

READING LIST

I'VE TOSSED BOOK and poem titles at you, sometimes at a dizzying pace. This kind of thing can make you feel excited, so you go on to read more books, or infuriated, so you blame the authors and books you never heard of for making you feel dumb. Never feel dumb. Not knowing about a book or author simply shows what you haven't gotten to yet. I find more works and writers every day that I haven't gotten to, haven't even heard of.

What I offer here is a list of books mentioned throughout the book, plus some others I probably should have mentioned, or would have if I had more chapters to write. What all these works have in common is that a reader can learn a lot from them. I have learned a lot from them.

I do not claim that these books are better than other books I have not chosen, or that *The Iliad* is better than Charles Dickens. I do have strong opinions about which books are better and why, but that's not what this is about. All I can claim for these books is that, if you read them, you will become more learned. That's it. We're in the learning business. I am, and if you've read this far, so are you. Education is about classes and grades; learning is what we do for ourselves. When we're lucky, they go together. If I had to choose, I'd take learning.

Oh, there's another thing that will happen if you read the books on this list: you will have a good time, mostly. I promise. Hey, I can't guarantee that everyone will like everything or that my taste is your taste. What I can guarantee is that these books are entertaining. We speak of literary *works*, but in fact literature is mostly play. If you read novels and plays and stories and poems and you're not having fun, somebody is doing something wrong. If a novel seems like a struggle, quit; you're not getting paid to read it, are you? And you surely won't get fired if you don't read it. So enjoy.

PRIMARY WORKS

Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868–1869). The lives of four sisters, and the death of one.

W. H. Auden, “*Musée des Beaux Arts*” (1940). A meditation on human suffering, based on a Pieter Brueghel painting. There's a lot more great Auden where this came from.

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1954). What if there's a road but

characters don't travel it? Would that mean something?

Libba Bray, *Beauty Queens* (2011). Might make you take a second look at all those TV commercials for clothes, shampoo, and makeup, and wonder what exactly you're being sold. Plus it's extremely funny.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess* (1905) and ***The Secret Garden*** (1911). These might seem a bit old-fashioned, but they were some of the first books for young readers to give us real children (sometimes bad, sometimes good, always interesting) instead of paper cutouts who were rewarded for virtues and punished for vices.

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (1384). You'll have to read this one in a modern translation unless you've had training in Middle English, but it's wonderful in any language. Funny, heartbreaking, warm, ironic, everything a diverse group of people traveling together and telling stories is likely to be.

Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War* (1974). Not all readers are comfortable with Cormier's dark view of the world—but people with power often use it badly, and you won't find a more honest look at this harsh truth.

Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). In Dahl's world, humor lives alongside a fierce kind of judgment about human nature—it's entertaining and a little unnerving. Good stuff.

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Dickens is the most humane writer you'll ever read. He believes in people, even with all their faults, and he slings a great story, with the most memorable characters you'll meet anywhere.

Sharon M. Draper, *Romiette and Julio* (1999). If *West Side Story* isn't enough for you, look here for another way to retell Shakespeare's classic story.

Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book* (2008). Funny, scary, and clever.

William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954). You'll never look at recess the same way again.

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Race, class, and family, all in one tightly written play.

Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and ***The Old Man and the Sea*** (1952).

Homer, *The Iliad* and ***The Odyssey*** (from the eighth century B.C.). The second of these is probably easier going for modern readers, but they're both great. Every time I teach *The Iliad*, I have students who say, "I had no idea

this was such a great story.”

Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831).

Washington Irving, “**Rip Van Winkle**” (1819). Irving was one of the earliest writers to think carefully about what it means to be American.

Henry James, “**Daisy Miller**” (1878). It’s about the way human beings consume one another.

Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895).

C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950).

Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (2005). You don’t need me to tell you to take a look at this one, right?

Edgar Allan Poe, “**The Fall of the House of Usher**” (1839) and “**The Masque of the Red Death**” (1842). Poe’s stories (and poems, for that matter) have the logic of our nightmares, the terror of thoughts we can’t suppress or control.

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1997). You don’t need me here either. Continue through rest of series.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Take your pick. Here’s mine: *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, King Lear, Henry V, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Much Ado about Nothing, The Tempest, A Winter’s Tale, As You Like It, Twelfth Night*. And then there are the sonnets. Read all of them you can. Hey, they’re only fourteen lines long. I particularly like Sonnet 73, but there are a lot of wonderful sonnets in there.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818). The monster isn’t simply monstrous. He says something about his creator and about the society in which Victor Frankenstein lives.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* (fifth century B.C.). These plays make up a trilogy dealing with a doomed family. The first (which is the first really great detective story in Western literature) is about blindness and vision, the second about traveling on the road and the place where all roads end, and the third a meditation on power, loyalty to the state, and personal morality. These plays, now over twenty-four hundred years old, never go out of style.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Stevenson does fascinating things with the possibilities of the divided self (the one with a good and an evil side).

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897). What, you need a reason?

Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960) and ***How the Grinch Stole Christmas*** (1957). If you somehow missed out on these in your early childhood, I'm very sorry. Go back and read them now.

Theodore Taylor, *The Cay* (1969). A short book with a lot packed into it—childhood, growing up, race and racism, war, survival.

Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Poor Huck has come under attack in recent decades, and yes, it does have that racist word in it (not surprising for a work depicting a racist society), but *Huck Finn* has more sheer humanity than any three books I can think of. And it's one of the great road-buddy stories of all time, even if the road is soggy.

Eudora Welty, "Why I Live at the P.O." (1941). Family, family, family—how we get along and how we don't.

Laura Ingalls Wilder, the *Little House* series. What family means and what frontier means—two great questions to ponder.

FAIRY TALES WE CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

"**Sleeping Beauty,**" "**Snow White,**" "**Hansel and Gretel,**" "**Rapunzel,**" "**Rumpelstiltskin.**"

MOVIES TO READ

The Gold Rush (1925) and ***Modern Times*** (1936). Charlie Chaplin is the greatest film comedian ever. Accept no substitutes.

Notorious (1946), ***North by Northwest*** (1959), and ***Psycho*** (1960). Somebody's always copying Hitchcock. Meet the original.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000). Not only a reworking of *The Odyssey* but an excellent road-buddy film with a great American soundtrack.

Pale Rider (1985). Clint Eastwood's fullest treatment of his mythic avenging-angel hero.

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), ***Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*** (1984), and ***Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*** (1989). Great quest stories. You know when you're searching for the lost Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail that you're dealing with quests. Take away Indy's leather jacket, fedora, and whip and give him chain mail, helmet, and lance, and see if he doesn't look considerably like Sir Gawain.

Star Wars (1977), ***The Empire Strikes Back*** (1981), and ***Return of the Jedi*** (1983). George Lucas's trilogy does a great job of showing us types of heroes and villains. If you know the Arthurian legends, so much the better.

Personally, I don't care if you learn anything about all that from the films or not; they're so much fun, you deserve to see them. Repeatedly.

West Side Story (1957). Tony and Maria, the Jets and the Sharks, plus some of the best song and dance a musical ever offered.