) are part of the adult world she must deal with. Sir John Tenniel's illustrations have become as classic as Lewis Carroll's story. (*Through the Looking Glass*)

Cather, Willa, *My Antonia* (American, 1918): A realistic novel about immigrant pioneers as they strive to adapt to the Nebraska prairies. It is the story of the struggles of Antonia and other women who are strengthened by the harsh realities of life. (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*)

Cervantes, Miguel de, *Don Quixote* (Spanish, 1605, 1615): A novel in which an eccentric old gentleman setting out as a knight goes "tilting at windmills" to right the wrongs of the world. This work, made up of twelve stories, "has been translated into more languages than any other book except the Bible" (L. H. Hornstein).

Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening* (American, 1899): This is the story of a New Orleans woman who abandons her husband and children to search for love and self-understanding. A controversial book when it was published because of the character's extramarital affair, the book was virtually ignored for 50 years.

Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness* (British, 1902): A probing psychological novel that explores the darkness in the soul of each man. Conrad's narrator Marlow makes a journey into the depths of the Congo where he discovers the extent to which greed can corrupt a good man. (*The Secret Sharer, Lord Jim*)

Crane, Stephen, *The Red Badge of Courage* (American, 1895): This Civil War novel, which Crane called "a psychological portrayal of fear" reveals the grim aspects of war in the life of an ordinary soldier. Henry Fleming joins the army full of romantic visions of battle, which are shattered by combat.

Defoe, Daniel, *Robinson Crusoe* (British, 1719): Based on the true story of Alexander Selkirk's sea experiences, this novel is about the adventures of a man who spends 24 years on an isolated island. With the help of an islander whom he names Friday, Crusoe shows courage and ingenuity in meeting the challenges of his predicament.

Dickens, Charles, *Great Expectations* (British, 1860—61): A novel about Pip, a poor boy, who is made rich by a mysterious benefactor, sets out to realize his 'great expectations' and finally becomes a man of worth and character. As in all his works, Dickens populates this novel with memorable and eccentric characters. (*David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

Dostoevski, Feodor, *Crime and Punishment* (Russian, 1866): A psychological novel about a poor student who murders an old woman pawnbroker and her sister. After the crime, his conscience bothers him until he confesses. He is sent to Siberia, and finally becomes truly repentant. (*The Brothers Karamazov*)

Eliot, George, *The Mill on the Floss* (British, 1860): The Victorian world of male supremacy is the background for this novel of a stormy relationship between a brother and sister. Maggie Tulliver's life is miserable because her brother Tom disapproves of her choices of romances. (*Middlemarch*)

Ellison, Ralph, *Invisible Man* (American, 1947): "I am an invisible man," begins this novel of an unnamed black man's search for identity as an individual and as a member of his race and his society. This story goes beyond one man's search and chronicles every man's struggle to find himself.

Faulkner, William, *The Sound and the Fury* (American, 1929): The theme for this Nobel Prize-winning author's novel is the decline of the Southern family. Presented through four points of view, it examines the deterioration of the Compson family. ("*The Bear*," *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom*)

Fielding, Henry, *Tom Jones* (British, 1749): A humorous novel about the adventures of an amorous young man whose impulsiveness often leads him into difficult situations. (*Joseph Andrews*)

Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby* (American, 1925): A novel in which a young man corrupts himself and the American Dream in order to regain a lost love. *The Great Gatsby* "belongs not only to American but to world literature. . .to the tragic predicament of humanity as a whole" (A. E. Dyson).

Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary* (French, 1857): A realistic novel in which a young wife is bored with her husband. In her extramarital affairs, she seeks unsuccessfully to find the emotional experiences she has read about in romantic novels.

Forster, E.M., *A Passage to India* (British, 1924): A pessimistic novel about man's inhumanity to man. A young English woman in British-ruled India accuses an Indian doctor of a sexual assault; her accusation causes racial tension between the British and Indian communities and destroys the young man's career. (*A Room with a View*, *Howard's End*)

García Márquez, Gabriel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Columbian, 1967): This Latin American novel portrays seven generations in the lives of the Buendía family. García Márquez employs a technique called magic realism—the use of magic, myth, and religion to intensify reality.

Golding, William, *Lord of the Flies* (British, 1954): In this novel a group of English schoolboys who are stranded on an island without adults become savages. This moral fable implies that defects in society are caused in part by defects in individuals.

Hardy, Thomas, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (British, 1891): A Victorian novel in which the happiness and marriage of Tess and her husband are destroyed because she confesses to him that she bore a child as the result of a forced sexual relationship with her employer's son. (*The Return of the Native*)

Hawthorne, Nathaniel, *The Scarlet Letter* (American, 1850): A novel about an adulterous Puritan woman who keeps secret the identity of the father of her illegitimate child. Her sin and the secret sin of the father are dwarfed by the vengefulness of her husband.

Hemingway, Ernest, *A Farewell to Arms* (American, 1929): In this semiautobiographical novel, which takes place during World War I, an American lieutenant falls in love and runs away with the woman who nurses him to health. Hemingway, winner of the 1954 Nobel Prize, is known for his journalistic style. (*The Sun Also Rises*)

Hurston, Zora Neale, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (American, 1937): A novel about a woman's search for a happy life. "The image of the black woman as the mule of the world becomes a metaphor for the roles that Janie reequiates in her quest for self-fulfillment..." (Sherley Williams).

Huxley, Aldous, *Brave New World* (British, 1932): In this bitter satire about the future, Nobel prize-winner Huxley conceives a world controlled by advances in science and social changes. Individuals are no longer important and their lives are planned out for them.

James, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw* (American, 1898): This novella is a study of good and evil in which the children are "the arena and the victim" (Hortense Calisher). A governess in charge of two children discovers they are under the evil influence of ghosts and attempts to save them. (*Portrait of a Lady*)

Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Irish, 1916): A novel about a young man growing up in Ireland and rebelling against family, country, and religion to become an artist. Joyce's use of stream-of-consciousness has influenced many modern writers. (*Ulysses*, *The Dubliners*)

Kafka, Franz, *The Trial* (Czechoslovakian, 1925): In this novel a man is tried for a crime he knows nothing about, yet he feels guilty and is executed. W. H. Auden described Kafka as "the author who comes nearest to bearing the same kind of relation to our age [that] Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe bore to theirs..." (*Metamorphosis*)

Lawrence, D.H., *Sons and Lovers* (British, 1913): An autobiographical novel about a youth who is torn between a dominant working-class father and a possessive genteel mother. “Lawrence has been one of the most influential figures in Anglo-American literature and life of this century” (Martin SeymourSmith). (*Women in Love*)

Lewis, Sinclair, *Babbitt* (American, 1922): A satirical novel about a middle-class businessman in an average midwestern city. Babbitt becomes a pathetic yet comical character because of his exaggerated sense of his importance. Lewis was the first American to win the Nobel Prize. (*Main Street*)

Malamud, Bernard, *The Assistant* (American, 1957): A novel in which a Gentile hoodlum “out of a compelling pity” goes to work for a Jewish grocer whom he has robbed. Finally taking the grocer’s place, he becomes a Jew himself and accepts all that is Jewish.

Mann, Thomas, *Death in Venice* (German, 1912): In this novella an author becomes aware of a darker side of himself when he visits Venice and fantasizes a love for a young boy he sees there. This story alludes frequently to Greek literature and mythology.

Melville, Herman, *Moby-Dick* (American, 1851): A complex novel about a mad sea captain’s pursuit of the White Whale. To Clifton Fadiman, “as we turn the pages, our hands close about an imaginary harpoon...in our ears rings the cry: ‘There she blows!’”

Morrison, Toni, *Sula* (American, 1973): A novel about the lifelong friendship of two vastly different women who become estranged when one causes the other's husband to abandon her. "Its humor is earthy and delightful, and its dialogue is especially sharp" (Jonathan Yardley). (*Beloved*)

O'Connor, Flannery, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (American, 1955): A triad of short stories set in Georgia. The title story is about the deadly confrontation between a religious grandmother and a mad murderer. O'Connor's characters "hold their fears at bay with a rustic religiosity that is as functional as their speech or dress" (James Greene).

Olsen, Tulle, *Tell Me a Riddle* (American, 1956—60): A group of short stories including a novella about the problems of aging. An old man and woman quarrel bitterly about whether to stay in their own home or to move to the Haven, a retirement home.

Orwell, George, *Animal Farm* (British, 1945): The classic satire of communism in which the pigs lead the other farm animals in a revolution against the humans, setting up their own government where "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." (1984)

Paton, Alan, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (South African, 1948): A novel about a black minister in South Africa who goes in search of his children and finds them corrupted and destroyed by white society. The roots of both the generational and racial conflicts of black South Africans are explored in this story.

Poe, Edgar Allan, *Great Tales and Poems* (American, 1839—45): Poe is considered the father of detective stories and a master of supernatural tales. The stories most often recommended are “The Fall of the House of Usher” “The Purloined Letter” “The Cask of Amontillado” “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

Salinger, J. D., *The Catcher in the Rye* (American, 1951): A novel in which a prep school dropout rejects the “phoniness” he sees all about him. *Catcher* is “one of those rare books that influenced one generation after another, causing each to claim it as its own” (Adam Moss).

Scott, Sir Walter, *Ivanhoe* (British, 1820): A story of chivalry in which the Norman hero Wilfred finally wins his true love, the Saxon Rowena, with the help of the Black Knight (Richard the Lion-Hearted in disguise) and brings about a temporary peace between the Normans and the Saxons. (*Heart of Midlothian*)

Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein* (British, 1818): A gothic tale of terror in which Frankenstein creates a monster from corpses. Because everyone who sees him fears him, the monster despairs and turns on his creator.

Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath* (American, 1939): A historical novel by 1962 Nobel Prize winner about the desperate flight of tenant farmers from the Midwest during the Depression. Members of the Joad family struggle to retain their humanity and dignity in the face of the hostility they find in California. (*Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row*, *The Pearl*)

Swift, Jonathan, *Gulliver's Travels* (British, 1726): A satire on mankind in which an 18th-century Englishman visits foreign lands populated by bizarre creatures who illuminate many of the vices and weaknesses of his society.

Thackeray, William Makepeace, *Vanity Fair* (British, 1847—48): A novel of 19th-century upper-middle-class British society that portrays 20 years in the lives of two young women very opposite in character: gentle, sentimental Amelia and lively, cunning Becky.

Tolstoy, Leo, *War and Peace* (Russian, 1865-69): A historical novel of the Napoleonic Wars that celebrates the Russian spirit and shows the effect of war and peace on every social class in Russian society. (*Anna Karenina*)

Turgenev, Ivan, *Fathers and Sons* (Russian, 1862): In this novel two young men experience difficulty in their relationships with their parents and with their women friends. “The aspirations of Russia’s liberal youth are pitted against those of the conservative landowning gentry...” (R. Freedman).

Twain, Mark, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (American, 1886): In this novel Huck takes a trip down the river with a runaway slave and learns the worth of life. According to Ernest Hemingway, “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.”

Updike, John, *Rabbit, Run* (American, 1961): The first of the Rabbit Angstrom novels in which an immature young man still longing for the lost glory of his youth runs away from his responsibilities and abandons his wife and child.

Voltaire, *Candide* (French, 1759): A satire against those who complacently accept life’s disasters. This bitter criticism is disguised as a rollicking travel story in which Candide is puzzled because everything bad happens to him in this “best of all possible worlds.”

Vonnegut, Kurt, *Slaughterhouse Five* (American, 1969): A semi-autobiographical novel about the firebombing of Dresden in World War II. In the story a time traveler, Billy Pilgrim, finds peace in a future world where he is “grateful that so many of those moments are nice.” (*Cat’s Cradle*)

Walker, Alice, *The Color Purple* (American, 1982): A novel that focuses on “the role of male domination in the frustration of the black woman’s struggle for independence” (Mel Watkins). In this story a young black girl sees herself as property until another woman teaches her to value herself.

Welty, Eudora, *Thirteen Stories* (American, 1965): A collection of short stories about people and life in the deep South. Most often mentioned by colleges are “Why I Live at the PO,” “The Worn Path,” and “The Petrified Man.”

Wharton, Edith, *The Age of Innocence* (American, 1920): A novel about a couple condemned to a loveless marriage by the conventions of their social class. “Wharton’s work formed a bridge from the 19th-century novel to the magazine fiction of the present” (Louise Brogan). (*The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*)

Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse* (British, 1927): Written in stream-of-consciousness, this semi-autobiographical novel describes the Ramsey family’s life in their country home. The lighthouse they see from the window is a symbolic goal for them all. (*A Room of One’s Own*)

Wright, Richard, *Native Son* (American, 1940): In this novel Bigger Thomas, a young black man from the Chicago slums, lashes out against a hostile society by committing two murders. The book is based partly on Wright’s experiences, partly on an actual murder case.