



Middle School Reading List

This booklet is ambitious. It recommends challenging texts which may be more adult than you have been accustomed to reading in the past; it does so because we believe that you are very able, and therefore deserve the chance to find out how thrilling it can be to tackle great works of literature (including non-fiction) outside the school syllabus. These are books that will challenge the way you think and open new worlds of experience. Most of the books listed here are recognised classics, but some are more recent; all are excellent. The recommendations have been divided into a number of categories to enable different kinds of exploration – you could range widely, sampling works of many different types or backgrounds, or you could (for example) get an education in American literature that would be impressive for someone many years your senior. Reading books from this list will entertain you, challenge you, and help you to mature academically and personally. Happy reading!

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Cultural touchstones – ten books that will come up in conversation

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) – a story of survival on a desert island, an almost mythical exploration of Western individualism and colonialism

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) – a pioneering story of science and revenge, probing what it means to be both creator and creature

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861) – a classic coming-of-age story

Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) – a turbulent Romantic novel of great emotional intensity

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897) – the archetypal horror novel

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – a stunning depiction of Jazz Age America, exploring the tensions between wealth, ambition and personal relationships

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) – a terrifying yet darkly satirical depiction of an authoritarian world where thoughts can be crimes

William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954) – an unforgettable exploration of what lurks beneath the veneer of civilisation among a group of stranded schoolboys

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) – a powerful story of racial and social injustice in the American South

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) – a dystopian story set in a repressive patriarchal theocracy

Short stories

Ray Bradbury, 'The Pedestrian', 'The Golden Kite and the Silver Wind', 'The Flying Machine', and other stories

Anton Chekov, 'The Death of a Government Clerk' and other stories

Nikolai Gogol, 'The Nose' and other stories

Ernest Hemingway, 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' and other stories

James Joyce, 'The Dead' and the other stories in *Dubliners*

D. H. Lawrence, 'The Rocking Horse Winner', 'Odour of Chrysanthemums' and other stories

Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Purloined Letter' and other stories in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*

Leo Tolstoy, 'Master and Man' and other stories

The American experience

Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) – explores the complex emotional toll of the American Civil War

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952) – an unnamed black man narrates his experiences in mid-twentieth century America

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – a stunning depiction of Jazz Age America, exploring the tensions between wealth, ambition and personal relationships

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) – an experimental and very poignant novel written in response to the 9/11 attacks

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957) – the story of a road trip across America, and the defining novel of the post-war ‘Beat Generation’

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) – a powerful story of racial and social injustice in the American South

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) – a thought-provoking exploration of the legacy of slavery, set in the aftermath of the American Civil War

Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (2004) – an alternative history in which America is ruled by a fascist president, exploring the consequences for the Jewish community from New Jersey from which Roth himself had come

J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) – the classic novel of teenage disillusionment with the “phony” adult world

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) – classic stories of

American youth, set in Mississippi (be warned that some of the racial language is highly offensive)

Modern fiction from around the world

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) – the classic novel of 19th century colonisation, set in century Nigeria

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) – a coming-of-age novel exploring family and religion in postcolonial Nigeria

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (2013) – the story of a Nigerian woman who makes a new life in the United States

Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* (2008) – an exploration of wealth, poverty and globalisation in contemporary India

Oyinkan Braithwaite, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) – a blackly comic Nigerian novel about how blood is thicker – and more difficult to get out of the carpet – than water...

J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) – a nostalgic yet disturbing semi-fictional account of Coetzee's own youth in South Africa

Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) – an exploration of the cultural pressures felt by two Indian immigrants in the United States

Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) – an ambiguous novel in which a Pakistani man narrates the story

of his life to a mysterious American, exploring the tensions of the post-9/11 world

Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (2003) – a tale of family, friendship and guilt in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban

Lloyd Jones, *Mister Pip* (2006) – a story of education and trauma set during the civil war in Papua New Guinea

Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey* (1991) – one family's experience of life in Bombay in the 1970s; see also Mistry's Dickensian epic *A Fine Balance* (1995)

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) – a story of betrayal set during the struggle for Kenyan independence

Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen* (2015) – set in 1990s Nigeria, this is a coming-of-age story that takes a turn for the tragic

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981) – a magical realist narrative depicting the life of a man born at the exact moment of the partition of India in 1947

Philosophical fiction/novels of ideas

Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942) – a troubling absurdist story of murder and alienation; also published as *The Outsider*

Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World* (1991) – this Norwegian “novel” is really a very readable history of Western philosophy

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1915) – the short, disturbing tale of a man who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into an insect, exploring ideas about family and identity

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) – an influential satirical journey through four fictional lands, by the end of which Lemuel Gulliver wishes he were a horse

Voltaire, *Candide* (1759) – a satirical coming-of-age narrative which assails human institutions and mistaken optimism from the point of view of its naïve hero

Classic detective and adventure fiction

John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) – a thrilling adventure novel set at the outbreak of the First World War

Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1966) – an innovative “non-fiction novel” exploring a quadruple-murder in 1950s Kansas

Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939) – a complex crime novel which artfully explores themes of deception and death

Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) – an influential and much-praised crime novel featuring Hercule Poirot

Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (1868) – often described as the first detective novel

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1980; English translation 1983) – a playful and sophisticated murder mystery set in a medieval monastery

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped* (1886) – a historical fictional adventure set in eighteenth-century Scotland

Classic science fiction and fantasy

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) – a glorious and often absurd sci-fi comedy, encompassing the beginning and end of the world, and the answer (42) to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything

J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (1962) – in a way that now seems prophetic, Ballard depicts a future world where the oceans have risen and human beings must confront the consequences

Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – written at the same time as the classic film of the same name, a wildly successful novel about the origins and the end of human civilisation and technology

Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) – a post-apocalyptic story about artificial life

Frank Herbert, *Dune* (1965) – supposedly the best-selling work of science fiction ever, a compelling story set in a feudal interstellar society in the distant future

Diana Wynne Jones, *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) – a witty and entertaining riff on a number of conventional fantasy tropes

Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) – controversial depiction of the ethics of intelligence-improving surgery

Ursula Le Guin, *The Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) – a classic fantasy coming-of-age story

Mervyn Peake, *Titus Groan* (1946), *Gormenghast* (1950), *Titus Alone* (1959) – a witty, medieval-inspired fantasy trilogy

Terry Pratchett, *Mort* (1987) – often considered one of the best novels in Pratchett's popular *Discworld* fantasy series

H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895) – a pioneering Victorian story about the future of human civilisation and the ambivalence of progress

John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) – a blinded human population has to fend off the attacks of man-eating plants

Classical and medieval literature translated or retold

***Beowulf*, trans. by Seamus Heaney (1999)** – the epic Anglo-Saxon poem, translated by one of the great modern poets

***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. by Simon Armitage (2007)** – an accessible retelling of this intriguing and beguiling medieval story

Neil Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* (2017) – a compendium of Norse mythology from a leading contemporary fantasy writer

Robert Graves, *I Claudius* (1934) – the lives of the first Roman emperors, told from the perspective of the unlikely leader Claudius

Christopher Logue, *War Music* (1981) – a poetic retelling of Homer's *Iliad*

Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles* (2011) – a retelling of Homer's *Iliad* told from the perspective of Achilles' friend Patroclus

T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (1958) – based on *Morte d'Arthur* (the death of King Arthur) by Sir Thomas Malory

Dystopian and political fiction

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) – a dystopian story set in a patriarchal theocracy

Malcolm Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) – set in a world in which “firemen” do not put out fires but burn books

Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) – a linguistically inventive and darkly satirical dystopian fiction

John le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974) – the ultimate story of Cold War intrigue, with the austere yet compelling George Smiley as protagonist

Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (1980) – an inventive post-nuclear novel in which the past, including the English language, survives only in fragmented and mutated form

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932) – a pioneering novel in which the human population has been genetically selected and infantilised by drug-induced pleasure

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005) – an emotionally intense story of cloning and coming of age

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006) – a post-apocalyptic novel in which industrial civilization has ended

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) – a terrifying yet satirical depiction of an authoritarian world where thoughts can be crimes

War and Peace

J. G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (1984) – the unforgettable and poignant story of one British boy's experiences in China during World War Two, based on Ballard's own life

Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (1991) – a powerful exploration of the psychological consequences of the First World War; there are two sequels, *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995)

Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong* (1993) – an exploration of the traumas of the First World War and their impact in the decades that followed

Michael Frayn, *Spies* (2002) – an elderly man reminisces about his youth in wartime London, with a surprising twist

Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (1961) – a satirical exploration of the absurdity of war with a cast of memorable characters

Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) – a powerful portrayal of the effects of World War One on the German soldiers who fought in it

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) – a classic anti-war novel, involving elements of science fiction and time travel in its exploration of the bombing of Dresden in 1945

(Auto)biography, memoir, and travel-writing

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969) – a memoir of childhood that illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma

Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937) – a classic travel narrative set in Persia and Afghanistan

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015) - written as a letter to the author's teenage son about the feelings, symbolism, and realities associated with being Black in the United States

William Dalrymple, *In Xanadu* (1989) – the story of Dalrymple's journey in the footsteps of Marco Polo, from Jerusalem to Inner Mongolia

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) – a famous and influential memoir from a former slave, advocating the abolition of slavery in America

Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time of Gifts* (1977) – a masterpiece of travel writing, recounting the younger Fermor's journey on foot from Holland to Istanbul, capturing life in Europe in 1933

Anne Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (written 1942–1944, published 1947) – a diary kept in Nazi-occupied Holland by a young Jewish girl, who later died in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp

Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump*, translated by Keiko Yoshida David Mitchell (2013) – a fascinating memoir supposedly told by an autistic man who is usually unable to communicate his thoughts; controversial and thought-provoking

Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012) – an exploration of the ways we are shaped by, and interact with, the landscape

George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) – Orwell's memorable account of his time living in deliberate poverty on the edges of society

Joe Simpson, *Touching the Void* (1988) – the celebrated story of a mountaineering trip gone wrong

Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) – the story of a woman who died in 1951 but whose genetic material survives to this day in cells kept and grown for scientific research

Rory Stewart, *The Places in Between* (2004) – the story of Stewart's solo walk across Afghanistan in 2002, in the immediate aftermath of the allies' invasion

Bart Van Es, *The Cut Out Girl* (2018) – a very thought-provoking memoir of family life which reflects on the emotional consequences, many decades later, of a family's fostering of a young Jewish girl during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands

Classic drama

Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) – the monologue of a man looking back on different episodes of his life using recordings made by his younger self

Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (2004) – a modern classic exploring the complex emotions associated with adolescence, learning and teaching

Robert Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons* (1960) – explores the moral dilemma faced by Sir Thomas More as he maintained his deepest principles in opposition to King Henry VIII, and More's final noble sacrifice

Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* (1879) – a controversial play about the struggles of a woman trapped by the patriarchal institutions of marriage

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949) – the tragic tale of a salesman and his family as they face the dreams and struggles of American life

Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party* (1957) – a dark and menacing absurdist comedy set in a dingy seaside boarding house

Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) – an absurdist “metatheatrical” play in which six characters interrupt a play rehearsal to ask the producer to complete their story

Willy Russell, *Blood Brothers* (1981) – a musical about two brothers separated at birth, leading very different lives which yet remain tragically entwined

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) – a sparkling comedy about love and identity

Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) – an intense depiction of the psychological disintegration of a grandiose lady from the American South

If you like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*...

Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Shadow' (1847) – a literary fairy tale in which a man's shadow assumes a life of its own

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) – an implicit critique of colonialism in Africa, as Marlow uncovers the story of the colonial agent Mr Kurtz

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Double* (1846) – a man on the verge of a psychological breakdown encounters his own exact lookalike

Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) – a psychological thriller following the deeds of a psychopathic trickster who never gets caught

James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) – a psychological Gothic thriller about a murderer who is convinced that he acts out of righteousness

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) – a brilliantly ambiguous story about a governess to two isolated children and the ghostly presence of their former servants

Edgar Allen Poe, 'William Wilson' (1839) – the story of a man whose whole immoral life is haunted by his mysterious doppelgänger

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) – a pioneering story of science and revenge, probing what it means to be both creator and creature

H.G. Wells, *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) – an early work of science fiction in which a mad scientist creates living human-like creatures from animal parts

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) – a man sells his soul to ensure that he will remain forever young, and so able to pursue a life of careless pleasure, while his portrait ages in the attic

Book about books

Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000) – one of America's most successful popular writers reflects on his motivations for writing and the tips of his trade

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (1992) – through short essays on extracts from a range of different novels, Lodge explores and explains all the key elements of the writer's craft

George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* (2021) – a very thought-provoking exploration of a selection of great short stories, which shows how thrilling GCSE English Language could be in an ideal world

Emma Smith, *This Is Shakespeare: How to Read the World's Greatest Playwright* (2019) – a very accessible contemporary guide to each of Shakespeare's plays