**Reading Materials**

This document provides information about the reading materials for this theme, including a complete list of available titles, as well as book summaries and author information for each.

**Complete Book List**

Included below is the complete list of books which have been vetted and recommended for this theme, and which are available in inventory from the ICfL.

* *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain (1884)
* *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton (1920)
* *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger (1951)
* [*The*](http://libraries.idaho.gov/node/2019) *Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (1923-1938)
* [*Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson’s Poems*](http://libraries.idaho.gov/node/2016), by Emily Dickson (1858-1955)
* *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck (1939)
* *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)
* *Invisible Man,* by Ralph Ellison (1952)
* *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott (1868)
* *The Old Man and the Sea*, by Ernest Hemingway (1952)
* *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, by Mark Twain (1894)
* *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937)
* *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee (1960)
* *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852)
* *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, by Henry David Thoreau (1854)
* *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank Baum (1900)

**Book Summaries & Author Information**

Included below are the detailed summaries of each book available for this theme, as well as background information about the author.

**The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, by Mark Twain (1884)

This is arguably Mark Twain’s greatest book, partly because it is held together by his greatest character, the narrator Huck, and partly because it criticizes the cruelties and hypocrisies of American culture so powerfully. The novel condemns the various ways in which human beings gain advantage for themselves at the expense of others. Religion, social position, fraud, mob violence: all these are described; but the extreme example of cruelty and taking advantage of others is, of course, slavery. At the book’s core is Huck’s relation to the slave Jim, and much of the novel’s brilliant irony comes from Huck’s condemning himself for the same feelings and actions toward Jim which readers (and the author) applaud and love him for. It is also a very funny book. Whatever the target of his criticism, Twain can make us laugh, even when despair is behind the humor.

Author Information

A scathing critic of American culture, Mark Twain was no less hard on himself. “Well,” he wrote to a friend, “I am a great and sublime fool. But then I am God’s fool, and all His works must be contemplated with respect.” Twain was a “character” not only in the flamboyance of his personality and his matchless wit, but also in the conflicts that drove his personality. These conflicts are indicated by the continuing competition between his two names: Samuel L. Clemens and Mark Twain, which still give librarians and indexers fits trying to decide what to call him. The values and allegiances of Clemens/Twain were typically divided. He wanted to thumb his nose at society, but also to be successful in it. He wanted to be the writer of democracy, of the people, but he also wanted the upper-class culture of the East coast to accept him. Even his writing style changed, according to his sense of purpose and audience.

**The Age of Innocence**, by Edith Wharton (1920)

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) wrote carefully structured fiction that probed the psychological and social elements guiding the behavior of her characters. Her portrayals of upper-class New Yorkers were unrivaled. *The Age of Innocence*, for which Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920, is one of her most memorable novels.

At the heart of the story are three people whose entangled lives are deeply affected by the tyrannical and rigid requirements of high society. Newland Archer, a restrained young attorney, is engaged to the lovely May Welland but falls in love with May’s beautiful and unconventional cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska. Despite his fear of a dull marriage to May, Archer goes through with the ceremony—persuaded by his own sense of honor, family, and societal pressures. He continues to see Ellen after the marriage, but his dreams of living a passionate life ultimately cease.

The novel’s lucid and penetrating prose style, vivid characterization, and its rendering of the social history of an era have long made it a favorite with readers and critics alike.

Author Information

Edith Newbold Jones was born January 24, 1862, into one of New York’s wealthiest families. Educated by governesses on both sides of the Atlantic and self-taught in her father’s hidebound library, she began writing poems and stories as a child, attempting her first novel at age eleven. When Edith was sixteen her mother had some of her adolescent verses privately printed, and later, on the recommendation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, had one of them accepted by William Dean Howells for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Socially she followed the course of a debutante. In 1885, at the age of twenty-three, she married Edward “Teddy” Wharton, and took her place in the rarefied milieu of New York, Boston, and Newport social circles. The childless marriage was not a happy one. Teddy Wharton had a predilection towards idleness and was not particularly interested in his wife’s literary ambitions. Worse, they both suffered from debilitating nervous illnesses. The marriage was maintained until 1913 when Edith divorced on grounds of her husband’s infidelity. *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* made Wharton one of the most renowned novelists in America. Wharton died in France at the age of 75.

**The Catcher in the Rye**, by J. D. Salinger (1951).

The hero-narrator of *The Catcher in The Rye* is an ancient child of sixteen, a native New Yorker named Holden Caulfield. Through circumstances that tend to preclude adult, secondhand description, he leaves his prep school in Pennsylvania and goes underground in New York City for three days. The boy himself is at once too simple and too complex for us to make any final comment about him or his story. Perhaps the safest thing we can say about Holden is that he was born in the world not just strongly attracted to beauty but almost, hopelessly impaled on it. There are many voices in this novel: children's voices, adult voices, underground voices-but Holden's voice is the most eloquent of all. Transcending his own vernacular, yet remaining marvelously faithful to it, he issues a perfectly articulated cry of mixed pain and pleasure. However, like most lovers and clowns and poets of the higher orders, he keeps most of the pain to, and for, himself. The pleasure he gives away, or sets aside, with all his heart. It is there for the reader who can handle it to keep.

Author Information

Jerome David Salinger (born January 1, 1919, New York, New York, U.S.—died January 27, 2010, Cornish, New Hampshire), was an American writer whose novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) won critical acclaim and devoted admirers, especially among the post-World War II generation of college students. His corpus of published works also consists of short stories that were printed in magazines, including the *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker*. Salinger was the son of a Jewish father and a Christian mother, and, like Holden Caulfield, the hero of *The Catcher in the Rye,* he grew up in New York City, attending public schools and a military academy. After brief periods at New York and Columbia universities, he devoted himself entirely to writing, and his stories began to appear in periodicals in 1940. After Salinger’s return from service in the U.S. Army (1942–46), his name and writing style became increasingly associated with *The New Yorker* magazine, which published almost all of his later stories. Some of the best of these made use of his wartime experiences: “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” (1950) describes a U.S. soldier’s poignant encounter with two British children; “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (1948) concerns the suicide of the sensitive, despairing veteran Seymour Glass. The reclusive habits of Salinger in his later years made his personal life a matter of speculation among devotees. The last work Salinger published during his lifetime was a novella titled *Hapworth 16, 1924*, which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1965.

[**The**](http://libraries.idaho.gov/node/2019) **Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway** (1923-1938)

Hemingway’s personality threatens to overshadow his writing, but it is always refreshing to return to his fictional creations. He did his best work in the short stories. These stories, written in the 1920s and 1930s when Hemingway was in the prime of his life and career, will take you to Michigan and Chicago, Spain and Africa. More important, they will take you into the minds of some of Hemingway's most powerful characters, most of them American. Hemingway’s stories often portray a desperate, tenacious love of life, though many seem preoccupied, as Hemingway was himself, with death.

Author Information

Hemingway did not come easily to his famous terse style. Though he read widely and composed stories in high school, his prose apprenticeship took him a long time. He turned down a chance to go to college to become a cub reporter for the Kansas City Star. He left that job to serve in Italy in the First World War as an ambulance driver. Wounded, he returned home in 1919 and continued writing. As a reporter for the Star, he began to learn a thrifty, blunt style. In Europe in the 1920s he worked as a correspondent for the Toronto Star, writing human-interest accounts that helped him sharpen his skills of observation and set them in succinct prose. In Paris in the twenties, Hemingway became a member of Gertrude Stein’s “lost generation.” Stein and Ezra Pound tutored Hemingway; F. Scott Fitzgerald was a friend. Between 1923 and 1938 he published forty-nine short stories which are among the best any American has produced.

[**Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson’s Poems**](http://libraries.idaho.gov/node/2016), by Emily Dickson (1858-1955)

Emily Dickinson lived in Puritan New England in the days of that culture's decline. Her poems often show outrage at the rigid social conventions of her culture. Dickinson is a poet of social and religious criticism, but, probably more important, she is a poet of individual feeling: of love and loneliness, expectation and renunciation, death, and its effect on the living. And she wrote wonderful poems of delight at being alive in the world of nature and of people. After her death, her sister became obsessed with having her poetry published. In a gift to a friend, Emily once enclosed a note that said merely, “Area—no Test of Depth.” That might serve as a comment on Emily Dickinson and her writing. If Thoreau is generous, even careless with words, Dickinson is parsimonious. Words mattered greatly to her. Readers are often left feeling very ambiguous about her poetry: they can’t understand her very well, but they are sure that she is a superior artist; and they agree that although she is frustratingly cryptic at times, she nevertheless meets some deep need in them.

Author Information

Emily Dickinson was born to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. Though Emily’s formal education was limited, it was excellent. She attended Amherst Academy from 1840 to 1847 and spent 1847-48 at Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary. One intriguing aspect of Dickinson’s character is her reclusiveness. The only known photograph of Dickinson shows that she, like her mother and sister, was slightly wall-eyed. The frightening eye disease may have been severe enough to threaten blindness, and after she returned home from the treatments, she became increasingly more reclusive. Emily Dickinson’s use of language is one of her major contributions to American literature. She used quite ordinary poetic forms—the rhythms common to English hymns. The ordinariness of the forms is reflected in the well-known contention that people can sing most of her poems to the tune of “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” But in those forms, she condensed meaning and created riddling ellipses, thereby inventing a new means of poetic expression.

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

This is the story of a desperate people, moving westward in the hope of a better life. It is at once a naturalistic epic, a dissenting tract, and a romantic gospel. It speaks to a multiplicity of human experiences and is located squarely in our national consciousness. Convinced that things *must* be better in California than they were at the time in Oklahoma, dust bowl migrants were drawn westward by luxurious visions. The reality was far different from what they had dreamed, and what they found was poverty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Instead of sweet California grapes, they found bitter grapes of resentment and anger.

Author Information

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in the California farming town of Salinas. After attending Stanford University for six years (and failing to complete the requirements for a degree), he went to New York City where he worked as a construction laborer and reporter. His first novel *Cup of Gold* (1929) was published after his return to California. It was a fanciful tale of allegory and romance based on the life of Henry Morgan, the pirate-governor of Jamaica. The novel was not a great success, and Steinbeck soon turned to the materials he knew best, the people and places of his native California. In the 1930’s, Steinbeck published a series of novels, each set in California’s central coast and valleys, which achieved wide recognition. *The Pastures of Heaven, The Red Pony, Tortilla Flat, In Dubious Battle,* and *Of Mice and Men* are among Steinbeck’s greatest achievements. During these early years, Steinbeck also continued to work as a reporter, investigating among other things, the conditions of migratory farm laborers in California. He summarized his conclusions in a series of articles first published as “The Harvest of Gypsies” in the San Francisco News in October 1936, and later reprinted as a pamphlet under the title *Their Blood is Strong*. Steinbeck completed his fictional account of the Dust Bowl migrants during a burst of activity between June and October of 1938, and the novel stands as a masterpiece of world literature.

**The Great Gatsby***,* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

F. Scott Fitzgerald chronicled the decadence and excess of the Jazz Age in this story of the quest for the American Dream by self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby. Both Gatsby and the narrator of Gatsby’s story, Nick Carroway, are combat veterans of World War I, having fought as young infantry officers on the Western Front. The drunken, gaudy parties that the mysterious Jay Gatsby throws every weekend at his palatial mansion on Long Island become a metaphor and a sign of the larger disorder produced by that war, which seriously damaged, if it did not entirely destroy, the moral foundations upon which Western civilization had rested. Gatsby pursues his love, Daisy Buchanan, who remains beyond his reach despite the wealth that Gatsby has amassed.

Author Information

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. He was one of the best known American authors of the 1920s and '30s and is closely associated with the optimism and excesses of that era's "Jazz Age." Fitzgerald's stories often featured people like himself: middle-American types infatuated with the wealth and status of upper-crust society. In the mid-1920s he lived in Paris where he was friends with Ernest Hemingway and other literary expatriates. Fitzgerald was a popular celebrity of the day, and he and his wife, Zelda, became famous for their extravagant lifestyle, drinking bouts and (eventually) erratic behavior. His major published novels include *This Side of Paradise* (1920), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Fitzgerald was named for his distant cousin, Francis Scott Key, the composer of the American National Anthem. Fitzgerald died December 21, 1940, of a heart attack.

**Invisible Man***,* by Ralph Ellison (1952)

This book is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest American novels of the second half of the 20th century. From the moment of its publication in 1952, *Invisible Man* generated the impact of a cultural tidal wave. Here was a pioneering work of African-American fiction that addressed not only the social, but the psychic and metaphysical, components of racism: the invisibility of a large portion of this country’s populace and the origins of that invisibility in one people’s willed blindness and another’s habit of self-concealment. But Ellison had created far more than a commentary on race. He had attempted to decipher the cruel and beautiful paradox that is American, a country founded on high ideals and cold-blooded betrayals. And he sent his naïve hero plunging through almost every stratum of this divided society, from an ivy-covered college in the deep South to the streets of Harlem, from a sharecropper’s shack to the floor of a hellish paint factory, from a millionaire’ cocktail party to a communist rally, from church jubilees to street riots. Along the way, Ellison’s narrator encounters the full range of strategies that African-Americans have used in their struggle for survival and dignity—as well as all the scams, alibis, and naked brutalities that whites have used to keep them in their place. In *Invisible Man* Ellison created one of those rare works that is a world unto itself, a book that illuminates our own in ways that are at once hilarious and devastating.

Author Information

Ralph Ellison won the National Book Award for his first novel *Invisible Man* (1952), the story of an alienated and isolated black man living in racially repressive urban America. Ellison grew up in Oklahoma and aimed for a career in jazz music. Instead he moved to New York City in 1936 and turned to writing, encouraged by other African-American writers including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. During World War II he served in the Merchant Marines and published short stories. The remarkable success of *Invisible Man*-made Ellison famous worldwide, and he was suddenly considered one of America's most important writers. Reluctant to assume the role of a representative for his race, Ellison always maintained that in writing his book he was pursuing art more than he was pursuing racial justice. Although he lectured and published collections of essays (*Shadow and Act* in 1964 and *Going to the Territory* in 1986), he worked for forty years on a second novel without finishing it. His literary executor and friend, John Callahan, put together the manuscript after Ellison died and the novel was published as *Juneteenth* in 1999.

**Little Women**, by Louisa May Alcott (1868)

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868) is an enduring book that yields some startling insights into nineteenth century American life when one reads it as an adult. The novel has never been out of print since its initial publication in 1868, and it has been translated into no less than 27 languages. How to account for such longstanding appeal? Jo, in her feisty rebellion against the shackles of girlhood, is a character with whom all readers, especially girls, can identify. The novel raises still-valid questions about options and roles for women and also demonstrates the strides toward quality women have achieved in the past century. The novel was an instant success and became the precursor of the realistic family novel. (Source: Theme pamphlet by Elizabeth R. Baer, for American Library Association, 1984.).

Author Information

Alcott, born into a New England family, was the second daughter of Bronson Alcott, a transcendentalist visionary and educator, and Abigail May Alcott, who bore the primary responsibility for keeping the family clothed and sheltered. Encouraged by Bronson, each member of the family regularly kept a journal and worked on self-improvement, just as the members of the fictional family do. Alcott approached the writing of a “girl’s story” at the urging of her father and her publisher, with a certain amount of resignation as she would have preferred to make her reputation with adult fiction. She had published books ranging from one on her Civil War nursing experiences to a fictionalized autobiography. However, given the urgent need of her family for financial assistance, she penned the first half of what is now published as one novel (the sequel came out in 1869) within three months’ time. According to family legend, she trained herself to write with both hands so that she could switch when one hand grew tired!

**The Old Man and the Sea**, by Ernest Hemingway (1952)

*The Old Man and the Sea* invites, even demands, reading on multiple levels. For example, readers can receive the novella as an engaging and realistic story of Santiago, the old man; Manolin, the young man who loves him; and Santiago's last and greatest battle with a giant marlin. However, the novella also clearly fits into the category of *allegory —* a story with a surface meaning and one or more under-the-surface meanings. Likewise, the characters become much more than themselves or even types — they become *archetypes* (universal representations inherited from the collective consciousness of our ancestors and the fundamental facts of human existence). From this perspective, Santiago is mentor, spiritual father, old man, or old age; and Manolin is pupil, son, boy, or youth. Santiago is the great fisherman and Manolin his apprentice — both dedicated to fishing as a way of life that they were born to and a calling that is spiritually enriching and part of the organic whole of the natural world. Santiago, as the greatest of such fishermen and the embodiment of their philosophy, becomes a solitary human representative to the natural world. He accepts the inevitability of the natural order, in which all creatures are both predator and prey, but recognizes that all creatures also nourish one another. He accepts the natural cycle of human existence as part of that natural order but finds within himself the imagination and inspiration to endure his greatest struggle and achieve the intangibles that can redeem his individual life so that even when destroyed he can remain undefeated.

Author Information

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), born in Oak Park, Illinois, started his career as a writer in a newspaper office in Kansas City at the age of seventeen. After the United States entered the First World War, he joined a volunteer ambulance unit in the Italian army. Serving at the front, he was wounded, was decorated by the Italian Government, and spent considerable time in hospitals. After his return to the United States, he became a reporter for Canadian and American newspapers and was soon sent back to Europe to cover such events as the Greek Revolution. During the twenties, Hemingway became a member of the group of expatriate Americans in Paris, which he described in his first important work, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Equally successful was *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the study of an American ambulance officer's disillusionment in the war and his role as a deserter. Hemingway used his experiences as a reporter during the civil war in Spain as the background for his most ambitious novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Among his later works, the most outstanding is the short novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). His straightforward prose, his spare dialogue, and his predilection for understatement are particularly effective in his short stories, some of which are collected in *Men Without Women* (1927) and *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories* (1938). Hemingway died in Idaho in 1961.

**Pudd’nhead Wilson**, by Mark Twain (1894)

At the beginning of Pudd'nhead Wilson a young slave woman, fearing for her infant son's life, exchanges her light-skinned child with her master's. From this rather simple premise Mark Twain fashioned one of his most entertaining, funny, yet biting novels. On its surface, Pudd'nhead Wilson possesses all the elements of an engrossing nineteenth-century mystery: reversed identities; a horrible crime; an eccentric detective; a suspenseful courtroom drama; and a surprising, unusual solution. Yet it is not a mystery novel. Seething with the undercurrents of antebellum southern culture, the book is a savage indictment in which the real criminal is society, and racial prejudice and slavery are the crimes. Written in 1894, Pudd'nhead Wilson glistens with characteristic Twain humor, with suspense, and with pointed irony: a gem among the author's later works.

Author Information

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born November 30, 1835, the sixth child of John Marshall and Jane Lampton Clemens. Approximately four years after his birth the Clemens family moved to the town of Hannibal. As a youngster, Samuel was kept indoors because of poor health. However, by age nine, he seemed to recover from his ailments and joined the rest of the town's children outside. When Samuel was 12, his father died of pneumonia, and at 13, Samuel left school to become a printer's apprentice. After two short years, he joined his brother Orion's newspaper as a printer and editorial assistant. It was here that young Samuel found he enjoyed writing. At 17, he left Hannibal behind for a printer's job in St. Louis. While in St. Louis, Clemens became a river pilot's apprentice. He became a licensed river pilot in 1858. Clemens' pseudonym, Mark Twain, comes from his days as a river pilot. It is a river term which means two fathoms or 12-feet when the depth of water for a boat is being sounded. "Mark twain" means that is safe to navigate. Clemens began working as a newspaper reporter for several newspapers all over the United States. In 1870, Clemens married Olivia Langdon, and they had four children. Twain began to gain fame when his story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calavaras County" appeared in the New York Saturday Press on November 18, 1865. Twain's first book, "The Innocents Abroad," was published in 1869, "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" in 1876, and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" in 1885. Mark Twain passed away on April 21, 1910, but has a following still today. His childhood home is open to the public as a museum in Hannibal.

**Their Eyes Were Watching God**, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937)

This classic novel tells the story of Janie Crawford`s search for freedom and fulfillment through her participation in black culture. Out of print for nearly 30 years—due largely to initial audiences’ rejection of its strong black female protagonist—Hurston’s classic has since it’s 1978 reissue become perhaps the most widely read and highly acclaimed novel in the canon of African-American literature.

Fair and long-legged, independent and articulate, Janie Crawford sets out to be her own person—no mean feat for a Black woman in the 1930’s. Janie’s quest for identity takes her through three marriages and on a journey back to her roots. It is as important that Janie is a woman as it is that she is black; the intersection of these two qualities made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a groundbreaking novel.

Author Information

Hurston tells readers in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* simply that she did “get born.” She grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the only incorporated all black town in the U.S. Her mother fought to give her the freedom to “look white folks right in the face” and set out for the horizon; she never discouraged Hurston’s storytelling and inventiveness. After a long struggle to educate herself, Hurston graduated from Barnard College in anthropology, and black folk culture became her vocation. Working under the supervision of noted anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston set off to collect black folk tales in southern timber camps, jook joints, and store porches, and to study voodoo in New Orleans and Haiti.

Hurston was a member of the Harlem Renaissance and spent her entire life struggling to keep her people’s cultural heritage alive. Written in Haiti while the author was doing field work, this *Their Eyes Were Watching God*  “embalmed” all her passion for her recently abandoned lover. More importantly, the work combines two central themes from Hurston’s life: her search for independence and fulfillment and her love for black folk culture.

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

The unforgettable novel of a childhood in a sleepy Southern town and the crisis of conscience that rocked it, *To Kill a Mockingbird* became both an instant bestseller and a critical success when it was first published in 1960. It went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and was later made into an Academy Award-winning film, also a classic.

Compassionate, dramatic, and deeply moving, *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes the readers to the roots of human behavior—to innocence and experience, kindness and cruelty, love and hatred, humor and pathos. Now with over 18 million copies in print and translated into ten languages, this regional story by a young Alabama woman claims universal appeal. Harper Lee always considered her book to be a simple love story. Today it is regarded as a masterpiece of American literature.

Author Information

Nelle Harper Lee (born April 28, 1926) is an American novelist widely known for her 1960 Pulitzer Prize–winning *To Kill a Mockingbird* which deals with the racism she observed as a child in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama. Though Lee only published this single book for half a century, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her contribution to literature. Lee has received numerous honorary degrees, and declined to speak on each occasion. Lee assisted close friend Truman Capote in his research for the book *In Cold Blood* (1966). In February 2015 at age 88, nearly blind and deaf after a 2007 stroke, and after a lifetime of maintaining that she would never publish another novel, Lee published a second novel in 2015, titled *Go Set a Watchman*, the events of which precede those in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

**Uncle Tom’s Cabin**, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852)

Selling more than 300,000 copies the first year it was published, Stowe’s powerful abolitionist novel fueled the fire of the human rights debate in 1852. Denouncing the institution of slavery in dramatic terms, the incendiary novel quickly draws the reader into the world of enslaved people and those who enslaved them.

Stowe’s characters are powerfully and humanly realized in Uncle Tom, an enslaved man whose faith and dignity are never corrupted; Eliza and her husband, George, who elude the attempts of their enslavers to catch them and who eventually flee a country that condones slavery; Simon Legree, a brutal plantation owner; Little Eva, who suffers emotionally and physically from the suffering of the enslaved people; and fun-loving Topsy, Eva’s enslaved playmate.

Critics, scholars, and students are today revisiting this monumental work with a new objectivity, focusing on Stowe’s compelling portrayal of women and the novel’s theological underpinnings. When viewed through the lens of our current culture, modern readers may criticize the portrayal of African Americans as childlike and content merely with humane treatment rather than equally capable and deserving of freedom and autonomy. At the time it was published, many of Stowe’s critics accused her of exaggerating the mistreatment of enslaved people and published pro-slavery tracts to refute her depictions of slavery.

Author Information

Harriet Beecher was born June 14, 1811, the seventh child of a famous protestant preacher. Harriet worked as a teacher with her older sister Catharine: her earliest publication was a geography for children, issued under her sister's name in 1833. In 1836, Harriet married widower Calvin Stowe: they eventually had seven children. During her life, she wrote poems, travel books, biographical sketches, and children's books, as well as adult novels. While she wrote at least ten adult novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe is predominantly known for her first, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Following publication of the book, she became a celebrity, speaking against slavery both in America and Europe. She wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) extensively documenting the realities on which the book was based, to refute critics who tried to argue that it was inauthentic; and published a second anti-slavery novel, *Dred* in1856. Her portraits of local social life, particularly with minor characters, reflect an awareness of the complexity of the culture she lived in, and an ability to communicate that culture to others. In her commitment to realism, and her serious narrative use of local dialect, Stowe predated works like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* by 30 years and influenced later regionalist writers including Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. She died at the age of 85 in Hartford Connecticut.

**Walden; or, Life in the Woods**, by Henry David Thoreau (1854)

*Walden* is a difficult book. It is full of outrageous exaggerations and teasing paradoxes. Thoreau loves words, uses them beautifully, but at times loves their twists and turns excessively and uses too many of them, in paragraphs that threaten never to end. His philosophical reflections often begin clearly but end in unresolved complexity, and a little later he may turn around and express an opposing view. (“A foolish consistency,” wrote his friend and mentor Emerson, “is the hobgoblin of little minds.”) Thoreau’s descriptions of ponds and woods, beans and woodchucks, ice and rain, winter and spring, are vivid but may go on too long and lose some of their effect. Add to these qualities Thoreau’s controversial opinions and ways of living, and it’s easy to see why readers so often get furious with him. He challenges our ways of living, so of course he makes us mad. But because he confronts us at the core of our lives—our goals and our relations to others, society, nature, and God—people keep reading him. We don’t ignore him because he highlights certain areas of our lives whose importance has only increased since he died in 1862.

Author Information

Henry David Thoreau decided that he could see life and the world more clearly if he lived by himself for a while, so he stayed two years by the shore of Walden Pond, a few miles from his hometown, Concord, Massachusetts. He wanted to test his idea that the key to living a full life is to simplify it: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Thoreau is certainly a “character”—the kind that will never win a popularity contest. His faults and the thorny aspects of his personality leave him vulnerable to criticism by those who dislike his character, ideas, or lifestyle. However, Jon Margolis wrote that “Thoreau was a decent, educated, hard-working person, and no one who writes can be anything but awed by the way he did it.”

**The Wonderful Wizard of Oz**, by L. Frank Baum (1900)

Since it first appeared in 1900, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has brought joy to generations. In it, a girl's dream world comes to life as the cyclone lifts Dorothy from Kansas, depositing her in the enchanted land of the Munchkins. Here she meets the famous Oz characters: The Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, the Cowardly Lion, and the Wicked Witch of the West. Her adventures along the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City and the Wizard himself evoke the rich, universal appeal of a classic fairy tale.

Author Information

Lyman Frank Baum (May 15, 1856 – May 6, 1919) was an American author of children's books, best known for writing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. He wrote thirteen novel sequels, nine other fantasy novels, and a host of other works (55 novels in total, plus four "lost" novels, 82 short stories, over 200 poems, an unknown number of scripts, and many miscellaneous writings), and made numerous attempts to bring his works to the stage and screen. His works predicted such century-later commonplaces as television, laptop computers (*The Master Key*), wireless telephones (*Tik-Tok of Oz*), women in high risk, action-heavy occupations (*Mary Louise in the Country*), and the ubiquity of advertising on clothing (*Aunt Jane's Nieces at Work*).