

## Outside Reading Options for American Literature, *semester one*

*Not all books on this list are approved by DCRC, the literary approval board for SVSD – parents/guardians, please be advised. All books, however, are considered classics of American literature.*

***As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner:** *As I Lay Dying* chronicles the death of Addie Bundren and the subsequent journey to bury her corpse in her family's cemetery several miles away. This disastrous and darkly comic tale is enriched by Faulkner's innovative narrative technique, which features narration by fifteen characters, including a confused child and the dead woman, Addie. In addition, Faulkner mixes vernacular speech with "stream-of-consciousness" passages to enhance this unique narrative style.

**\**The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath:** *The Bell Jar* is American writer and poet Sylvia Plath's only novel, which was originally published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas" in 1963. The novel is semi-autobiographical with the names of places and people changed. The book is often regarded as a roman à clef, with the protagonist's descent into mental illness paralleling Plath's own experiences with what may have been clinical depression. Plath committed suicide a month after its first UK publication. The novel was published under Plath's name for the first time in 1967 and was not published in the United States until 1971, pursuant to the wishes of Plath's husband Ted Hughes and her mother

***Boy Black* by Richard Wright:** An autobiographical work in which Wright adapted formative episodes from his own life into a "coming of age" plot. In the novel, Richard is a boy in the Jim Crow American South. This was a system of racial segregation practiced in some states of the U.S., which treated blacks as second-class citizens. In his novel, Wright emphasizes two environmental forces of this system: hunger and language. He shows how hunger drives the already oppressed to even more desperate acts, and his emphasis on language explains how he managed to survive Jim Crow: by developing an attention to language as a coping mechanism for the surface world of life. Meanwhile, literature offered him internal release from the tensions of living without the freedom to express his dignity as a human being. Thus, Wright's novel is a powerful story of the individual struggle for the freedom of expression.

**\**The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe:** For a start, Kesey's own life with the Merry Pranksters is perhaps the consummate example of a phenomenon that, in 1968, baffled the national imagination: the transformation of the "promising middle-class youth with all the advantages" into what was popularly known as "the hippie." Kesey was more than promising. He was a Golden Boy of the West—a scholar, actor, star athlete, and one of the outstanding novelists of his generation—when he burst forth as an experimenter with powerful new hallucinogenic drugs, leader of the Merry Pranksters, and, finally, fugitive from the FBI, the California police, and the Mexican Federales.

***Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury:** Guy Montag is a thirty-year-old fireman experiencing an intellectual awakening. For ten years now he has protected the sanity and comfort of the community by setting fire to books. He and his wife Mildred live comfortably in the suburbs of a large city. All Mildred needs to make her life complete is a fourth TV wall, so she can be surrounded by the characters she watches and interacts with every day in her living room. True, an international war has been brewing, but nobody much cares as long as they're comfortable.

***Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway:** Hemingway once referred to *A Farewell to Arms* as his version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Like Shakespeare's play, the novel is a tale of tragic romance between an American Lieutenant, Frederic Henry, and a British army nurse, Catherine Barkley, that unfolds along the Italian front during World War I.


***The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud:** Yakov Bok, a Russian Jew, is accused of the murder of a boy, Zhenia Golov, who was found stabbed to death. The Black Hundred, an anti-semitic organization, accuses the Jews of murdering the boy for his blood, which they would use for the making of Passover matzos.

***The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck:** *The Grapes of Wrath* follows the trials and tribulations of the Joad family as they leave the dust bowl of Oklahoma for a better life in California. When *The Grapes of Wrath* was published on March 14, 1939, it created a national sensation for its depiction of the devastating effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou: is the first—and many say the best—of five autobiographical volumes the gifted African American author, Maya Angelou, wrote. It is a remarkably vivid retelling of the turbulent events of her childhood, during which she shuttled back and forth between dramatically different environments in rural Stamps, Arkansas, slightly raunchy St. Louis, Missouri, and glitzy San Francisco, California. It is also the annals of her relationships with a rich and diverse cast of characters. Chief among these are her determined, strict, and wise grandmother Annie Henderson, her crippled and bitter uncle Willie Johnson; her bright and imaginative brother Bailey Johnson Jr.; her playboy father Bailey Johnson; and her beautiful, brilliant, and worldly mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson. A host of other unforgettable characters fill out the cast for this earnest, sometimes sardonic retelling of the drama of Maya Angelou's growing-up years. During these years, she struggled against the odds of being black at a time when prejudice, especially in the South, was at its height. But most of all her story is the story of discovering who she is—of working her way through a multi-faceted identity crisis. The source of the title of the book is a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar entitled "Sympathy." "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," writes the poet. "When he beats his bars and he would be free. It is a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings."

**The Jungle by Upton Sinclair:** Since its first publication in 1906, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* has stirred generations of readers to outrage. It is the story of an economic system that destroys Jurgis Rudkus and his family, treating them no better than the cattle that are slaughtered and vivisected in the book's most horrific and memorable scenes. The story conveys just how terrible conditions for workers were a hundred years ago and how dangerous the threat of food contamination really was before corporate greed was put in check by government regulation. *The Jungle* is a rare example of a work of fiction that is so true to its source and so powerfully written that it changed the course of government regulation.

**\*Killer Angels** by Michael Shaara: This is one of the best books ever written about the Civil War. Michael Shaara personalizes the Battle of Gettysburg. As a reader, you get to learn about all the great stories within the most important battle in our country's history. You learn about the unknown general from Maine whose regiment singlehandedly held off the Confederate Army, and the story of how 2 best friends met in the middle of the battlefield on opposing sides (and one of them died within 15 yards of the other). It is one of the best books I have ever read. It's short, interesting and a pretty easy read. (D'Ambrosio Pick)

**\*The Kite Runner**  by Khaled Hosseini: published in 2003, it is Hosseini's first novel. *The Kite Runner* tells the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, whose closest friend is Hassan, his father's young Hazara servant. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of Afghanistan's monarchy through the Soviet invasion, the mass exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime.

*My Antonia* by Willa Cather: The story of both Antonia Shimerda, a Bohemian immigrant to the state of Nebraska in the 1880s, and the novel's American-born narrator, Jim Burden. The story is told as Jim relates his own image of Antonia in a nostalgic recreation of his childhood and youth. Their wildly differing places in the social hierarchy account for their respective fortunes. Antonia survives her father's suicide, hires herself out as household help, is abandoned at the altar, gives birth out of wedlock, but achieves fulfillment in her marriage to a Czech farmer, her loving children, and their flourishing farm. Jim, a successful well-traveled and cultured East-coast lawyer, remains romantic, nostalgic, and unfulfilled in life.

**Old Man and the Sea, by Ernst Hemingway,** tells the story of Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman, who alone in his small boat faces the most difficult fight of his life against an enormous marlin. At the beginning of the novel, Santiago has lost his fisherman's luck; he has gone eighty-four days without catching a marketable fish. Even his closest friend, a village boy he taught to fish, has left him to work on another boat....

**The Scarlett Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne:** Hawthorne's emotional, psychological drama revolves around Hester Prynne, who is convicted of adultery in colonial Boston by the civil and Puritan authorities. She is condemned to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her chest as a permanent sign of her sin.

**\*The Sea-Wolf** by Jack London is a 1904 psychological adventure novel about a literary critic, survivor of an ocean collision who comes under the dominance of Wolf Larsen, the powerful and amoral sea captain who rescues him. Its first printing of forty thousand copies were immediately sold out before publication on the strength of London's previous *The Call of the Wild*.

**\*Seabiscuit** by Laura Hillenbrand: This is the true story of the underdog horse that captured the imagination of the entire country during the Great Depression. This book does a great job of explaining the importance of horse racing during the Great Depression and the overwhelming odds that Seabiscuit overcame to become the most famous athlete of the 1930's. This book is very fast paced, action packed and a lot of fun to read. You will never want to watch the movie once you have read this book (Spiderman riding a horse? Are you kidding me?) (D'Ambrosio Pick)

### **Slaughterhouse 5 or the Childrens' Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death by**

**Kurt Vonnegut:** Based on Vonnegut's own experiences as a World War II prisoner who witnessed the Allied firebombing of Dresden, Germany, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man who has come "unstuck in time." Without any forewarning, he finds himself suddenly transported to other points in time in his own past or future. The book chronicles the extraordinary events that happen to Billy, from witnessing the Dresden firebombing to being kidnapped by aliens.

**\*Something Wicked This Way Comes** by Ray Bradbury: a 1962 novel by Ray Bradbury. It is about two 13-year-old boys, Jim Nightshade and William Halloway, who have a harrowing experience with a nightmarish traveling carnival that comes to their midwestern town one October. The carnival's leader is the mysterious "Mr. Dark" who bears a tattoo for each person who, lured by the offer to live out his secret fantasies, has become bound in service to the carnival. Mr. Dark's malevolent presence is countered by that of Will's father, Charles Halloway, who harbors his own secret desire to regain his youth.

**\*Sometimes a Great Notion by Ken Kesey:** This is Ken Kesey's second novel, published in 1964. While *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) was arguably the more famous of the two novels, many critics consider *Sometimes a Great Notion* Kesey's magnum opus (masterpiece). The story involves an Oregon family of loggers who cut and procure trees for a local mill in opposition to striking, unionized workers.

**Stillness at Appomattox, by Bruce Catton,** is an award-winning, non-fiction book written in 1953 that recounts the American Civil War's final year, describing the campaigns of Ulysses S. Grant in Virginia during 1864 to the end of the war in 1865. It is the final volume of the Army of the Potomac trilogy that includes *Mr. Lincoln's Army* (1951) and *Glory Road* (1952).

**\*The Things They Carried** by Tim O'Brien: a collection of related stories by Tim O'Brien, about a platoon of American soldiers in the Vietnam War, originally published in hardcover by Houghton Mifflin, 1990. While apparently based on some of O'Brien's own experiences, the title page refers to the book as "a work of fiction"; indeed, the majority of stories in the book possess some quality of metafiction. Even though the characters are based on a work of fiction, they show similarities to real soldiers that O'Brien knew during his time in the war. A few of the characters show similarities to characters from his autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. That is why O'Brien dedicated his book to the men of the Alpha Company.

**\*Thirteen Days** by Robert F. Kennedy: This book is President John F. Kennedy's brother's personal account of what took place during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Bobby Kennedy was there in the war room to witness how his brother (along with the help from the X Com) got the Soviet Union to remove their nuclear weapons from Cuba. This is the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war. The book is short, intense and very easy to read. (D'Ambrosio Pick)

**\*Under the Feet of Jesus** by Helena María Viramontes: At the center of this powerful tale is Estrella, a girl about to cross over the perilous border to womanhood. What she knows of life comes from her mother, who has survived abandonment by her husband in a land that treats her as if she were invisible, even though she and her children pick the crops of the farms that feed its people...from the aging but iron-bodied man who reluctantly becomes the head of the family, even as dreams of his youth in Mexico are calling him home...and from the endless highways and vast fields of California, where they travel and work together. But within Estrella, seeds of growth and change are stirring.

*Viva Chicano* by Frank Bonham: The growing concern over the resurgence of street gang violence in the Los Angeles area makes *Viva Chicano* even more significant today than it was at its publication in 1970. Current press coverage of California's gang violence reveals the same problems portrayed in *Viva Chicano*. Because he bases his works of fiction on firsthand experience with young people and the adult professionals who deal with them on a daily basis, Bonham's stories ring true.

**\*When I Was Puerto Rican** by Esmeralda Santiago: Esmeralda Santiago's story begins in rural Puerto Rico, where her childhood was full of both tenderness and domestic strife, tropical sounds and sights as well as poverty. Growing up, she learned the proper way to eat a guava, the sound of tree frogs in the mango groves at night, the taste of the delectable sausage called *morcilla*, and the formula for ushering a dead baby's soul to heaven. As she enters school we see the clash, both hilarious and fierce, of Puerto Rican and Yankee culture. When her mother, Mami, a force of nature, takes off to New York with her seven, soon to be eleven children, Esmeralda, the oldest, must learn new rules, a new language, and eventually take on a new identity. In this first volume of her much-praised, bestselling trilogy, Santiago brilliantly recreates the idyllic landscape and tumultuous family life of her earliest years and her tremendous journey from the *barrio* to Brooklyn, from translating for her mother at the welfare office to high honors at Harvard.

**\*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts** by Maxine Hong Kingston: published in 1975. Although there are many scholarly debates surrounding the official genre classification of the book, it can best be described as a work of creative non-fiction. Throughout the five chapters of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston blends autobiography with old Chinese folktales. What results is a complex portrayal of the 20th Century experiences of Chinese-Americans living in the U.S in the shadow of the Chinese Revolution.