

**A Short List of Novels
and Associated Readings**

(For Dave C – October 1996)

Here's a list of 30 authors and their best – okay, *among* their best – books that would be in my top-fifty list any day of the week because I've enjoyed them in so many ways. I think they constitute, taken altogether, a rich, representative, and suggestive kernel in the development of modern American literature as exemplified by the novel.

E. M. Forster	<i>A Room with a View</i>
Vladimir Nabokov	<i>Lolita; Pale Fire; Invitation to a Beheading</i>
Miguel de Cervantes	<i>Don Quixote</i>
Daniel DeFoe	<i>Moll Flanders</i>
Thomas Hardy	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>
Herman Hesse	<i>Steppenwolf; Siddhartha</i>
Milan Kundera	<i>Slowness; The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i>
Albert Camus	<i>The Plague; The Stranger</i>
Fyodor Dostoyevsky	<i>The House of the Dead</i>
Aldous Huxley	<i>Ape and Essence; Crome Yellow</i>
William Faulkner	<i>As I Lay Dying</i>
Gabriel García Márquez	<i>A Hundred Years of Solitude; Chronicle of a Death Foretold</i>
Voltaire (Arouet)	<i>Candide</i>
Henry Miller	<i>Tropic of Cancer</i>
Leo Tolstoy	<i>Anna Karenina</i>
Truman Capote	<i>In Cold Blood</i>
Franz Kafka	<i>The Trial</i>
Erich Maria Remarque	<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>
Herman Melville	<i>Moby Dick</i>
Thomas Wolfe	<i>You Can't Go Home Again; Look Homeward, Angel</i>
Somerset Maugham	<i>Of Human Bondage</i>
Geoffrey Chaucer	<i>The Canterbury Tales</i>

F. Scott Fitzgerald	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>
Ernest Hemingway	<i>The Sun Also Rises</i>
J. D. Salinger	<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>
Charles Dickens	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
Kenneth Patchen	<i>The Journal of Albion Moonlight</i>
Joseph Conrad	<i>Heart of Darkness</i>
Jonathan Swift	<i>Gulliver's Travels</i>
Pär Lagerkvist	<i>The Sibyl</i>

This list does not include, but probably should, many other stellar names from the pantheon of literature, and of the novel in particular: Homer, E. L. Doctorow, Kurt Vonnegut, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Pynchon, Anthony Trollope, Robert Heinlein, Gustave Flaubert, Dante Alighieri, H. G. Wells, Thomas Mann, Bernard Malamud, James Baldwin, Isak Dinesen, Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Henry Fielding, Joseph Heller, André Gide, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Walter Scott, Lawrence Durrell, Laurence Sterne, Erskine Caldwell, William Styron, Mark Twain, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Nikolai Gogol, Henry James, R. M. Rilke, John Steinbeck, Philip Roth, Katherine Anne Porter, George Sand, Anaïs Nin, Oscar Wilde, Nikos Kazantzakis, many dozens of others at least as deserving, and everybody new — say, from the past three decades.

Moreover, I would suggest a few other arenas of relevance and some of their bright lights: the anonymously written oldies (*Piers Plowman*, *Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Song of Roland*, *Beowulf*); various poets (Dylan Thomas, Robbie Burns, Pablo Neruda, W. B. Yeats, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, A. C. Swinburne, J. N. Arthur Rimbaud, John Keats, T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, W. H. Auden); story writers (O. Henry, E. A. Poe, Isabel Allende); playwrights (Samuel Beckett, Anton Chekov, Max Frisch, Eugène Ionesco, William Shakespeare, Bertold Brecht, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams); and even critics (Wm. Empson, I. A. Richards, Edmund Wilson) who have contributed important ideas.

Somewhat more peripheral have been the contributions of many fine essayists and writers in anthropology, economics, mathematics, history, physics, cosmology, philosophy, even psychology. Of course there are the innumerable and often impenetrable religious texts. And finally, I freely admit that my lists are somewhat shy

of female, and very shy of black, Asian, and Marxist authors, as well as of those belonging to many other subsets of humanity.

I would say that anyone who's read at least one book by each of the thirty authors whose titles I've listed, give or take a few, has a fair background in the development of American literature as exemplified by the novel. I would say that anyone who's read all these plus at least one book by each of the forty writers in the second list probably has sampled most of the core of it. (This is not to say he understands what it means or how to do it, only that he has seen what it is. A logger may spend his life in the forest without achieving any clear understanding of its ecology.) A literate person should moreover be acquainted, at least, with all of the anonymous works, with the poets, story writers, playwrights and critics I've listed, and with other works besides.

What the relevance of the academic disciplines might be is harder to discern. Suffice to say an author ought to have something to talk about.

As to the general paucity in my lists of authors whose names have emerged during the past twenty or thirty years – and this includes most of the black, Asian, and female authors – I first of all plead ignorance. I am very unfamiliar with the work of this time, no matter who wrote it. I also say this: fictional fashion during this period, roughly 1965–1995, has embraced social and political agendas, academic sciamachy, commonplace esthetic sensibilities, and journalistic stylizations. This has produced some very fine essayists – Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*) is one of my favorites – as well as polemicists and proselytizers, but it seems to have derailed many would-be novelists. In recent times it seems the novel has been left to Jaqueline Susann and Danielle Steele and other pop genre-specialists and formula-grinders, while many serious authors have labored over thinly disguised sociological tracts on the numerous afflictions of modern humanity.

An argument can be made of course that this body of work from the past 30 years in reality has transformed the novel – into a model of itself, naturally – but I think it has not affected the evolution of the novel very much at all. It may be time for something new. Anyway, as you plough through all this, remember, you asked for it. And who knows, you might find some of it, at least, enlightening.