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English Language Arts

**Authorized Novels and Nonfiction
Annotated List**



APOLLO 13

Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger

“Swigert checked the panels and saw that there appeared to be an abrupt and inexplicable loss of power in what the crew called main bus B ... If one bus lost power, it meant that half the systems in the spacecraft could suddenly go dead. ‘Hey,’ Swigert shouted down to Houston, ‘we’ve got a problem here.’”
p. 103

Apollo 13 was previously published as *Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13*. This popular reprint is one of the more accessible books on space travel ever written. Specifically, it is an account of the problem-filled 1970 Apollo mission to the moon. Co-author Jim Lovell was an astronaut on the mission who was afterward named *Time* magazine’s Man of the Year. He tells about a mysterious explosion that led to power and oxygen failure and the subsequent famous radio message: “Houston, we have a problem.” This adventure is narrated chronologically with dates and times, and the book also includes photographs and an Afterword on events after splashdown.

Apollo 13 is an inspiring study of heroism and courage. The main focus is the rescue itself, as the crew goes through various crises but survive because of cooperation and overwhelming human effort. The book uses ironic humour, occasional technical language, and minor examples of coarse language to convey the events and the mood of the story.

Apollo 13 would be a good choice for students who have a strong scientific interest or for programs where courses are taught interdepartmentally.

New York, NY:
Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1995
Pocket Books edition
[original 1994]
418 pages

ISBN 0-671-53464-5

THE ASH GARDEN

Dennis Bock



The Ash Garden is a three-character fictional view of the bombing of Hiroshima and its profound, long-term effects. Anton is a proud German physicist who works at Los Alamos. Sophie is his young wife who fled from the Nazis and ended up quarantined on a ship in the Atlantic. Emiko is a six-year-old girl who is playing on a riverbank when the atomic bomb goes off, and later ends up as a documentary filmmaker after receiving corrective surgery. The destinies of all three characters are interwoven through the use of alternating points of view.

Bock's focus is the moral ambiguities of war and how humans learn to live with tragic events of history. The book does not lay blame, but instead emphasizes, as Anton states, that "We have all paid." The war topic is timely, relevant and helpful in showing how humans cope with adversity and suffering. This is also a useful novel for teaching character development, point of view, plot structure, and the influence of plot on character.

Teachers should be aware that some communities might find offence in some of the language and references to sexuality, race/ethnicity and people with disabilities. There is a brief, contextualized and thematically-relevant description of Sophie's physical emergence into womanhood.

"I know the world requires a certain payment from us all, pain and suffering, hunger, destitution, solitude, for the freedoms we enjoy. We have all paid. Or will. It is not right or wrong to have used the bomb. But it was necessary." p. 203

Toronto, ON:
HarperCollins Canada, 2001
First Perennial Canada
edition
281 pages

ISBN 0-00-648545-6

THE BEAN TREES

Barbara Kingsolver

*“To hear you tell it, you’d think man was only put on this earth to keep urinals from going to waste.’
‘That’s not true, I like Estevan.’ My heart sort of bumped when I said this. I knew exactly how it would look on an EKG machine; two little peaks and one big one.*

‘He’s taken. Who else?’

‘Just because I don’t go chasing after every Tom’s Harry Dick that comes down the pike.’

‘Who else?’” p. 112

New York, NY:
HarperPerennial, 1992
[original 1988]

ISBN 0060915544

In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor Greer escapes rural Kentucky in a dilapidated '55 Volkswagen. She arrives in Tucson, Arizona at an auto repair shop called “Jesus Is Lord Used Tires,” which also doubles as a sanctuary for Central American refugees. En route, she is persuaded to take responsibility for a 3-year-old Native American child whom she names Turtle. Together, they become an unlikely family, bonded by love and optimism, helping others and being helped, as they make their way through life.

Thematically, the book is warm and rich, loving and wise. Trauma is counterbalanced by genuine humanity, and violence is tempered by the warmth of human relationships. Stylistically, the narration is casual and relaxed, but the novel does contain some coarse language and controversial religious references that may be offensive to some readers. The characters are driven by understandable human motives in such a way that they, and the reader, can laugh in spite of some of life’s tragedies and injustices.

Although the author deals with the trauma of child sexual abuse, and the distress that comes of abandonment and poverty, these issues are relevant to the plot and consistent with the characterization and development of theme. Teachers may also want to address the issue of inter-racial adoption. The wisdom of the book is simple and clearly drawn. It encourages the reader to acknowledge the power of unexpected alliances and resources.

THE BROKEN CORD

Michael Dorris

The Broken Cord is the story of Michael Dorris, a young bachelor, who adopts Adam. Over the course of the next 15 years, Michael gradually and painfully discovers that his adopted son is epileptic and severely limited developmentally. The challenges of physical and mental limitations strain Michael's resources, and when he marries, family relationships as well. Finally, after years of uncertainty, Adam is diagnosed as a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome, or FAS. The effects of his mother's drinking during pregnancy have been catastrophic to Adam and eventually lead to his death. Adam is unable to imagine, to foresee the consequences of his behaviour, or to remember from one time to the next the results of his actions. As Adam becomes an adult, his adopted parents are less able to protect him from himself and from others.

This account reads like a novel, though it includes scientific evidence and statistics, as well as a brief autobiography of Adam. But most of all, it shines with love and impotent fury for a life destroyed before it was ever lived. Dorris, a well-educated, articulate Native American, draws attention to FAS and its effects. This book is best suited to the mature reader and offers a sensitive yet important issue for students to discuss.

"As time passed I blamed racism: negative evaluators underrated Adam because of unconscious, unexpressed negative feelings about minorities. I discounted as 'cultural biased' the IQ tests that consistently scored my son in the upper sixties to low seventies. I periodically concluded that Adam's teachers must be incompetent, badly trained, or lazy when they failed to stimulate his performance in the classroom." p. 65

New York, NY:
HarperPerennial, 1990
[original 1989]

ISBN 0060916826

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Fedor Dostoevsky

“Kill her, take her money, on condition that you dedicate yourself with its help to the service of humanity and the common good; don’t you think that thousands of good deeds will wipe out one little, insignificant transgression? For one life taken, thousands saved from corruption and decay!” p. 62

Crime and Punishment is the story of a murder committed on the principle of the superman who places himself above society. In an effort to prove he is intellectually and morally superior to Russian society, Rodion Raskolnikov brutally murders a pawnbroker and her innocent sister with an axe. The novel traces the psychological breakdown that leads to Raskolnikov’s eventual confession and sentence to a Siberian prison.

This classic is a study of the complexities of human psychology. It examines the processes that lead an individual to break under the pressure of a flawed philosophy. Dostoevsky’s sinister portrait of life in 19th-century St. Petersburg, with its gloomy tenements and rampant drunkenness, contributes to Raskolnikov’s psychological breakdown and adds to the debate of nature versus nurture.

This is a lengthy, complex novel that provides insights into psychology and the nature of human suffering and redemption.

Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1980
[original 1866]

ISBN 0192815490

DAVITA'S HARP

Chaim Potok

In *Davita's Harp*, Ilanna Davita Chandel is the daughter of David and Channah Chandel. Her father is a nonbelieving Christian, her mother a nonbelieving Jew, and both are Communists. Davita's story begins in pre-World War II Brooklyn, where her parents are workers for the communist cause. Her world is anything but normal. Because of their views, her parents are forced to move from one apartment to another, and their home is always alive with meetings promoting communism. The family is thrown into turmoil when Davita's father is tragically killed in Guernica, Spain while covering the Spanish Civil War as a reporter. Furthermore, when Stalin signs the nonaggression pact with Hitler, Davita's mother becomes disillusioned with communism, which exacerbates her crisis of faith. However, this crisis eventually brings Channah and Davita closer to one another and eventually leads them both back to the mother's Jewish roots.

Students may require extensive background information on the differences between Christianity and Judaism, the Spanish Civil War, and pre-World War II America and Europe. There is one mention of a rape, a scene of sexuality, some violence and a description of a lynching. However, none is gratuitous; each incident helps to shape Davita's character.

Davita and Channah are strong female protagonists who defy or overcome many of the conventions and traditions placed before them. Davita's Harp is a poignant coming-of-age story that may be most appropriate for the mature reader in small group or individual study, or offered on an optional basis.

“You can't forget the bad things that are done to you by telling yourself the world isn't all bad. We really can know only the people and things that touch us. Everything else is like words in a dictionary. We can learn them but they don't live deep inside us. Can you understand that, Ilana?”
‘I think so.’
‘Religion is a dangerous fraud, Ilana, and an illusion.’” p. 315

New York, NY: Fawcett
Crest, 1986
[original 1985]

ISBN 0449207757

EINSTEIN'S DREAMS

Alan Lightman

"It is a world of impulse. It is a world of sincerity. It is a world in which every word spoken speaks just to that moment, every glance given has only one meaning, each touch has no past or no future, each kiss is a kiss of immediacy."
p. 42

Einstein's Dreams is a series of poetic meditations on time, written as the fictional dreams of Albert Einstein as he was putting the last touches on his famous theory of relativity. What Lightman's fantasy proposes is that Einstein must have speculated about his theory in the context of his daily life. Einstein's thoughts and impressions are recorded in a series of thirty short, diary-style meditations that present variations on the given theme: in one world, time is circular; in another a man is occasionally plucked from the present and deposited in the past.

This novella is deceptively brief, charmingly and cleverly written, and effectively captures the elusive and illusive aspects of time. *Einstein's Dreams* can be read in its separate 'bits and pieces' or as a cohesive whole. It argues implicitly for more thoughtful, sensitive, conscious living in the here-and-now, and will have a special appeal to students who are beginning to philosophize about life.

New York, NY:
Random House, Inc., 1994
Warner Books edition
[original 1993]
179 pages

ISBN 0-446-67011-1

A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Ernest Hemingway

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Lieutenant Henry, an American ambulance driver on the Italian front, meets and falls in love with a beautiful English nurse, Catherine Barkley. The intensity of their love is juxtaposed with descriptions of soldiers demoralized by war. It is a story of love amidst a world of chaos, where love and pain co-exist, yet move toward a fatalism that is felt by Henry and Catherine.

War is not glorified, and the soldiers speak with characteristic earthiness and irreverence. Students should be reminded that the novel is set in the trenches of the Italian countryside and stereotyping of women was common at that time. After Hemingway's description of the German attack on Corpetto, a better understanding of the grim realities of a soldier's world is revealed.

Considered to be one of Hemingway's finest novels, *A Farewell to Arms* is focused on the pointlessness of war and is a lyrical novel of great power. It is an intense masculine portrayal of the effects of war, and reveals an attitude and a literary method characterized by Hemingway in the 1930s. The use of rich language and detailed description should be of interest to students, and the contrasting actions of loyalty and desertion should provoke discussion and emphasize the futility and horrors of war. The novel is appropriate for small group discussion and is best suited to the mature reader.

"If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward men are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry."
p. 249

New York, NY: Collier
Books, 1986
[original 1929]

ISBN 0020519001

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

John Steinbeck

“The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting mean apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here “I lost my land” is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—‘We lost our land.’ The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one.” p. 194

The Grapes of Wrath traces the journey of the Joad family in the mid-1930s from a dried-out Oklahoma tenant farm to the “Promised Land” of California, where they desperately struggle to make a living picking fruit. In spite of the efforts of Ma Joad to keep the family together, the hardships encountered—hunger, sickness, discrimination, exploitation, death—all take their toll.

The Joads are one fictional family intended to represent the thousands who followed the same route and encountered similar problems. Steinbeck, himself, travelled with these migrants in 1937 and published newspaper articles and documentary evidence of their plight. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a social novel, a vivid protest against the victimization of workers in a time of crisis; yet, despite the grim story line, it is not pessimistic in tone, but rather celebrates the beauty and triumph of the human spirit.

The novel is useful for a variety of teaching purposes: social criticism; in conjunction with parallel Canadian literature about the 1930s; for close study of varied novel techniques, such as the use of interchapters; and for Biblical parallels and symbolism. It lends itself well to small group work, to background research, to the comparison of fiction to documentary, or art to propaganda.

New York, NY: Penguin Books,
1976
[original 1939]

ISBN 0140042393

Awards:

Pulitzer Prize, 1940

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Charles Dickens

Philip Pirrip, the protagonist of *Great Expectations*, is an orphaned village boy who, through a series of mysterious events, finds himself expecting to become a gentleman. His new-found good fortune takes him to London and elevates his social class, but does nothing to improve his character. The startling discovery of the real source of his fortune, and the eventual recognition of the needs of others, finally shows him the true meaning of "gentleman." By the end of the novel, Pip has become one, in the real sense.

The book could be useful in the study of the novel: structure, character development, point of view, setting, symbolism, style. It relates well to other fiction on the theme of innocence and growth through experience.

Great Expectations is considered by many to be Dickens' greatest literary achievement. It contains the usual Dickensian variety of characters, humour, pathos, mystery, plot complications and suspense. Thus, it sustains reader interest over its considerable length, though it should probably be chosen for the more skilled reader.

"But as she grew and promised to be very beautiful, I gradually did worse, and with my praised, and with my jewels, and with my teachings, and with this figure of myself always before her, a warning to back and point my lesson, I stole her heart away and put ice in its place."

'Better,' I could not help saying, 'to have left her a natural heart, even to be bruised and broken.'"
p. 313

New York, NY: Bantam
Classic Press, 1958
[original 1861]

ISBN 0553210157

THE HERO'S WALK

Anita Rau Badami



“She was losing all that was familiar and beloved, thought Sripathi. He wished then that he could promise her that everything would be all right. He had even reached out to pat her shoulder, to tell her that she would be okay—he was going to take her home to India—but the child had shrunk away from him.”
pp. 142–143

The Hero's Walk is about Sripathi Rao, an unhappy, unremarkable middle-aged man living in Toturpuram, India with his eccentric extended family. His domineering mother is making his life miserable, his son is becoming dangerously involved in political activism, and his daughter has broken off her arranged engagement to a local man in order to marry a white Canadian. At the opening of the book, Sripathi learns his daughter and her husband have died in an auto accident leaving a daughter, seven-year-old Nandana, who reluctantly comes to live with her grandparents. The novel portrays the difficult relationship that forms between the child and her traditional Indian grandparents, and Sripathi's struggle to let go of the failures and tragedies of the past in order to move on with life.

This rich, detailed book captures the atmosphere of East Indian life with warmth, humour and insight. *The Hero's Walk* lends itself to personal response and problem-solving or decision-making work. Teachers need to be aware that the book contains references to domestic violence, sexual activities, masturbation and mercy killing.

Toronto, ON: Random House
of Canada Ltd., 2001
Vintage Canada edition
[original 2000]
359 pages

ISBN 0-676-97360-4

INTO THIN AIR: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE MOUNT EVEREST DISASTER

Jon Krakauer

Into Thin Air is the nonfiction classic that started a major craze of books about mountaineering and climbing disasters. Jon Krakauer was a journalist-mountain climber who had originally gone to report on the commercialization of the Everest and found a much more dramatic story. During the climb, in May 1996, a freak blizzard overcame the group of twenty climbers, killing five of them and leaving another minus a hand from severe frostbite. Krakauer uses interviews, corroborated details and first-hand accounts (some of which include mildly inappropriate language) in this intense examination of the tragedy.

This book is a fascinating study of humans against the elements of nature, which critically explores the behaviour of the other climbers and Krakauer himself. Perhaps even more so, *Into Thin Air* is about why people are obsessed with climbing a deadly mountain like Everest, and the triumph of desire over common sense. Climbing is presented as an intrinsically irrational activity that can lead to elation and heroism but also hubris, frustration, guilt and death.

Into Thin Air may inspire students to research this specific disaster, similar climbing tragedies or other high-risk endeavours.

"If you can convince yourself that Rob Hall died because he made a string of stupid errors and that you are too clever to repeat those same errors, it makes it easier for you to attempt Everest in the face of some rather compelling evidence that doing so is injudicious. In fact, the murderous outcome of 1996 was in many ways simply business as usual."
pp. 356-357

Toronto, ON:
Random House of Canada,
1998
Anchor Books edition
[original 1997]
374 pages

ISBN 0-385-49208-1

THE METAMORPHOSIS

Franz Kafka

“What a quiet life the family has been leading,” Gregor said to himself, and while he stared rigidly in front of him into the darkness, he felt very proud that he had been able to provide such a life in so nice an apartment for his parents and his sister. But what now if all the peace, the comfort, the contentment were to come to a horrible end?” p. 22

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a monstrous insect. He has become a “filthy stinking vermin,” and is increasingly rejected and ignored by his family and all other persons who encounter him. Confined to his room, excluded from any human relationships, Samsa deteriorates, messily disintegrates, and dies.

The story is often read allegorically: as a depiction of alienation; as a religious parable dealing with the loss of faith; as an indirect version of a psychoanalytical case study of delusion and despair. Biographical comparisons can also be made to Kafka’s own circumstances as an Austrian Jew.

The text of *The Metamorphosis* is short, only 58 pages. However, included in this edition is an introduction by the editor–translator, explanatory notes, material by and about Kafka, and a lengthy selection of critical material (much of which may be too specialized for all but advanced students). A selected bibliography is also appended.

Some students may have difficulty accepting the initial, unusual premise. Once it is accepted, however, readers can respond to the story’s clarity and its careful use of descriptive detail. Then, various interpretations can be developed, interpretations that need not be either allegorical or biographical.

This work is best suited for advanced students.

New York, NY: Bantam Books,
1986
[original 1915]

ISBN 0553213695

MONSIGNOR QUIXOTE

Graham Greene

Monsignor Quixote is an engaging dialogue between two old friends who are travelling the countryside together. The novel affords the reader the opportunity to explore two apparently diverse points of view, but these marked differences between the characters mask profoundly similar hearts. Father Quixote and his Sancho Panza, an unseated communist mayor, are two innocents abroad in modern Spain, embarked on a journey that humorously, but philosophically, parallels Cervantes' 17th-century story of Don Quixote.

Despite different political, religious, economical, even sexual perspectives, the priest and the mayor are bound together by generosity of spirit, appreciation of creation and a longing for truth. Their friendship and their growth allow the reader to uncover the enigmatic elements of human goodness and moral responsibility to society. Their journey provides background for witty conversation and allows the reader to explore how differences of opinion can lead to strong bonds of friendship. The book is a commentary on the moral person as well as the moral citizen.

Readers should not be put off by the seemingly irreverent treatment of Christianity and the Roman Catholic church. While it may appear that Greene is delving into profound theological issues, he is really dealing with basic human struggles common to all denominations, and is simply using Catholic theology and socialism as the symbolic language of the novel.

In order to understand the difficult references and allusions in this novel, the reader needs to acquire a substantial knowledge of Christianity, Marxism, communism and the Roman Catholic church. It is also recommended that students be aware of tone and theme in the writing styles of both Cervantes and Graham Greene. Time, maturity and critical thinking skills should lead to an understanding of *Monsignor Quixote* on a symbolic level.

“You make the world of the future sound like Utopia, father.”

‘Oh no, humanism and religion have not done away with either nationalism or imperialism. It’s those two that cause wars. ... From unhappy memories too. That’s why I’m glad to have the short memory of a priest.’”
p. 125

Markham, ON: Penguin Books Canada Limited, 1983
[original 1982]

ISBN 0140065970

THE MOSQUITO COAST

Paul Theroux

"We drove past Tiny Polski's mansion house to the main road, and then the five miles into Northampton, Father talking the whole way about savages and the awfulness of America—how it got turned into a dope-taking, door-locking, ulcerated danger zone of rabid scavengers and criminal millionaires and moral sneaks."
p. 3

In *The Mosquito Coast*, Allie Fox packs up his family and escapes the capitalist world of America for the Mosquito Coast. An eccentric misfit in the United States, he transfers his inventive way of life to his new world. Allie believes that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," and therein lies the motivation for his personal pilgrimage and his attempts to overpower others. Theroux interweaves the physical and metaphorical details of the deliverance of this family in such a way as to engage the reader in their isolation and turmoil. Allie is abusive but spellbinding in his eccentricity. The narrator, his son Charlie, is one of his victims, and yet Charlie's experiences are also his adventures. Although exploited by his father, Charlie's confusions are both understandable and compelling.

The Mosquito Coast is a powerful social satire because the control exercised by the self-centred Allie Fox parallels the rapid industrialization of the western world. He leads himself to self-destruction, taking with him those he loves. The novel can be a vehicle for an exploration of many issues in our technological and capitalistic society. Because religious references may be controversial in some communities, and the treatment of theme and character are earthy and sometimes vulgar, the novel may be most appropriate for mature students, or offered on an optional basis. This is a story of desperation and the breakdown of individuals and society.

New York, NY: Avon Books,
1983
[original 1982]

ISBN 0380619458

Awards:

James Tait Black Memorial
Prize for Best Novel, 1981

NIGHT

Elie Wiesel

Night is the terrifying account of a Nazi death camp as told by survivor Elie Wiesel. Wiesel was still a teenager when he was taken from his home in Sighet, Transylvania, to the Auschwitz concentration camps and then to Buchenwald. The horror turned this young Jewish boy into an agonized witness to the death of his family, the death of innocence and the death of his God. Even through all this, the story is one of hope and bravery. *Night* is a warning to humankind to ensure that such an atrocity never happens again.

Teachers should undertake the teaching of this novel with considerable preparation and care. The topic is, by its very nature, a sensitive one. The descriptions of violence and cruelty may be objectionable to some students and community members; however, they reinforce that the treatment of Jews in concentration camps during World War II was focused on humiliation, suffering and deprivation. Some of the scenes are particularly unnerving and depressing. Reference is made to cultured people who were victims of genocide while the world remained silent.

Although this personal account deals with an historical event, the issues are timeless—man's inhumanity to man, the struggle to survive against all odds, and the hope that such things will never happen again.

Through a series of short, powerful, painful glimpses, its pace and style make Wiesel's story agonizing and convincing. This excellent cross-curricular book could lead to related research about genocide today. The book is suitable for full class, small group or individual study.

"I ran off to look for my father. And at the same time I was afraid of having to wish him a Happy New Year when I no longer believed in it. He was standing near the wall, bowed down, his shoulders sagging as though beneath a heavy burden. I went up to him, took his hand and kissed it. A tear fell upon it. Whose was that tear? Mine? His? I said nothing. Nor did he. We had never understood one another so clearly."
p. 65

New York, NY: Bantam
Books, 1982
[original 1958]

ISBN 0553272535

OSCAR PETERSON: THE WILL TO SWING

Gene Lees



“So just remember one thing, Mr. Higgins, when you go up there to play, don’t compare yourself to me or anyone else. You play your music your way, and play it the best you have in you, every set, every night. That’s called professionalism.”
p. 149

In *Oscar Peterson: The Will to Swing*, Gene Lees examines the challenges and struggles that a young black man faced as he worked to become one of the world’s greatest jazz pianists. Oscar Peterson, from Montreal, became an internationally known musician while still in his 20s.

Peterson is characterized as a positive role model. He works hard, he actively fights to combat racism, and he exemplifies those who lack economic advantages and still succeed. However, some students may be offended by the coarse language and examples of racial discrimination and prejudice that appear in this work, and should critically examine these instances as well as the negative behaviours of some of the individuals presented. The book promotes the idea that people of all racial/ethnic groups can achieve and interact positively.

The content of the book should be interesting to those students with musical interests and would be most appropriate for either small group or individual study.

Toronto, ON: Lester & Orpen
Dennys Limited, 1988

ISBN 0886191297

THE OUTSIDER

Albert Camus

The Outsider was first published in French in 1942 as *L'Étranger*. Meursault, a young man in the French colony of Algiers, tells the story of the last year of his life. With almost equal emphasis—or lack of it—he describes his mother's funeral, a casual affair with a woman, his acquaintance with a neighbour and his dog, a day at the beach, his killing of an Arab under the hot sun, his trial and conviction, and his last thoughts in prison before his execution.

The simple, frank and unemotional narration reflects a man who refuses to “play the game”: to pretend more than he feels, to lie, to judge himself or others. He is, therefore, seen as a threat to a conventional colonial society, to the legal system, and to the Christian church. As a result, he is condemned to death as much for his refusal to conform as for his killing of the Arab. Meursault is an example of what Camus calls “the Absurd Hero,” one who finds himself a stranger in an indifferent universe, and who does not require explanation or justification for his existence, but rather, accepts the simple fact of life itself.

The novel is short and deceptively simple in narration. Its unconventional protagonist, unexpected development and strangely flat style attracts the interest of students and stimulates thoughtful discussion and evaluation of the existential view of life. It is also useful in the study of novel techniques: structure, style, character development, and social and metaphysical themes.

“The prosecutor then rose, looking very grave, and in a voice which I thought sounded truly emotional, and with a finger pointing in my direction, he slowly pronounced, ‘Gentlemen of the jury, on the day after the death of his mother, this man was swimming in the sea, entering into an irregular liaison and laughing at a Fernandel film. I have nothing more to say to you.’ He sat down, still amid silence.” p. 91

London, England: Penguin Books, 1983
[original 1942]

ISBN 0140180184

PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK

Annie Dillard

"The mating rites of mantises are well known: a chemical produced in the head of the male insect says, in effect, 'No, don't go near her, you fool, she'll eat you alive.' At the same time a chemical in his abdomen says, 'Yes, by all means, now and forever yes.' While the male is making up what passes for his mind, the female tips the balance in her favor by eating his head."
p. 57

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is a season-by-season series of Annie Dillard's personal observations of nature. She says of herself, "I am above all an unscrupulous observer." They centre on a poet and naturalist's "receptiveness and concentration" on the countryside around Tinker Creek, Virginia and range from minute observations of such phenomena as caddis fly larvae to speculations about the principle of indeterminacy, or Einstein's "holy curiosity" about the nature of the Universe.

There is a passing allusion to a "simple and cruel Eskimo tale" (source, Farley Mowat) that is effective in a disturbing way. This work alludes mainly to male philosophers, artists and scientists but this is counterbalanced by the overall strong and sensitive voice of the woman who is writing. Dillard's style is lucid, often witty, and personal. The writer moves calmly, and often poetically, from the concrete to the abstract, from observation to introspection. The scientific eye is balanced by a very human approach and a reverence for the dignity of all forms of life.

Since the whole work may demand more staying power than can be expected from all but the most able and determined readers, teachers might consider using excerpts from this book. Passages from it would be excellent as models for the teaching of writing and for developing "the secret of seeing," which lies behind most effective writing.

New York, NY:
HarperPerennial, 1985
[original 1974]

ISBN 0060915455

Awards:

Pulitzer Prize, 1975

Best Foreign Book Award
(France), 1990

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Jane Austen

This opening statement from *Pride and Prejudice* neatly combines the typical Austen subject matter, the search for a suitable marriage partner, with the ironic tone of the novel:

“It is truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet of Longbourne, Hertfordshire, with an estate entailed on a fatuous male cousin, have five unmarried daughters, and so the quest for wealthy husbands for at least the two oldest daughters is a serious matter. The arrival in the neighbourhood of an eligible young bachelor, Mr. Bingley, sets all the mothers atwitter and scheming. The eldest and most beautiful Bennet daughter, Jane, seems a perfect choice for Bingley, but the plot of the novel centres on her sister, the lively and opinionated Elizabeth, and Bingley’s supercilious and aristocratic friend, Darcy. Pride and prejudice—on both sides—complicate the plot.

This classic novel is probably the best known, and most popular, of the Austen canon. It can be read not only for its story but studied for its fictional techniques, especially the development of character by speech and gesture, and a subtly controlled ironic style. This edition contains a substantial introduction, a select bibliography, Austen’s chronology and some explanatory notes.

“I might as well enquire,” replied she, ‘why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I was uncivil? But I have other provocations. You know I have.”
p. 169

Oxford, England: Oxford
University Press, 1990
[original 1813]

ISBN 019282760X

THE REPUBLIC OF NOTHING

Lesley Choyce



“The island needed saving and it needed it now. Not tomorrow. Not after some goddamn election or after a dozen cabinet meetings. My father had started out in politics as an anarchist, but now he was something else that I didn’t care to think about.” p. 277

The Republic of Nothing is set in the 1950s in Whalebane, a small island off of Nova Scotia that has declared itself an independent republic without a government. Ian, the narrator, tells of the eccentric islanders with offbeat, character-driven humour. This tone is set early with an incident involving a missing G on a typewriter, to be followed by similar odd moments such as when the moon talks to a villager or when a dead elephant washes ashore.

This novel is an excellent example of wry Canadian humour that examines themes of family struggle, independence and political idealism. It is an imaginative and entertaining piece of Maritime writing that presents a catalogue of human foibles from a patently satirical perspective. To benefit most from *The Republic of Nothing*, students will require maturity, a sense of irony and a willingness to imaginatively “go with” the text.

The inclusion of a graphic description of sex, as well as coarse language and references to drugs and abortion, may be problematic to some students and community members.

Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane,
1994
363 pages

ISBN 0-864-92153-5

SAINT MAYBE

Anne Tyler

Baltimore, Maryland is the home of the ideal, “all-American” family, the Bedloes, the subject of the novel *Saint Maybe*. However, this idyllic world is soon shattered when Ian, the youngest child, learns a secret that has tragic consequences for Dan, his older brother. This tragedy alters Ian, sending him on a lifelong and painful search for redemption. His journey begins at “The Church of the Second Chance” whose theology expounds that forgiveness is not given freely, but must be earned. After years of arduous labour, Ian finally gains his redemption when he meets Rita, marries her, and they have a child.

In typical Tyler fashion, the characters in *Saint Maybe* are quirky and off-beat, yet are easily understood and accepted by the reader. Some characters, however, are presented as stock figures. For example, the Bedloes have a series of “Middle Eastern” neighbours, university students, who are never named, and are portrayed as people who never seem to adapt to “Western standards,” yet become part of the Bedloes’ extended family. Students could examine whether or not Tyler does this to ridicule a particular ethnic group, or is she using satire as a way of examining society’s views toward immigrants.

Tyler also uses many religious references to depict Ian’s quest for forgiveness and makes his religion one of the focal points of the novel. When pre-reading, the teacher should consider possible community concerns about the ethic or religious references Tyler presents. During novel study, students should critically examine these issues as well as the references to foreigners, particularly those of Middle Eastern origin.

Overall, this is an excellent novel to use in examining character development, an individual’s search for redemption, and the evolution of family.

“God wants to know how far you’ll go to undo the harm you’ve done.’
‘But He wouldn’t really make me follow through with it,’ Ian said.
‘How else would He know then?’
‘Wait.’ Ian said.
‘You’re saying God would want me to give up my education. Change all my parents’ plans for me and give up my education.’
‘Yes, if that’s what’s required,’ Reverend Emmett said.” p 133

Toronto, ON: Penguin
Books Canada Ltd., 1992
[original 1991]

ISBN 0140159592

STEPHEN HAWKING: QUEST FOR A THEORY OF EVERYTHING

Kitty Ferguson

"In the academic world physicists continued to express tremendous respect for Hawking but were a little nonplussed by all the media hype. It didn't take higher math to multiply book sales figures in the millions.... There was the occasional hint of sour grapes, a half-suppressed mutter of 'His work's no different from a lot of other physicists; it's just that his condition makes him interesting.'" p. 137

Stephen Hawking: Quest for a Theory of Everything is an account of the life and work of Stephen Hawking, eminent physicist of the 20th century who is diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) at the age of 20. His quest for truth in the world of theoretical physics becomes a triumph of the spirit and mind over extreme physical disability.

Hawking's search, discoveries and theories are discussed in relatively simple terms. Numerous clarifying diagrams are provided, as well as a glossary at the end, which will aid the reader in understanding. His quest covers the exploration and explanation for "a theory of everything," which is nothing short of an explanation of the Universe and everything that happens within it.

This biography should be of special interest to students fascinated by physics, science or science fiction. Research projects could follow, such as group studies of "people who have made a difference." Students not particularly interested in science might still become involved in the biographical material of a brilliant and courageous man. A glossary, to assist with some of the scientific terms, is included at the end of this edition.

New York, NY: Bantam Books,
1992
[original 1991]

ISBN 055329895X

THE STONE ANGEL

Margaret Laurence



The Stone Angel tells of the last few days in the life of Hagar Shipley, a proud, stubborn old woman of 90. Age has rendered her incapable of living independently, she bitterly resents the assistance she requires, and she struggles to escape from her son's home. Her tired old mind wanders into the past, calling into life, once more, the people—especially the men—who have been important to her. Her father, from whom she inherited her stubborn pride and inability to express the softer side of her nature; her husband, who died never suspecting her unspoken love; her favourite son, John, willful and unmanageable like herself, are all dead now. Only Marvin, her eldest son, is left, and when she finally forces herself to voice the approval he longs to hear, the words are a lie. Hagar dies as she has lived—proud and independent.

From a technical point of view, this novel provides good material for the study of plot structure, point of view, symbolism, characterization, and effective use of stylistic devices. Central among these devices is the stone angel, which Hagar's father has erected, ostensibly a memorial to his dead wife, but more truthfully, as a monument to his own pride and a symbol of Hagar herself.

The characters are interesting and convincing, and together they offer a realistic portrayal of human nature. The background provides a view of western Canadian life from the 1920s through to the 1960s. Student discussion of the novel could consider the extent to which Hagar is individual and idiosyncratic, or representative of elderly women of her time and place.

"I can't change what's happened to me in my life, or make what's not occurred take place. But I can't say I like it, or accept it, or believe its for the best. I don't and never shall, not even if I'm damned for it."
p. 160

Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1968
[original 1964]

ISBN 0771091591

THE STONE CARVERS

Jane Urquhart



“There is absolutely nothing,’ he told her, ‘like the carving of names. Nothing like committing to the stone this record of someone who is utterly lost.” p. 347

The Stone Carvers spans three decades at the beginning of the 20th century and geographically moves from Ontario to the battlefields of France in an exploration of loss, war and the healing power of art. Klara Becker, the daughter of an Ontario woodcarver, is haunted by a love affair with a boy who died in World War I. She remains a spinster but finds comfort through carving. Years later, her mysterious brother and she reunite and travel to Walter Allward’s monument to fallen Canadian soldiers at Vimy, France, where they both experience epiphanies on war and try to rebuild their lives.

Thematically, this award-winning book is about the need to remember, the sweep of history, the futility of war, and the redemption that emerges through art. An intelligent and spellbinding novel, *The Stone Carvers* is simply written and appropriate for most English Language Arts 30-1 classes.

As pre-reading, teachers may wish to provide historical background on Vimy Ridge, the war memorial, and the role of Canadians during WWI. Teachers should be aware that the book contains profanity, violence and references to the sexual behaviour of the characters.

Toronto, ON: McClelland &
Stewart Ltd., 2001
390 pages

ISBN 0-7710-8685-7

TO DESTROY YOU IS NO LOSS

Joan D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam

To Destroy You Is No Loss is a compassionate biography that tells of a Cambodian family's ordeal during the Khmer Rouge holocaust in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The preface gives an excellent background to the events leading up to and during the holocaust. The book, itself, traces the life of one very courageous young woman, Teeda Butt Mam, and her family during those years of servitude and genocide while Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge held the country in a death grip. Following the fall of the Pol Pot, the family become refugees and find their way to the United States. The co-author, Joan Criddle, helps sponsor the Butt family's emigration to America. She dedicates the book "To Teeda and her family for a willingness to recount painful experiences, to make their ordeal public, in order that we might understand."

Students who are concerned with the politics of the Asiatic world, who wish to study political leaders and societies, who wish to learn more about the Cambodians among us, who are interested in world refugee problems, and who are concerned with man's humanity or inhumanity to man, should be interested in this book.

A remarkable "tour de force" that demonstrates the strength of the human will to survive, this biography would fit well in a humanities program.

"Slowly and painfully, the dazed woman had pried herself from the tangle of arms and legs, crawled over the bodies and made her escape. She had subsisted on grubs and roots since then. For five days, Vitou and his friend had risked detection by bringing food to her.

When it became known in the village that several victims had survived, and were hiding among the nut trees, the leaders first threatened death to any villager who aided them." p. 165

New York, NY: Doubleday,
1989
[original 1987]

ISBN 0385266286

TOUCH THE EARTH: A SELF-PORTRAIT OF INDIAN EXISTENCE

T. C. McLuhan

"We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery."
p. 45

New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1971

ISBN 0671222759

Touch the Earth is a sepia photo-illustrated compilation of speeches and excerpts from documents, all told in the voice of the North American Indian, many of whom, like Chief Joseph, Tecumseh and Geronimo, are well-known historical figures. Their voices range in tone from the nostalgic and philosophical, to the bitter and defiant.

The material spans a century and records the Native view of the white man's betrayal of nature and of an indigenous race. Section headings indicate the range of topic and tone: "The Morning Sun, the New Sweet Earth and the Great Silence"; "The Hairy Man from the East"; "My Voice Is Become Weak"; "If We Surrender, We Die." Early parts of the book reinforce the closeness of the Native to the land and provoke interest in a time of increasing concern about the environment.

The book promotes an empathy toward Native peoples and provides for increased understanding of the spiritual significance of many facets of Native life. There is, however, a marked imbalance. All Natives are perceived positively; almost all Caucasians are stereotyped negatively. While this might be seen as a restoring of the balance against the negative stereotyping of the Native in past literature and history, teachers should be aware that *Touch the Earth* is not suitable as a whole "stand-alone" resource. Its bias should be recognized and the book used only if accompanied by other material and activities, either to balance the "white view" often historically presented, or with literature that reveals some examples of Caucasians who have interacted positively with Native people. The book may be most appropriate for either small group or individual study.

The voices in this book are powerful, but students should be aware that they are not reading a balanced history, but a personal, literary and artistic view of history. The language is often lyrical and passionate and, as a sort of anthology of prose poetry, the book lends itself to oral reading of selections.

TRUTH AND BRIGHT WATER

Thomas King



Truth and Bright Water is a fun and easy-to-read novel by one of Canada's most respected Aboriginal authors. It tells of two young cousins, Tecumseh and Lum, who live in both a small American town called Truth, and a reserve across the border called Bright Water. While Lum attempts to win the Indian Days race and run away from his past and an abusive parent, Tecumseh tries to figure out his own family.

This humorous novel is written in King's characteristically plain, poetic and comic style. The book explores themes of love, betrayal, reconciliation, self-discovery and the search for purpose. For non-Aboriginal readers, this will be a delightful, educational excursion into Aboriginal imagination and perspectives.

The book contains extensive use of questionable language, as well as references to sexual activities, suicide, environmental issues, authority and corporal punishment. Some of these issues may be offensive to students and members of the community.

"... maybe the bluff was once a burial ground. Maybe at one time we buried our dead there and then forgot about it. Maybe if you dug down a little in the grass and the clay, you'd find entire tribes scattered across the prairies. Such things probably happen all the time. A little rain, a little wind, and a skull just pops out of the ground." p. 73

Toronto, ON:
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.,
1999
Harper Canada Perennial
edition
282 pages

ISBN 0-00-648196-5

UNDER THE RIBS OF DEATH

John Marlyn



“He crossed his legs stubbornly. Some day, he thought, he would show them. Some day he would own a house that would make this one look like a shack. The time would come when he would throw a party and the people he invited wouldn’t have to bring their own food, either. That was a dirty trick—inviting you to come and eat your own food.”
p. 42

Under the Ribs of Death tells the story of a young immigrant boy as he struggles to become Anglicized in Winnipeg during the late 1920s. Although Sander is Hungarian, he could be any immigrant from anywhere, and the story follows him through poverty to success and to poverty once again. In his quest for wealth, Sander rejects his family, friends and ethics—only to regain these values, love of family, spiritual goals, and a sense of pride and dignity—when he once more finds himself indigent.

The novel reflects the social mores of the era and deals with the non-Anglo immigration experience through stereotypes of the “English” and the “foreigner.” In so doing, the prejudices of English Canadians, and the effects of the Great Depression are revealed. The writing style uses examples of dour humour contrasted with expressions of despair and poverty. While there is some blasphemy, it is used to reveal the despair of the characters.

This novel provides opportunity for discussion regarding theme, point of view, irony and characterization. Sander’s struggle for identity reveals the ironic need to be simultaneously independent and dependent.

Toronto, ON: McClelland &
Stewart Inc., 1990
[original 1957]

ISBN 0771098669

THE WARS

Timothy Findley



In *The Wars*, Robert Ross, a gentle 19-year-old Canadian, experiences the horrors and personal dilemmas of war as a young officer in France during World War I. He undergoes moral and physical violation, and makes personally courageous but politically treasonous decisions, which lead to court-martial. The novel is a strong and sensitive condemnation of all “wars” against the human spirit. In the midst of death, Ross is a young man committed to, and affirming of, the value of all life. Findley is critical of organized religion and, although he doesn’t emphasize it, it is clear he doubts the ability of the church to respond meaningfully in times of either public or private crisis. Robert’s mother, an alcoholic who suffers terribly over Robert’s involvement with the war, derives little comfort from the church. There are two explicitly sexual scenes that may need to be considered if selecting this novel. One is set in a brothel near Lethbridge where Robert observes his war hero, Captain Taffler, in a homosexual act; another is the gang-rape of Robert by his fellow officers, in the officers’ dark steam bath. Both scenes, however, are essential to the development of the central character and to the themes of the novel. Because of the religious and sexual references, the book might be best offered on an optional basis. As a novel study, *The Wars* is interesting for its unique narrative structure: the use of different points of view as collected by a contemporary researcher, through clippings, photographs, letters and interviews. Shifts in time may cause some initial reader confusion, but the purpose soon becomes clear. In spite of its serious subject matter, the novel is fast-paced, immensely readable, and written with a sure, fine touch.

“I know what you want to do. I know you’re going to go away and be a soldier. Well—you can go to hell. I’m not responsible. I’m just another stranger.” p. 28

Markham, ON: Penguin Books, 1978
[original 1977]

ISBN 0140050116

Awards:

Governor General’s Award
for fiction in English, 1977

City of Toronto Book Award,
1977

WILD GEESE

Martha Ostenso



“She straightened like a flash and flung it with all her strength at Caleb’s head. Her eyes closed dizzily, and when she opened them again he was crouching before her, his hand moving across his moustache. The ax was buried in the rotten wall behind his head.” p. 206

Set on a farm in Northern Manitoba, *Wild Geese* portrays the life of Caleb Gare who cruelly suppresses his family. He blackmails his wife with the threat of exposing her illegitimate son, Mark Jordan, to the truth about his real father. The plot is further developed when Mark falls in love with the visiting school teacher, Lind Archer, whose confidante is Jude, Caleb’s daughter. Jude’s strength and sexuality are contrasted to Lind’s delicacy and tenderness. Later, Jude rejects Caleb’s belief in the necessity of immigrant hardships, and triumphs over her father’s oppression.

The novel provides for an interesting discussion of the family farm as a backdrop for a story of passion and manipulation of power. The characters’ emotions are paralleled to the conditions of the land; Caleb is “a spiritual counterpart of the land, as harsh, as demanding, as tyrannical as the very soil from which he drew his existence,” and he exerts this power over his family.

The story is set in the period between the arrival of the geese in the spring and their departure in autumn, further symbolizing the natural world as representative of the characters. The novel should provide for interesting discussions on language, character development, symbolism and theme, and is appropriate for full class discussion.

Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1989
[original 1925]

ISBN 0771099940

WINDFLOWER

Gabrielle Roy



In *Wildflower*, Elsa, a young Inuit girl, is seduced by an American soldier in Fort Chimo, Northwest Territories. The child who is born, Jimmy, becomes the object of his young mother's devotion. She attempts to immerse him in the Inuit culture, but finally loses him to the white man's world and his wars. *Windflower* is a translation of *La Rivière sans Repos*, one of four stories in which Roy depicts the Inuit in an uneasy transition between two worlds, not fully at home in either.

Various themes emerge: the imprisoning effect of material possessions; the brotherhood of man; the cyclic nature of life; and the brief joys of love and motherhood—symbolized by the short-lived tundra windflower.

The novel is short, easy to read, informal in style and clear in structure. It provides a sympathetic insight into the Inuit way of life, which is warmly and compellingly portrayed.

“In the old days,’ he reproached her gently, ‘you were all carelessness, Elsa, now you’re all care. Couldn’t you rear your child more simply, as you yourself were reared?’
‘In filth!’ she said indignantly. ‘Eating the guts of animals?’
‘You’re too quick to go to extremes,’ he said. ‘It’s a question of rearing the boy with care but without the danger of his ever coming to be ashamed of you and Winnie and Thaddeus. Do you understand?’
Quite truthfully, she did not understand.”
p. 48

Toronto, ON: McClelland &
Stewart Inc., 1975
[original 1970]

ISBN 0771092202

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Emily Brontë

“You teach me now how cruel you’ve been—cruel and false. Why did you despise me? Why did you betray your heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort. You deserve this. You have killed yourself. Yes, you may kiss me, and cry; and wring out my kisses and tears: they’ll blight you—they’ll damn you. You loved me—then what right had you to leave me?” p. 198

The saga *Wuthering Heights* is narrated by a new arrival on the wild Yorkshire moors, John Lockwood, whose informant is his housekeeper, Nelly Dean. She recounts to him, in a series of vivid flashbacks and time shifts, the events making up the troubled love story of Catherine Earnshaw and the dark and passionate Heathcliff—a story of love and vengeance, which passes on to the next generation in the characters of Cathy, the dead Catherine’s daughter, and Linton, Heathcliff’s son.

The novel can be read as a love story, but at a deeper level, as an exploration of the darker side of human nature. Some readers may find some of the incidents, such as the strangling of a dog, or the hanging of puppies, troubling and distasteful—but they are part of the vein of undeniable cruelty that underlies the human nature portrayed.

This Brontë classic has both a poetic and a moral structure. The intensity of the characters’ emotions, the wildness and remoteness of setting, and the Gothic atmosphere, make the novel fascinating and disturbing.

New York, NY: Bantam Classic Press, 1981
[original 1847]

ISBN 0686697278