

Why Read?

One of the benefits of college should be wide reading and new information, the ability to think critically, the ability to take a broad and well-informed perspective on the world. The classes you take and the degree you get, however, are only the beginning of an education. The greatest benefit of college is learning to learn on your own.

What we find in literature: a connection with our own experiences and those of others with respect to issues that everyone confronts, in one way or another, at some time or other. Authors, ancient and modern, deal with the inner and outer conflicts of life, the questions that won't leave us alone, though we'd like to ignore them. Literature deepens our sensibilities, gives voice to our own frustrations, joys, anxieties, and ecstasies. The splendor of writers at the top of their game using language skillfully, playfully, with excitement, loving to tell stories that have emotional and conceptual depth, taking us sometimes out of our comfort zones as far as the panorama of human possibilities is concerned; these are the books that both help us mature and reward greater maturity with greater meaningfulness. If you find these works challenging, puzzling, formidable when you start reading/listening, gather some basic information about them. Look them up on the web: there's so much information available that no one needs to read in a vacuum anymore.

Where films are available, I would suggest seeing films only of plays (not other narratives). Nothing replaces the experience of the language on the page and the way your own imagination creates the characters and action of a narrative.

Note: this is a very selective list. It doesn't even include all the literature I like, much less all that is worth reading. These are works I have particularly liked and returned to, both to teach and read on my own. Reading should be a pleasure, even when it is difficult—rise to the occasion.

Ancient literature:

These are works written long ago, but their stories are cosmic in scope, involving war, love, self-sacrifice, the meaning of death, who the divinities are and how they relate to our lives (and thereby the stories are explanations of why our lives take the random, unpredictable courses they do—many aspects of life have not changed from the ancient world to the modern. Now we have cell phones and video games.)

The Epic of Gilgamesh, anon. The first adventure, quest search story we have—an inquiry into the meaning of life, the pain of death and separation, the wish for immortality.

The Iliad (tr. Robert Fagles) (one of the two great works at the very beginning of western literature—the other is *The Odyssey*) This great work portrays the people who fight wars, as well as those who make the decisions; raises the question of the meaning and value of war, death, honor, and glory as opposed to life, peace, and satisfaction.

The Odyssey (tr. Robert Fagles) Also a great book—another quest, adventure, search narrative that takes Odysseus into realms beyond his experience, which he

must use his utmost skill and ingenuity to survive—the story of every human.)

The Ramayana (tr. William Buck) The greatest love story ever told, and perhaps the most painful.

The Mahabharata (tr. William Buck)

The Bhagavad Gita (one of the great expressions of religious philosophy in any language)

1 & 2 Samuel (Hebrew Bible)

The Book of Revelation (Christian Bible)

The Book of Job (Hebrew Bible)

(note: don't take these Biblical works for granted—the Bible is not a unified, homogenized theological treatise: it is a collection of narratives and other kinds of texts from many different historical periods, collected by many author/editors who adapted the texts to the needs of their own times—easy, Sunday-school type “lessons” should be set aside. God is a different character in different books.

Read what's on the page. It may surprise you.)

The Aeneid, Vergil (the story of the destruction of Troy and the narrow escape of Aeneas, who goes off on an Odyssean journey to fulfill his mission of founding Rome—poem left unfinished by Vergil some 40-50 years before the birth of Jesus)

Dialogues, Plato

The-No-Longer-Ancient-But-Not-Yet-Very-Modern World

(medieval/renaissance/to 19th century—in the minds of most scholars, “ancient world” refers to the world before Christ. Unfortunately, that doesn't make the world after Christ “modern,” at least not for a very long time.)

Gargantua and Pantagruel, Rabelais

The Decameron, Boccaccio

The Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer

Tale of the Genji, Lady Murasaki (early Japanese tale of court life and intrigue)

The Divine Comedy (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*—separate books), Dante (the great expression of medieval Catholicism in graphic, grotesque, and exalted narration)

Paradise Lost, John Milton (not to everyone's taste—but a monumental narrative, one of the most famous depictions of Satan in all of literature, and a compassionate treatment, unorthodox in some ways, of Adam and Eve and the first disobedience of a divine commandment)

The Life of Samuel Johnson, Boswell (set a standard for biographical writing, and one of the most compelling, human, and funny portraits of a great 18th century writer; you really get to know this great, cranky man who wrote the first English dictionary)

Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy

War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy

Tom Jones, Henry Fielding (great, funny 18th century novel, great for long days on the beach or the back porch)

Tristram Shandy, Laurence Sterne (one of the early representatives of Irish literature—very very funny in an offbeat, understated way—the hilariously eccentric Uncle Toby will charm and delight you)

Emma, *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen. These will get you started.

Shakespeare (a beginning list—eventually, you should just go ahead and read all the plays). In general, as film versions go, the collection of BBC productions is very good. They stay close to the original text and they are produced as Elizabethan plays, not modernized versions. I mention other film versions along the way.

- Comedies: *12th Night* (great film version available—check out Sir Toby and Sir Andrew Aguecheek)
Midsummer Night's Dream (how can you not love Bottom?)
As You Like It
- Tragedies: *King Lear* (available in a film version with the great British actor, Sir Lawrence Olivier)
Othello (available in a film version with Laurence Fishburne, Kenneth Branagh)
Macbeth (interesting film adaptation by Akira Kurosawa—*Throne of Blood*)
Hamlet (avoid the Mel Gibson film version—go for Kenneth Branagh; the Lawrence Olivier version is okay, but dated)
Titus Andronicus (early potboiler—great fun! Film version: *Titus*, with Anthony Hopkins as Titus)
Romeo and Juliet (who can resist a play Leonardo DiCaprio had a leading role in—modern film production, obviously, not during Shakespeare's time)
- Roman plays: *Coriolanus*
Julius Caesar
Troilus and Cressida (tough play emotionally—read it, then go back and read the *Iliad* with a completely different perspective)
- History plays: *Henry IV, Pt. 1* (you've got to read this for Falstaff, one of Shakespeare's most enduring and popular characters!)
- Late plays: *A Winter's Tale* (beautiful play, with a miracle at the end)
The Tempest (a great magician gets his daughter married to the man of her dreams)

From the modern period:

First, a caveat: the defining events of the 20th century have not been the type to reassure one about the humanity of humans, and this is certainly registered in the works below. A student asked once why the class had to read so many depressing books: the answer is that a) twentieth century writers have had vast tragic, horrific events to live through; b) the great writers in every era seem to be those most sensitive to the greatest human afflictions, doubts, and sufferings. Writing in and of itself is often their pathway to spiritual and emotional salvation, and in their books they share that with the rest of us.

The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann (a big novel, a great novel, go for it!)

Gravity's Rainbow, Thomas Pynchon (a big novel, a great novel, a challenging, complex novel. Don't be scared! If there were still E-tickets, this would be an X-ticket ride, in more than one sense.)

The Crying of Lot 49, Thomas Pynchon (much shorter than *Gravity's Rainbow*; complex, weird—don't be scared!)

Absalom, Absalom, William Faulkner (challenging book by one of America's Nobel prize-winning writers—don't be scared—stick to it! Faulkner is on record as saying to a reporter, If you didn't understand my books after reading them three times, read them a fourth!) When you've finished this, go on to almost all of his other novels.

Ulysses, James Joyce (a must-read for anyone interested in 20th century literature—a monumental work about deeply human characters; the final chapter is one of the most famous extended adventures in experimental writing and got the book banned in America until 1947 when the Supreme Court declared that it was not “pornography”—did I get your attention?)

Dubliners, James Joyce (for those of you interested in the jewelry business, each of the stories in this collection is a gem; Joyce never misses a beat, never strikes a bad note; every word is exactly the right word—learn great writing from one of the greatest writers)

The Wasteland, T.S. Eliot (one of the defining poems of the 20th century)

On the Road, Jack Kerouac (defining book of the beat/hippie movement)

A Bend in the River, V.S. Naipaul

A House for Mr. Biswas, V. S. Naipaul

The Tin Drum, Gunter Grass (amazing, heartbreaking story set in Germany/Poland in WW II; p.s.: Grass is one of the 20th century's great writers)

The Flounder, Gunter Grass (amazing, hilarious and moving story about how women changed the course of history with various dishes they have cooked; this may sound condescending, but the novel isn't condescending—it gives women real power and points to the mess men have made of things in world history)

Hopscotch, Julio Cortazar (seminal Argentinian writer) cf. also, *We All Loved Glenda So Much*, a collection of short stories

The Death of Artemio Cruz, Carlos Fuentes (one of Mexico's finest writers, international reputation—this is an early, experimental novel that brought him major recognition)

Ficciones, Jorge Luis Borges (Argentinian writer, 1st half of the 20th century—important influence on many later writers in many languages)

Sophie's Choice, William Styron (the story of a writer who goes to New York, gets caught up with two people, one of whom is Sophie, whose holocaust experience is devastating for herself and for the reader)

Woman Warrior, *Tripmaster Monkey*, *China Men*, Maxine Hong Kingston (all three of these books meld the Chinese and American sensibility—*China Men* is heavily documentary, a tribute to the men who came from China to America in the 19th century to work on railroads, and the record of America's on-again-off-again acceptance of them, which alternated with outright discrimination and brutality, depending on America's need for cheap labor—a recurrent story.)

Molloy, *Watt*, Samuel Beckett (very strange and darkly funny novels by the Nobel-prize-winning author of *Waiting for Godot*)

Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafisi (wonderful story of Iranian women who join to discuss literature and its meaning for them in a regime that suppresses women—stories of how the reactionary fundamentalist Muslim government treats its people sprinkled throughout the book—Nafisi also has a lot of provocative commentary)

about the books she teaches/discusses with the women, some of whom, in their mid-twenties, have never been allowed to date, or to go out in public without being accompanied by a male relative)

Day of the Locust and *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West (classic, definitive LA novels)

Six Characters in Search of an Author, Luigi Pirandello (one of the earliest absurdist theater plays—surprising, funny, shocking at the end)

Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury (science fiction is a whole other genre; some of it right up there with other great literature—this story of a repressive government and the underground movement to preserve literature for the ages seems always important); cf. also Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*

Letters from the Earth, Mark Twain (the book no one told you about because it's too scandalous!)

Typical American, Love Wife, Gish Jen

When you're not reading: listen to great music! These are just a couple out of many possible recommendations:

The Rite of Spring, Igor Stravinsky (breakthrough composition of the 20th century)

Pierrot Lunaire, Arnold Schoenberg (breakthrough composition of the 20th century)

Symphonies 3, 5, 9, Beethoven (and the rest when you've finished with those)

String Quartets, Beethoven

Symphonies 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, Mozart

The London Symphonies, Haydn

Johan Sebastian Bach: *The Brandenburg Concertos*, *Mass in B Minor*, *The Well Tempered Clavier*—like Shakespeare, there are too many works to mention, and all repay repeated listening. Try the *Unaccompanied Cello Suites*, recorded by Yo-Yo Ma.

The music of Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus; the George Gruntz Concert Jazz Band

Non-fiction. This is going to be a really selective list—and certainly not definitive for any area—these are books I've found interesting and important to my personal education. They furnish a kind of global information/overview/perspective on the contemporary world and how we got where we are. The science books are all written with the layperson in mind. That doesn't make them easy, but they are accessible. Scientific ideas are often complex, but they drive many of the other intellectual paradigms of the modern world.

Guns, Germs, and Steel, Jared Diamond (historical anthropology—really interesting argument concerning why the dominant cultures in the world are the dominant cultures)

Collapse, Jared Diamond (anthropology/social criticism)

The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx (political philosophy)

The Prince, Nicolo Machiavelli (political philosophy)

Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, Elaine Pagels (Biblical scholarship/criticism/interpretation)

- The Origin of Satan*, Elaine Pagels (Biblical scholarship—how did Satan come to be the character we know him as today? The earliest mentions in the Hebrew Bible do not portray Satan as a “prince of evil.” In the Book of Job Satan is one of the heavenly beings.)
- Who Wrote the Bible?* Richard Eliot Friedman (Biblical scholarship—Hebrew Bible—the history of its authorship over some five centuries.)
- Who Wrote the New Testament?* Burton Mack (Biblical scholarship—Christian Bible—the conditions of the authorship of major books of the Christian Bible—the gospels, the book of Acts, the letters of Paul)
- Surpassing Wonder*, Donald Harman Akenson (historical overview of the development of Hebrew and Christian bibles—provocative book, very readable.)
- Living to Tell the Tale*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (fascinating autobiography)
- Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz (one of the world’s really great writers)
- Silence*, John Cage (perhaps the most influential composer, aesthete, artist of the mid 20th century—listen also to his music—very challenging, but helped define the musical idiom of the second half of the 20th century, influenced people like Brian Eno.)
- The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin (the books that set in motion controversies still being played out today—great argumentative writing)
- Stephen Jay Gould—almost any book—a witty, intelligent writer, developed the idea of “punctuated equilibrium” as a modification of the Darwinian description of the evolutionary process.)
- The Whole Shebang*, Timothy Ferris (the origins of the universe, current state of research in cosmology, very accessible)
- The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas L. Friedman (interesting, panoramic, and ominous chronicle of the impact of globalization)
- A People’s History of the United States* (subversive history of the US, focusing on the incidents where injustice and unfairness prevailed despite the constitutional promises of equality and justice for all)
- The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*, Stephen Kern (a historical narrative of the major developments, discoveries in technology that caused Europe and American to change radically into what we think of as a “modern” world)
- The March of Folly*, Barbara Tuchman (a historical inquiry into why governments/nations act against their own best interests in ways that are often self-destructive)
- A Distant Mirror: the Calamity of the 14th Century*, Barbara Tuchman (historical account of the social and political crises of the 14th century in Europe, with the implication that many of the conditions in effect then are reflected in the contemporary world)
- The Major Achievements of Science*, A.E.E. Mackenzie
- Taking the Quantum Leap*, Fred Alan Wolfe (excellent overview not only of quantum mechanics, but of how the physics of quantum mechanics operates in the realm of human perception)
- The Blind Watchmaker*, Richard Dawkins (response to the critics of evolution—argument laid out clearly and concisely demonstrating that basic criticisms are

- wrong) Other books by Dawkins are equally sound and accessible.
- Science and Technology in World History*, McClellan and Dorn
- The Bible Unearth'd*, Finklestein and Silberman (archeology—controversial argument that the archeology of the Holy Land does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the Biblical accounts of Israelite history are historical.)
- The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, Louis Menand
- Doubt and Certainty*, Rothman and Sudarshan (an analysis of areas in the physical sciences where conclusions are not as definitive as we expect scientific knowledge to be)
- The Origins of the Koran*, ed. By Ibn Warraq (interesting collection of essays on how the Koran gradually took the form we know, as opposed to the traditional view that Muhammed wrote it down under the divine inspiration of Allah. The books of scholarship listed above for Friedman and Mack take a similar approach to the Bible.)
- A History of God*, Karen Armstrong (traces the development of the idea of God in monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—Armstrong is a major scholar of the Bible and the history of Islam, having written several books on both Muhammad and the Koran which are also worth reading)
- The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (philosophy of economics—first theoretical statement of how capitalism works; one of the works which Marx would have been directly or indirectly critiquing in the development of his theories)
- Godel, Escher, and Bach*, Douglas Hofstadter (explores formal/conceptual relationships among a mathematician, a modern artist, and a composer of the 17th century)
- A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking (months and months on the *New York Times* Best Seller list—a brief history of science and Hawking's own work in cosmology—almost entirely free of mathematical equations; the kind of book you can be accused of owning but never reading—as are many on this list. So get busy and read them!)
- Secret Origins of the Bible*, Tim Callahan (sources of Biblical stories and characters in the stories of other ancient cultures)
- How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill (charming, congenial—and not very long—history of Irish monks in the middle ages who managed to preserve much of the ancient literature that has come down to us today because they were so far off the beaten path of invasions by Germanic and other tribes—readable, popular book)
- The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill (essentially an appreciation of the Hebrew Bible and the ideas it has given to Judeo-Christian culture)
- Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, Thomas Cahill (does for the Christian Bible what Cahill did for the Jewish Bible—an appreciation of the texts and ideas that transformed European/American culture to the present day)