10 Books You Need to Read Before Graduation

“If you don’t read good books, you will read bad ones,” C. S. Lewis writes.

We may need to update Lewis’s claim for the twenty-first-century reader, for those who do not read good books will not necessarily read bad ones, but may—in not knowing why or what they should read—substitute books entirely with hours of video streaming and gaming. Lewis proposes that we are cultural creatures, which is true, but too often we neglect culture for entertainment.

Good books provide both: good entertainment and good enculturation.

Why Read

These are easy arguments for a bibliophile to make, and most people will not deny these truths; they just don’t live according to them. The world is full of distractions. To find time to read is to win a battle against the cotton-candy pleasure of binge-watching, against the litany of emails and projects and never-ending tasks of our work, against the monotony of Facebook posts and Twitter messages.

First, we all know that reading makes us better. We’ve heard it from teachers; we’ve read the apologies for reading online, but more so, we have felt them ourselves. We remember the exaltation when Harry Potter plunges the Gryffindor sword through the Basilisk’s head. Or when Mr. Darcy overcomes his pride and saves Lydia Bennett from a life of exile. When we think of what it means to forgive, we recall *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Color Purple*. When we worry over the

seemingly limitless reach of government's power, perhaps we turn again to *Brave New World* or *Oryx and Crake*.

We would be emaciated souls should we manage the adventure of life with only one set of eyes. How meager to face all the various hardships and gray moral areas with only our limited vision of the world! We need the eyes of Odysseus, Wordsworth, Nietzsche, and Toni Morrison. As Lewis also famously attested, "In reading I become a thousand [people] and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, yet it is still I who see."

To read is to become a seraphim, a polyglot, a beneficent hydra. We become more ourselves. We become better selves, better souls. We transcend being merely thinking machines or gluttonous beasts but transform into creative creatures who love, give, and are nourished by beauty.

What to Read

When I was young, I thought working in a bookstore would be the perfect job for me. I could spend every day helping people find the book they wanted. Like Ira and Barry from *City Slickers*, who could find the right ice cream flavor for every meal, I would concoct the most fitting story for each reader. "Oh, you love *Lord of the Rings*? Well, have you tried *Dr. Strange and Mr. Norrell*?"

It turns out that teaching fulfills at least part of this fantasy. Each semester, I have the opportunity to craft a reading list for my students, one that will delight and edify them. I change books constantly—having so many to choose from throughout time and space—usually determining some sort of theme to our reading. We may discuss "Love" one term, or "Metamorphosis," or "Power," and thus the titles change.

Yet there are three books that I teach every year and six or

seven more that I routinely recommend to students to read before they graduate. These are timeless works, and as much as I am a fan of contemporary literature, I agree with Lewis again: “It is a good rule after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one until you have read an old one in between.”

Rather than list the titles chronologically, I’ll rank them preferentially.

10 Books Every College Student Should Read

1. Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*

If you have only read “The Inferno,” you have not read Dante’s *Comedy*.

No matter how funny it is to witness a devil play the bugle with his backside, the “comedy” in the title refers not to hell but to the happily ever after of universal participation in the beatific vision that occurs in *Paradiso*. Unless you’re in a Satanic cult, do not let the sight of Lucifer be the end of your journey. Make the hard progress up the purgatorial mountain in the second volume and devote time to the beauty of paradise—whether you comprehend the final volume or not, it is a blessing to savor its poetry.

Each canto, or song, can be read by itself, so while the three volumes appear overwhelming, you can go bit by bit, slowly, with only ten minutes a night. Try Anthony Esolen’s translation. Thankfully, he provides the Italian on one page, the English on the other, and a host of helpful notes about Italian politics and Christian theology.

Through Dante’s 14,000-line poem, we experience

transformation, moving from the dark woods into the light. If we are lost and afraid, the poem shows us the way out.

Perhaps this is why writers have written memoirs such as *How Dante Can Save Your Life*. I read the poem every year, though I will admit that the first time I was asked to read it I found it confusing and overwhelming. Do not let that thwart you. In class, after we read the final lines, I suggest to students, "Now, you are ready to read the poem."

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

I struggled ranking Dante over Dostoevsky; I consider them of equal weight. There has never been a better novel written, in any language, than *The Brothers Karamazov*. The novel is a mystery, but it is unlike any mystery you have ever read, for we know the murder victim from the beginning. The question becomes: Who of us does not desire his death? Even the reader becomes implicated in the guilt of the narrative as we all must recognize our penchant for evil, our damning quest for acting as our own authority, and our discouraging attraction to violence.

This novel draws you in to participate with the characters. We dialogue with each of them and get to know them personally, as though they live and breathe and are drinking vodka in our living room. At the end of the story, we have been shown our failings, but we have also been shown how to die to self and rise again in a new way. The epigraph of the novel is from the Gospel of John: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

The novel embodies the truth of these words.

3. St. Augustine's *Confessions*

Recently, Hollywood misfit Russell Brand converted to Christianity. He explains, "Crack houses and these dens of suffering and illicit activity, they're all people trying to feel good, trying to feel connected. People are trying to escape. People are trying to get out of their own heads. To me this is a spiritual impetus."

As Augustine would say, the heart is restless until it rests in God. Augustine's spiritual autobiography is the first of its kind. It begins with his birth, follows his education and then his pursuit of many other pleasures in life, to his conversion to Christianity, where he finally finds rest.

The reason his autobiography maintains such power more than 1,500 years after it was written is because of its honesty. Augustine does not shy away from "confession" of his disordered loves, despite his position as bishop of Hippo, which he held when writing the book. Every other autobiography and memoir draws—knowingly or not—from Augustine's story.

4. Virgil's *The Aeneid*

Arma virumque cano: so begins the great adventure of Aeneas as he travels from Troy to found the empire of Rome.

The opening line plagiarizes both Homer's *Odyssey* and his *Illiad*. The Roman poet Virgil attempted to outdo both Greek bestsellers with his one epic, so that the first six books read as a rewrite of Odysseus's adventures, and the second six recount battles and war to outdo the tales of the *Illiad*.

That is not to say you should forego reading the other two classics—I alternate annually between teaching one of the three. Virgil's classic did have a long-lasting influence on Western culture. People used to flip open their copies of *The*

Aeneid and point their finger downward on a line, expecting prophecy. Then they'd apply the verse to their lives. Virgil is Dante's guide through *The Divine Comedy*, and Augustine struggles with the emotional pull in the love story between Dido and Aeneas.

Unlike Odysseus, who is a trickster and deceiver, or the hero Achilles, who pursues self-valorization above all, Aeneas's epithet is "pious Aeneas" because he searches out the most pious choice each moment of his journey.

A meme passed around among English teachers from the journalist Joseph Sobran laments, "In 100 years we have gone from teaching Latin and Greek in high school to teaching Remedial English in college." The Classics are foundational, not just for our language but more so for our character. These epic stories show us how to live as pious individuals and as those within a community composed of history, the present, the future, and transcendent ends.

5. Shakespeare's ***Richard III***

How to recommend one Shakespeare play?

When I was a young girl, my father placed a small statue of Henry V on our breakfast table one Saturday morning. Then he opened his leather-bound, gold-leafed-page edition of Shakespeare's play and read "The St. Crispin's Day Speech": "This story shall the good man teach his son…."

I recited the speech to a group of colleagues one evening at a banquet, about a decade later, on Father's Day, commemorating both the holiday and that group of special individuals gathered there for dinner. Shakespeare's words are timeless and infinitely transferable, which is why you have dozens of film adaptations each year, from the Baz Luhrmann approach to the phenomenal BBC series "The Hollow Crown." Prisons put on productions of Shakespeare to aid inmates in rehabilitation;

elementary schools cast students in roles where they speak lines that make no sense to the children but become ingrained in their memory.

When I taught fourth grade in a classical private school, I had a dozen nine-year-olds deliver Shakespearean monologues that both they and I will never forget. The bard is too often poorly taught in high school and forgotten by the majority of students who read his plays with difficulty, hear his lines as confusing and lackluster, and miss the vitality and beauty of his words.

If I could recommend one play to students, I would choose *Richard III*. Few have read it, but it teaches us so much about the lust for power, the machinations of campaigning leaders to deceive the masses, the misuse of religion, and the fickleness of selfish rulers. Benedict Cumberbatch's performance is one of the best that I have seen. However, for a trip into a twentieth-century rendition, watch Ian McKellen's version, where Richard III is a Nazi.

6. John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

At universities across the country—Notre Dame, Princeton, Duke, and others—students and faculty gather for marathon readings of John Milton's seventeenth-century epic *Paradise Lost*. Our university held one in 2016.

From early Saturday morning to midevening, students read a section at a time each hour and passed the poem from hand to hand, meditating on the poet's words and traveling through hell, heaven, and Eden, where they witnessed the fall of human beings. Milton's verses sound as if they were meant to be read aloud; his daughters transcribed the poem as Milton dictated it, hence its aural resonance. Thus, the lines are beautifully received without need for dissection or explication.

Poor Milton himself desired to become a great politician, but

the chaos of the Civil War in England placed him outside monarchial favor. His poem is a result of political exile as well as physical suffering—he went blind. When the first parents both eat of the tree of knowledge, they begin pointing fingers at each other. Milton writes, "The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning. And of their vain contest appeared no end." Here Milton implies that one must begin by confessing, "I am the problem."

Only from that position can one move forward—in arguments, in relationships, as well as in civil society.

7. Flannery O'Connor's *Complete Stories*

Every list of recommended books is biased, and here is my biased choice—Flannery O'Connor's *Complete Stories* is my favorite book.

However, I did not rank this title first because I do not think I could recognize the value of O'Connor's stories without the treasure of the previous stories. There would be no *Wise Blood* (O'Connor's first novel) without the Greek classics. There would be no "Revelation" without Dante. In a sense, O'Connor's stories are a rewriting of the great stories—from the Bible to Dostoevsky—set in the twentieth-century South.

Her stories are not edifying in the usual sense. No one wants to turn her words into moral platitudes. However, they hold a mirror up to the reader and ask that one sees herself in a dark light. They show us as we are—freaks under construction—and the view is not flattering. A reader closes a Flannery O'Connor story with either attraction or revulsion, sometimes both, but the one who returns will be as transformed as the one who journeys with Augustine or Aeneas.

8. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

The year 2018 marks the two hundredth anniversary of Frederick Douglass's birth. American students cannot do without reading the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

And once they read his story, they would do well to then read other phenomenal writers who are too often dismissed from the canon: Martin Luther King Jr., Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, or contemporary poets such as Marilyn Nelson and Kevin Young. I would also like to recommend highly Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, but, as it is not "literature" per se, I have left it out of my top ten. However, Stevenson's book left a strong impression on me and brought up memories of Douglass's autobiography, which I first read as a high school student. The story removes any misconceptions we have about suffering and struggle.

While we too often think of happiness as apart from pain, theologian Eleonore Stump once countered, Can you think of a single noteworthy individual who was born with a silver spoon, never encountered adversity, and died with all pleasures having been fulfilled? No, as Douglass's life reminds us, it is our response to suffering that makes life worth living.

Douglass writes, "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will."

9. Gerard Manley Hopkins's Poetry

Every person should spend time reading poetry and memorizing it.

In Russia all elementary students have a storehouse of poetry memorized. And consider *Seabiscuit*, where you watch Red Pollard overcome the difficulties of his life by reciting verses. Poetry gives us words for mysteries: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

Poems defamiliarize what we've made too familiar (Hopkins describes clouds as "wind-walks"), so that we search deeper into problems and do not accept our knowledge as the limit of understanding. The nineteenth-century poet's work will sound modern to our ears, despite its employment of the sonnet form.

His work did not see publication until many years after his death, but Hopkins's poetry influenced many of the great twentieth-century voices, such as Seamus Heaney, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and Christian Wiman. Memorizing "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" will open up the world to you and make you see again and pay attention. Also, sign up for the poem-a-day email from the Poetry Foundation and read a new poem each day in your inbox.

10. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*

The year 2018 is also the hundredth anniversary of Solzhenitsyn's birth. This Nobel Laureate was praised in the 1970s and then fell out of favor because of his criticisms of the West.

By the early 1990s, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and readers wondered about the significance of his work, which, by and large, categorized the atrocities of Russian communism. In

Elie Wiesel's memoir of the Holocaust, *Night*, the author demands, "Never shall I forget" the evil committed. Solzhenitsyn agrees and adds to our memory—the names of those who suffered and died and the hope they held and flamed. It reminds us that "the line dividing good and evil" does not run between people or nations but "cuts through the heart of every human being."

The book is a literary experiment, becoming a footstool of mixed genre texts. Its import and relevance exceeds historical value. Rather, like the Holocaust memoirs of Wiesel or Anne Frank or Primo Levi, Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (thankfully, there is an abridged version available!) recounts human heroism that should not be forgotten.

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