

# AMERICAN LITERATURE

## CLASSICAL BOOKS

TITLE	REVIEW
<p><b>The Scarlet Letter (1850)</b> <i>by Nathaniel Hawthorne</i></p>	<p>Hawthorne’s compelling story of the callous judgment handed out to an unmarried mother by the Puritans of Boston, Massachusetts, is a moving and thoughtful study of society’s ambivalent and contradictory treatment of women. Set in seventeenth-century Puritan Boston, Massachusetts, during the years 1642 to 1649, it tells the story of Hester Prynne, who conceives a daughter through an affair and struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity. Throughout the book, Hawthorne explores themes of legalism, sin, and guilt.</p> <p>Writer D. H. Lawrence said that there could not be a more perfect work of the American imagination than <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>. Henry James once said of the novel, “It is beautiful, admirable, extraordinary—an indefinable purity and lightness of conception... One can often return to it; it supports familiarity and has the inexhaustible charm and mystery of great works of art.”</p> <p>Historical Note: The Puritans were a group of English Reformed Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who sought to “purify” the Church of England from all other religious practices. Puritans left for New England, particularly in the years after 1630, supporting the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They believed they were doing God’s work and there was little room for compromise. Harsh punishment was inflicted on those who were seen as straying from God’s work. Adulterers might have been forced to wear a scarlet “A” if they were lucky. At least two known adulterers were executed.</p> <p>Source: The Scarlet Letter. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.</p>
<p><b>Moby-Dick or The Whale (1851)</b> <i>by Herman Melville</i></p>	<p>“Call me Ishmael” is among world literature’s most famous opening sentences. Sailor Ishmael tells the story of the obsessive quest of Ahab, captain of the whaler Pequod, for revenge on Moby Dick, the white whale, which on an earlier voyage, destroyed his ship and severed his leg at the knee. Initially, the novel was a commercial failure in 1891, but during the 20th century, its reputation as a</p>

Great American Novel was established. William Faulkner confessed he wished he had written it himself, and D. H. Lawrence called it “one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world,” and “the greatest book of the sea ever written.” British author E. M. Forster, remarked in 1927: “*Moby-Dick* is full of meanings: perception is a central theme, the difficulty of seeing and understanding, which makes deep reality hard to discover and truth hard to pin down.”

Historical Note: Herman Melville drew inspiration for this story on a true and horrible incidence that took place in 1890/91, when the whaler *The Essex* was attacked and sunk by a white sperm whale. The crew took to lifeboats and abandoned the ship with no supplies. The only way to survive was to turn to cannibalism. Very few survived. Among the survivors, however, was the captain, who had not been forgiven for eating his cousin and spent the rest of his life, as a recluse, on the island of Nantucket where Melville met and interviewed him.

Source: *Moby Dick*. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

## **The Great Gatsby (1925)**

**by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

*The Great Gatsby* is widely considered to be a literary classic and a contender for the title “Great American Novel.”

The novel follows a cast of characters living in the fictional town of West Egg on prosperous Long Island in the summer of 1922. The story primarily concerns the young and mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his quixotic passion and obsession for the beautiful former debutante Daisy Buchanan. Considered to be Fitzgerald’s magnum opus, *The Great Gatsby* explores themes of decadence, idealism, resistance to change, social upheaval, and excess, creating a portrait of the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties that has been described as a cautionary tale regarding the American Dream.

*The Great Gatsby* provides a critical social history of America during the times within its narrative. That era, known for unprecedented economic prosperity, the evolution of jazz music, flapper culture, and bootlegging, and other criminal activity, is plausibly depicted in Fitzgerald’s novel. Fitzgerald uses these societal developments of the 1920s to build the stories from simple details, like automobiles, to broader themes, like Fitzgerald’s discreet allusions to the organized crime culture, which was the source of Gatsby’s fortune. Fitzgerald educates his readers about the garish society of the Roaring Twenties by placing a timeless, relatable plotline within the historical context of the era.

Source: *The Great Gatsby*. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

**The Sound and the Fury (1929)**  
*by William Faulkner*

The novel has achieved great critical success and a prominent place among the greatest of American novels. It played a role in William Faulkner's receiving the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature.

The Sound and the Fury is set in Jefferson, Mississippi. The novel centers on the Compson family, former Southern aristocrats, who are struggling to deal with the dissolution of their family and its reputation. Over the course of the 30 years or so related in the novel, the family falls into financial ruin, loses its religious faith and the respect of the town of Jefferson, and many of them die tragically.

The influence of William Faulkner's immersive tale of raw Mississippi rural life can be felt to this day.

Source: The Sound and the Fury. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

**The Grapes of Wrath (1939)**  
*by John Steinbeck*

*The Grapes of Wrath* is an American realist novel. The book won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was cited prominently when Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962.

Set during the Great Depression, the novel focuses on the Joads, a poor family of tenant farmers driven from their Oklahoma home by drought, economic hardship, agricultural industry changes, and bank foreclosures, forcing tenant farmers out of work. Due to their nearly hopeless situation, and in part because they are trapped in the Dust Bowl, the Joads set out for California. Along with thousands of other "Okies," they seek jobs, land, dignity, and a future.

When preparing to write the novel, Steinbeck wrote: "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this [the Great Depression and its effects]." He famously said, "I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags."

This work won a large following among the working-class due to Steinbeck's sympathy for the migrants and workers' movement, and his accessible prose style.

Source: The Grapes of Wrath. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

**On the Road (1957)**  
*by Jack Kerouac*

The novel is based on the travels of Kerouac and his friends across America. It is considered a defining work of the postwar Beat and Counterculture generations, with its protagonists living life against a backdrop of jazz, poetry, and drug use.

Between 1947 and 1950, Kerouac engaged in the road adventures that would form *On the Road*. Kerouac carried small notebooks, in

which much of the text was written as the eventful span of road trips unfurled. He tells the story of his years on the road with his friend Neal Cassady as if writing a letter to a friend, in a form that reflected the improvisational fluidity of jazz. In a letter to a student in 1961, Kerouac wrote: “Dean and I were embarked on a journey through post-Whitman America to find that America, and to find the inherent goodness in American man. It was really a story about two Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him.”

Source: On the Road. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

**To Kill a Mockingbird  
(1960)**  
*by Harper Lee*

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is the Pulitzer Prize-winning story of local attorney Atticus Finch and his children Scout and Jem, who live in a community divided by, and defined by racism. Finch is asked to defend an African-American man accused of rape, which sends the small Southern town into a frenzy and launches Scout and Jem into the center of the conflict.

The novel is renowned for its warmth and humor, despite dealing with the serious issues of rape and racial inequality. The narrator’s father, Atticus Finch, has served as a moral hero for many readers and as a model of integrity for lawyers.

One critic explains the novel’s impact by writing, “In the twentieth century, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is probably the most widely read book dealing with race in America, and its protagonist, Atticus Finch, the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism.”

Its primary themes involve racial injustice and the destruction of innocence. Scholars have noted that Harper Lee also addresses issues of class, courage, compassion, and gender roles in the American Deep South.

Historical Note: The plot and characters are loosely based on the author’s observations of her family and neighbors, as well as on an event that occurred near her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama in 1936.

Source: To Kill A Mockingbird. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

**Beloved (1987)**  
*by Toni Morrison*

The protagonist Sethe is a slave who escapes slavery by running to Cincinnati, Ohio. After twenty-eight days of freedom, a posse arrives to retrieve her and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave slave owners the right to pursue slaves across state borders. Sethe kills her two-year-old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured and taken back to Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation from which Sethe recently fled. A woman presumed to be her daughter, called Beloved, returns years later to

haunt Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. The story opens with an introduction to the ghost: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."

The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 and was a finalist for the 1987 National Book Award. Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. *Beloved* was also adapted into a movie of the same name in 1998 starring Oprah Winfrey. A New York Times survey of writers and literary critics ranked it the best work of American fiction from 1981 to 2006.

The book's dedication reads "Sixty Million and more," referring to the Africans and their descendants who died as a result of the Atlantic slave trade.

Source: *Beloved*. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

## CONTEMPORARY BOOKS

TITLE	REVIEW
<p><b>The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics (2013)</b></p> <p><i>by Daniel James Brown</i></p>	<p>This is an irresistible story about beating the odds and finding hope in the most desperate of times, during the Depression of the 1930s. It is an improbable story, an account of how nine working-class boys from the American West showed the world at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin what true determination and character really meant.</p> <p>With a team made up of the sons of loggers, shipyard workers, and farmers, the University of Washington's eight-oar crew team was never expected to defeat the elite teams of the East Coast and Great Britain, yet it did, and it went on to shock the world by defeating the German team rowing for Adolf Hitler [1].</p> <p>The emotional heart of the tale is the story of Joe Rantz, a teenager without family or prospects, who rows to develop self-regard and to find a place for himself in the world [2]. The author, Daniel Brown, was able to interview Joe Rantz and drew on his personal vivid memories to bring us this story.</p> <p>Sources [1][2]: <i>The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics</i>. (n.d.). Excerpts from Amazon review. Retrieved April 23, 2017.</p>
<p><b>Everybody Behaves Badly: The True Story Behind Hemingway's Masterpiece "The</b></p>	<p>Ernest Hemingway's <i>The Sun Also Rises</i> has never been out of print since it was published in 1926. It is universally acclaimed a masterpiece. A few Americans and British ex-pats take a trip to Spain to see the town's running of the bulls. They spend the road trip getting drunk, sleeping with and betraying each other, to</p>

**"Sun Also Rises"  
(2016)**

*by Lesley M. M.  
Blume*

become symbols of what Hemingway's peers christened the "lost generation" that found no meaning in life after the mass losses of World War I.

This is the novel that made Ernest Hemingway a huge literary force. He elevated all of that bad behavior and gossip into high literature. And with this material, he created the first work of commercially successful modern literature.

Author Lesley M. M. Blume resurrects the restless landscape of 1920s Paris and Spain [1]. Her vivid account reveals the inner circle of the lost generation and shows how it still influences what we read, and how we think about youth, sex, love, and excess [2].

Sources [1][2]: Everybody Behaves Badly: The True Story Behind Hemingway's Masterpiece "The Sun Also Rises". (n.d.). Excerpts from Amazon review. Retrieved April 23, 2017.

**Commissario Guido  
Brunetti Series (1992-  
present)**

*by Donna Leon*

If you are looking for an amusing, mindless, pleasant series of books to read on the plane or during a cozy afternoon at home, then Donna Leon's detective stories are highly recommended. They are set in Venice and feature the fictional hero Commissario Guido Brunetti.

Intelligent and capable Brunetti confronts crime in and around his hometown. Each case is an opportunity for the author to reveal another aspect of the hidden side of society, and another facet of Venetian life. While solving the crime(s), Brunetti enjoys a personal life – we learn about his wife, Paola, daughter of a Venetian count, and their two children, as well as Brunetti's love of food. The reader is exposed, in detail, to many of his mouth-watering lunches and dinners. In 2009, Leon co-authored a cookbook inspired by the series, titled *Brunetti's Cookbook*.

Leon, a native of New Jersey, USA, has lived in Venice for over 25 years. She was a lecturer and professor in English literature in Venice, but stopped teaching to concentrate on writing. The first of the series was published in 1992, and the twenty-ninth book, her most recent, in 2016. Some, of course, are better than others.

The books are written in English and translated into many foreign languages. The ninth Brunetti novel, *Friends in High Places*, won the Crime Writers' Association Silver Dagger in 2000. German television has produced 22 Commissario Brunetti episodes for broadcast.

Source: Donna Leon. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 23, 2017.