**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.

* *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity,* by Katherine Boo. Published 2012, 288 pages.
* *Faithful and Virtuous Night: Poems,* by Louise Glick. Published 2015, 71 pages.
* *Less,* by Andrew Sean Greer. Published 2018, 272 pages.
* *The Nickel Boys,* by Colson Whitehead. Published 2020, 224 pages.
* *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky,* by Heidi Durrow. Published 2011, 278 pages.
* *All the Light We Cannot See,* by Anthony Doerr. Published 2017, 544 pages.
* *Empire Falls,* by Richard Russo. Published 2002, 483 pages.
* *March,* by Geraldine Brooks. Published 2006, 320 pages.
* *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,* by Annie Dillard. Published 1974, 304 pages.
* *The Grapes of Wrath,* by John Steinbeck. Published 1939, 464 pages.
* *To Kill a Mockingbird,* by Harper Lee. Published 1960, 336 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.

**Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity**, by Katherin Boo. Published 2012, 288 pages.

Katharine Boo’s nonfiction portrait of life in Annawadi, a slum next to a “lake of sewage” on the outskirts of Mumbai, is the result of three years of exhaustive research. The book—the author’s first— depicts the lives and interactions of several of Annawadi’s residents. Critics have referred to the book as Dickensian in its scope and focus on character. Behind the Beautiful Forevers won not only the 2012 National Book Award, but the 2012 Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award, and several other prizes. On granting Boo the National Book Award, the judges noted that “Behind the Beautiful Forevers is an interview-based narrative in which the interviewer never appears, a murder mystery, an intricately-plotted reflection of everyday life, and a reminder that sometimes the writer’s most valuable organ is the ear.”.

Author Information

Katharine Boo was born in 1964, and was raised in the Washington, D.C. area. Upon graduating from Barnard College, she began her journalism career writing for Washington newspapers. She was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for her *Washington Post* series about group homes for intellectually disabled people. Her writing for newspapers and for *The New Yorker* has tended to focus on the effects of poverty and disenfranchisement. She has won a MacArthur “genius” fellowship in addition to many other honors. Of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Boo has said, “There’s only limited amount of space a reader is going to give me for a slum they’ve never heard of; I want every sentence that I write in this book to get you closer to somebody you’ve never met before.”

**Faithful and Virtuous Night: Poem**, by Louise Glick. Published 2015, 71 pages.

*Faithful and Virtuous Night* is Louise Glück’s twelfth book of poetry. The collection alternates between more traditionally structured poems and prose selections. The book marks the first time Glück has included prose in her work. The poems are described as “inscrutable” and like parables, and many critics have suggested that this work is a departure from the poet’s earlier, more concrete and descriptive work. One wrote that the book “may be Glück’s strangest yet.” The collection was awarded the National Book Award for Poetry in 2014. The judges wrote that “Faithful and Virtuous Night emanates from a world where darkness blurs ordinarily sharp edges around the oppositions we summon to think our lives—loss and renewal, male and female, the living and dead.”

Author Information

Louise Glück is one of America’s most celebrated poets. She was born in 1943 in New York City. Though she attended both Sarah Lawrence and Colombia University, her physical and mental health concerns prevented her from earning a degree from either school. She opted instead to pursue several years of psychoanalysis in order to recover from an eating disorder; psychoanalysis has long been an acknowledged influence on her work. Glück published her first collection of poetry in 1968 and has been publishing them steadily since then. She has served as a visiting faculty member at many universities. Glück is the recipient of dozens of honors and awards for her work, including, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pulitzer Prize in 1993, her tenure as the US Poet Laureate 2003-2004, the National Book Award in 2014, and a Nobel Prize in Literature in 2020.

**Less**, by Andrew Sean Greer. Published 2018, 272 pages.

Andrew Sean Greer’s *Less* is a satirical novel about the misadventures of “failed novelist” Arthur Less. Less is turning 50, has suffered recent literary disappointments, and has just received an invitation to the wedding of his ex-boyfriend, Freddy. In an effort to reevaluate his life (and avoid the wedding), Less concocts a scheme to travel the world by accepting a series of professional invitations. He embarks on a comedic series of unfortunate events in his efforts to run away from his problems. The novel won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for fiction; the Pulitzer foundation described Less as “A generous book, musical in its prose and expansive in its structure and range, about growing older and the essential nature of love.” The novel also won the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Literary Award for 2018.

Author Information

Andrew Sean Greer was born in 1970 in Washington D.C., alongside his identical twin. He was raised in Maryland and graduated from Brown University and the University of Montana. He is primarily a novelist, but has also taught creative writing, and served as the first Executive Director of the Santa Maddalena Foundation. He is a multiple award winner, as well as the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. *Less* is his fifth novel.

**The Nickel Boys**, by Colson Whitehead. Published 2020, 224 pages.

Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Nickel Boys* follows two black teenagers who are branded delinquents and sent to suffer the abuses of a 1960s reform school, Nickel Academy. The novel is a fictionalized account of Florida’s Dozier School for Boys. A forensic anthropology survey report issued in 2016 revealed that at least 80 (and perhaps as many as 100) bodies were discovered buried on the school grounds, providing concrete proof of decades of abuse allegations. *The Nickel Boys* won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It is described as “Devastating” but “is ultimately a powerful tale of human perseverance, dignity, and redemption.”

Author Information

Colson Whitehead was born in New York City in 1969. He earned a degree from Harvard and began writing his first novels while working as a journalist in Manhattan. He has written seven novels and two works of nonfiction. He is a multiple award nominee and winner, and the recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has twice won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, for his novels *The Underground Railroad* (2017) and *The Nickel Boys* (2020).

**The Girl Who Fell from the Sky**, by Heidi Durrow. Published 2011, 278 pages.

Heidi Durrow’s *The Girl who Fell from the Sky* is a coming-of-age novel from the perspective of Rachel, the child of a Black American GI father and a Danish mother. Following a family tragedy, Rachel goes to live with her grandmother in Portland, and struggles to make sense of her history, identity, and sexuality in a new community. The novel was awarded the 2008 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction. One critic wrote that the book “is poised to take a place among classics of the American experience."

Author Information

Heidi W. Durrow (like her protagonist) was born in 1969 to an American serviceman father and a Danish mother and spent her early childhood on American military bases in Europe. Eventually, her family settled in Portland. Durrow is a graduate of Stanford, Colombia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, and Yale Law School. She has worked as a lawyer, a life skills trainer for the NBA and NFL, and as an event producer, author, and podcaster. She is a multiple award winner for her writing and community work.

**All the Light We Cannot See***,* by Anthony Doerr. Published 2017, 544 pages

Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See* is a historical novel centered on a French girl and a German boy whose separate narratives converge amid the calamities of World War II. The novel has been described as “epic,” and in addition to winning the 2015 Pulitzer Prize, was also a finalist for that year’s National Book Award. The NBA judges said of the novel, “A blind French girl and an orphaned Nazi conscript anchor Anthony Doerr’s sweeping novel of German occupation. Intricately interlocking sections begin to fall, like tumblers, into place as the novel progresses, while larger themes of loss and isolation play out upon characters’ fixations with radio waves, locksmithing, gemology, and shell collecting. Part historical fiction, part fable, part cabinet of curiosities*, All the Light We Cannot See* builds its own rare and fabulous world.”.

Author Information

Anthony Doerr was born in 1973 in Cleveland, Ohio. After earning degrees from Bowdoin College and Bowling Green State University, he embarked on a career as an author, and to date has published three novels, two short story collections, and a memoir. He is a multiple award winner, having been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as the Pulitzer Prize in 2015. He currently lives in Boise, Idaho, and was Idaho’s Writer-in-Residence from 2007 to 2010.

**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.

**March***,* by Geraldine Brooks. Published 2006, 320 pages

Geraldine Brooks’ *March* tells its story through the characters of another novel: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott’s 1868 story of sisters and their mother. *March* focuses on the father and husband of those women, the Reverend March. In Alcott’s story, he is beloved, but significant mainly by his absence. In *March*, readers see the story through his eyes—eyes which do not always comprehend clearly what they perceive. We travel with the chaplain into places where he is not wanted, where his values elicit ridicule and contempt. The harsh world of slavery, men, and war challenges everything the March family believes in, including one another. *March* won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Author Information

Australian-born Geraldine Brooks was born in 1955 in Sydney, Australia. After graduating from the University of Sydney, she worked as a journalist before attending Colombia University Graduate School of Journalism. She worked as a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, and wrote two nonfiction books before publishing her first novel in 2001. She has written three books of nonfiction and five novels to date. She was awarded the Order of Australia in 2016, and holds dual US and Australian citizenship.

**Pilgrim at Tinker Creek***,* by Annie Dillard. Published 1974, 304 pages.

Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a nonfiction account of the author’s explorations along the creek that borders her property in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia. The book is a reflection on nature and the understanding of the self. Dillard regards herself not as a scientist, but as an “explorer.” Although she uses various kinds of humor throughout, Dillard concludes, “Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest.” *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction.

Author Information

Born Meta Ann Doak in 1945 in Pittsburgh, Annie Dillard earned a BA and MA from Hollins College. She wrote her thesis on Henry David Thoreau, whose thinking and writing has profoundly influenced her work. Dillard has worked as a teacher and editor, and is the author of thirteen books—essays, poetry, and fiction. She is a multiple award winner, including, in 2014, a National Endowment for the Humanities medal.

**The Grapes of Wrath***,* by John Steinbeck. Published 1939, 464 pages.

John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* follows the Joad family in their journey from Oklahoma to California. The Joads, like thousands of other “Okies,” are driven from their tenant farms by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, only to find shortages of both resources and work in California. The novel is considered a realist classic of American literature, was awarded both The Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1940.

Author Information

John Steinbeck was born in 1902 in Salinas, California. He attended but did not graduate from Stanford University, and was a manual laborer and odd-jobber in New York City and back in California while writing novels and short stories. With financial support from his family, he was able to eventually become a self-supporting author. He wrote sixteen novels, six nonfiction books, two collections of short stories, and other work which he co-authored. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He died in New York City in 1968.

**To Kill a Mockingbird***,* by Harper Lee. Published 1960, 336 pages.

Harper Lee’s 1960 novel is a Depression-era examination of race, gender, innocence, and justice. The novel, set in Maycomb, Alabama, is told from the perspective of six-year-old Jean Louise “Scout” Finch. Scout’s father, lawyer Atticus Finch, is asked to defend Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Despite the heavy subject matter, the novel is human, compassionate, and sometimes even humorous. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a National Book Awards Finalist in 1961, and was awarded the 1960 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It is one of the most admired and beloved books in the English language.

Author Information

Harper Lee, a descendant of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, was born in 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama. She was childhood friends with fellow author Truman Capote, who visited Monroeville in the summers. She attended Huntingdon College and the University of Alabama before dropping out of school and moving to New York. After some time doing retail and clerical work, she was gifted a year’s worth of salary by her friends, so that she could complete a novel. She maintained residences in New York (where she was again neighbors with her friend Capote) and Monroeville. She led a reclusive life, declining to speak at the many awards events in her honor or grant interviews, until her death in 2016. She is the author of two novels and a multiple award recipient.