**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.

* *Balsamroot: A Memoir,* by Mary Clearman Blew. Published 1994, 224 pages.
* *Crossing to Safety,* by Wallace Earle Stegner. Published 1987, 352 pages.
* *Empire Falls,* by Richard Russo. Published 2002, 483 pages.
* *Jackalope Dreams,* by Mary Clearman Blew. Published 2008, 404 pages.
* *Passages West: 19 Stories of Youth and Identity,* by Hugh Nichols, Editor. Published 1990, 405 pages.
* *The Memory of Old Jack,* by Wendell Berry. Published 1999, 176 pages.
* *The Stone Angel,* by Margaret Laurence. Published 1993, 318 pages.
* *The Women of Brewster Place,* by Gloria Naylor. Published 1982, 192 pages.
* *Tuesdays with Morrie,* by Mitch Albom. Published 2002, 192 pages.

**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.

**Balsamroot: A Memoir***,* by Mary Clearman Blew. Published 1994, 224 pages.

In this memoir, Mary Clearman Blew traces the interlocked lives of three generations of women in the same family: Mary Blew (who now lives in Moscow, Idaho), her Aunt Imogene and mother Doris (who grew up on a failed Montana homestead), and her daughters Elizabeth and Rachel. After a life of apparent independent happiness, “Auntie” comes to live near Blew and soon begins to decline, bringing Blew to explore past lives of women in her family and to face her own longings and her own assumptions about what makes a woman’s life satisfying and full.

Author Information

Mary Clearman Blew grew up on a small cattle ranch in Montana, on the site of her great-grandfather’s 1882 homestead. Her memoir *All But the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family*, won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, as did her short story collection, Runaway. A novel, *Jackalope Dreams*, appeared in 2008 and won the Western Heritage Center’s prize for fiction. Other awards include the Mahan Award for contributions to Montana literature, the Idaho Humanities Council’s 2001 Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities, a Handcart Award for Biography, and the Western Literature Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2004, she received the "Distinguished Achievement Award" from the Western Literature Association. She is Professor of Emerita at the University of Idaho, where she has taught since 1994.

**Crossing to Safety***,* by Wallace Earle Stegner. Published 1987, [###] pages.

It’s deceptively simple: two bright young couples meet during the Depression and form an instant and lifelong friendship. “How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these?” Larry Morgan, a successful novelist and the narrator of the story, poses that question many years after he and his wife, Sally, have befriended the vibrant, wealthy, and often troubled Sid and Charity Lang. “Where is the high life, the conspicuous waste, the violence, the kinky sex, the death wish?” It’s not here. What is here is just as fascinating, just as compelling, as touching, and as tragic. *Crossing to Safety* is about loyalty and survival in its most everyday form—the need to create bonds and the urge to tear them apart. Thirty-four years after their first meeting, when Larry and Sally are called back to the Langs’ summer home in Vermont, it’s as if for a final showdown. How has this friendship defined them? What is its legacy? Stegner offers answers in those small, perfectly rendered moments that make up the lives “as quiet as these”—and as familiar as our own.

Author Information

Wallace Stegner was born on February 18, 1909, in Lake Mills, Iowa. Over a 60-year career he wrote 30 books. Among the novels are, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, 1943; *Joe Hill*, 1950; *All The Little Live Things*, 1967 (Commonwealth Club Gold Medal); *Angle of Repose*, 1972 (Pulitzer Prize); *The Spectator Bird*, (National Book Award), 1977; *Recapitulation*, 1979; *Collected Stories*, 1990; and *Crossing to Safety*, 1987. The nonfiction includes *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, 1954; *Wolf Willow, (A History, A Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier)*, 1962; *The Sound of Mountain Water*, 1969; *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*, 1992, a collection of essays that earned him a nomination for the National Book Critics Circle award. Stegner died at age 84 in 1993. Having lived and produced a full life and large body of work, Mr. Stegner’s accomplishments are too numerous to summarize effectively here. Please visit <https://wallacestegner.org/bio.html> for a full accounting of his life, accomplishments, and works.

**Empire Falls***,* by Richard Russo. Published 2002, 483 pages.

Richard Russo’s 2001 novel follows the fortunes and declines of both its setting (Empire Falls, a formerly prosperous mill town in Maine) and its protagonist, the once-promising but now-struggling Miles Roby. Miles manages the Empire Grill for the imperious Whiting family, which controls much of life in Empire Falls. The novel spans many decades and generations, and considers the interactions of class, family, and history in a small town. *Empire Falls* was awarded the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction.

Author Information

Richard Russo was born in 1949 in Johnstown, New York. He earned a BA, MFA, and PhD from the University of Arizona, and has taught at Southern Illinois University (Carbondale). He is a screenwriter and film producer, and has authored eight novels, two short story collections, and a memoir. Russo is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

**Jackalope Dreams***,* by Mary Clearman Blew. Published 2008, 404 pages.

The departed men in her life still have plenty to say to Corey. Her father, a legendary rodeo cowboy who punctuated his lifelong pronouncements with a bullet to his head, may be the loudest. But in this story of Montana—a story in which the old West meets the new and tradition has it way with just about everyone—it is Corey’s voice we listen to. In this tour de force of voices big and small, sure, and faltering, hers comes across resonant and clear, directing us to the heart of the matter.

Winner of the 2008 Western Heritage Award, *Jackalope Dreams* plays out against the mythology of the Old West—a powerful amalgam of ranching history, Marlboro Men, and train robbery reenactments. This story of the newly orphaned, spinsterish Corey is a sometimes comical, sometimes poignant tale of coming-of-age a little late. As she tries to recapture an old dream of becoming a painter—of preserving some modicum of true art amid the virtual reality of modern Montana—Corey finds herself figuring in other dramas as well, other, younger lives already at least as lost as her own.

Author Information

Mary Clearman Blew grew up on a small cattle ranch in Montana, on the site of her great-grandfather’s 1882 homestead. Her memoir *All But the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family*, won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, as did her short story collection, Runaway. A novel, *Jackalope Dreams*, appeared in 2008 and won the Western Heritage Center’s prize for fiction. Other awards include the Mahan Award for contributions to Montana literature, the Idaho Humanities Council’s 2001 Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities, a Handcart Award for Biography, and the Western Literature Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2004, she received the "Distinguished Achievement Award" from the Western Literature Association. She is Professor of Emerita at the University of Idaho, where she has taught since 1994.

**Passages West: 19 Stories of Youth and Identity***,* by Hugh Nichols, Editor. Published 1990, 405 pages.

*Passages West*, edited by Hugh Nichols, is an anthology of nineteen short stories about coming of age in the West. Selections by writers including Ivan Doig, Norman Maclean, Wallace Stegner, Mary Clearman Blew, and Vardis Fisher chronicle the anxieties and joys of young people searching for identity in a distinctive landscape.

Author Information

Hugh Nichols, from 1971 to 1999, was Professor of English and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston. He has written about H. L. David, Norman Maclean, Dorothy Johnson, and other Western writers.

**The Memory of Old Jack***,* by Wendell Berry. Published 1999, 176 pages.

A burnished day in September 1952 provides the framework for a narrative that movingly distills the lifetime of an uncommonly admirable if very human being. *Memory of Old Jack* is a slab of rich Americana, eloquent testimony that “it’s not a tragedy when a man dies at the end of his life.” (The New York Times Book Review). “The account of Jack’s courtship of his wife is a beautiful piece of writing…and worthy of a place among the best pieces of prose written by American writers of this century.” (Library Journal). Jack Beechum is the focus of this third-person narrative. The novel, one of the “Port William membership stories,” is set in Port William, Kentucky, in 1952 when Jack is 92 years old. The narrative takes place over the chronological period of but a day; however, the present tense narrative is punctuated by Jack’s reminiscences of the major events in his life. As Jack’s life unfolds throughout these flashbacks, his character and his impact on the history of the town and its people reveal Berry’s final message. This is at once a story of Jack and his life and times, but also the effect one man’s life has on those around him.

Author Information

Wendell Berry, born in Kentucky in 1934, has written numerous novels, collections of poetry, and occasional essays. He is also a teacher (formerly a professor of English at Kentucky State University), a preserver of local lore, an environmentalist, and a futurist in the sense that he understands the critical needs of communities (rural and by extension urban) as the platform for the future. Since 1965 he has farmed in rural Kentucky. He has received many awards and recognitions, including the 1999 Thomas Merton Award, fellowships in both the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, an award from the National Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters (1972) and the T. S. Eliot Award. In January 2015 he became the first living writer to be inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame.

**The Stone Angel,**by Margaret Laurence. Published 1993, 318 pages.

In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Shipley, age ninety, tells the story of her life, and in doing so tries to come to terms with how the very qualities which sustained her have deprived her of joy. Mingling past and present, she maintains pride in the face of senility, while recalling the life she led as a rebellious young bride, and later as a grieving mother. Laurence gives us in Hagar a woman who is funny, infuriating, and heartbreakingly poignant. It is Laurence’s admirable achievement to strike, with an equally sure touch, the peculiar note and the universal; she gives us a portrait of a remarkable character and at the same time the picture of old age itself, with the pain, the weariness, the terror, the impotent angers and physical mishaps, the realization that others are waiting and wishing for the end.

Author Information

Margaret Laurence was born in 1926 in the prairie town of Neepawa, Manitoba. Born Jean Margaret Wemyss, Laurence suffered the loss of her parents at a very young age. Her mother, Verna, died when Margaret was only four years old; her father Robert, who later married Verna's sister, passed away only five years after the death of his first wife. Raised from then on by her aunt/stepmother, a teacher and librarian, and her maternal grandfather, Laurence's love of literature and of writing flourished with her aunt's encouragement and guidance. In 1949, Margaret and her husband left for England and then, a year later, they moved to the British Protectorate of Somalia (known today as Somalia). They returned to Vancouver in 1957 with their two children, where Margaret finished *This Side of Jordan*. After separating from her husband in 1962, she moved with her two children to England, where she would reside for most of the next decade. It was at Elm Cottage that Laurence completed four of her five Manawaka books: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *A Bird in the House* (1970). In 1966, *A Jest of God* won Laurence her first Governor General's Award for fiction and was soon adapted into a movie entitled “Rachel, Rachel.” Margaret Laurence died on January 5, 1987 and her ashes were interred at the Riverside Cemetery in Neepawa, Manitoba.

**The Women of Brewster Place,**by Gloria Naylor. Published 1982, 192 pages.

In her heralded first novel, Gloria Naylor weaves the truths and the myths of seven women living in Brewster Place, a bleak inner-city sanctuary, into a powerful, moving portrait of the strengths, struggles, and hopes of black women in today’s America. Vulnerable and resilient, openhanded and openhearted, these women forge their lives in a place that in turn threatens and protects—a common prison and a shared home. Naylor renders painful and very ugly human experiences with simple eloquence and uncommon intuition. Her ability to establish a memorable sense of place and history makes *The Women of Brewster Place* a remarkable literary accomplishment and a contemporary classic.

Author Information

Gloria Naylor, was born in New York City in 1950. Although she grew up in the largest urban center in the U.S., her roots were in the south since her parents had been sharecroppers in Robinsonville, Mississippi. In 1963 Naylor and her family moved to Queens, a more middle-class borough, which increased Naylor's awareness of racism. Also in the same year, Naylor's mother joined the Jehovah's Witnesses and in 1968 Naylor followed in her footsteps. She witnessed for seven years, supporting herself as a switchboard operator, but eventually left the Jehovah's Witnesses because "things weren't getting better, but worse." What followed for Naylor were years of transformation. From 1975-1981 she worked full-time as a switchboard operator, pursued writing, and attended classes at Medgar Evers College, and eventually Brooklyn College. She discovered feminism and African-American literature which revitalized her and gave her new ways to think about and define herself as a black woman. In 1977 Naylor read her first novel by an African-American woman, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, which gave her the courage to write. She began writing fiction in 1979 and submitted a story to Essence magazine, whose editor advised her to continue writing. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English, completed her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and began graduate work in Afro-American in Studies at Yale in 1981. She died in 2016.

**Tuesdays with Morrie***,* by Mitch Albom. Published 2002, 192 pages.

This true story about the love between spiritual mentor and his pupil has soared to the bestseller list for many reasons. For starters, it reminds us of the affection and gratitude that many of us still feel for the significant mentors of our past. It also plays out a fantasy many of us have entertained: what would it be like to look those people up again, tell them how much they meant to us, maybe even resume the mentorship? Plus, we meet Morrie Schwartz—a one-of-a-kind professor, whom the author describes as looking like a cross between a biblical prophet and Christmas elf. And finally, we are privy to intimate moments of Morrie’s final days as he lies dying from a terminal illness. Even on his deathbed, this twinkling-eyed mensch manages to teach us all about living robustly and fully. It is an analysis of Morrie’s life and the things he has learned about living and dying now that he is faced with the nearness of his own death. It is also a book about Mitch and his own journey, the lessons he learns still from his old teacher, friend, and mentor.

Author Information

Mitch Albom is the author of nine books and a nationally syndicated columnist for the Detroit Free Press and a nationally syndicated radio host for ABC and WJR-AM. He serves on numerous charitable boards and has founded several charities in metropolitan Detroit including SAY Detroit and the Detroit Water Ice Factory, both of which help Detroit’s neediest. He lives with his wife, Janine, in Michigan.