

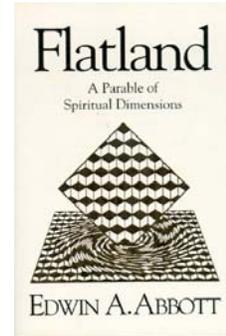
Appendix G: Recommended Books for College Common Reading

Our considerations in compiling this list:

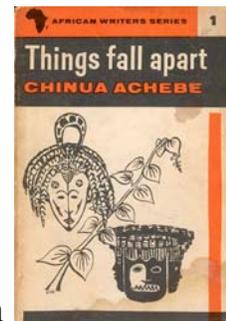
1. We sought diversity—the intellectual kind.
2. We sought books that are neither too long nor too short. “Too long” means a book that would defeat even the able, well-intentioned, and determined pre-freshman reader. No *War and Peace* here. In a few cases we’ve recommended long books but specified that the college should assign selections. “Too short” means a book or essay that would invite the pre-freshman to treat the assignment as a triviality, even though it isn’t. No Kennedy’s “Ask not” inaugural address.
3. We sought texts that are just a bit over students’ heads, but not so far that they are beyond reach. We excluded many works of classical antiquity on this basis. Sophocles is best read with the guidance of an instructor. Nietzsche invites wild misreadings from those who lack the philosophical context.
4. We sought works that are not contemptuous of humanity or dyed in profound cynicism. Some such books belong in the college curriculum but we judge them a poor welcome mat to the pre-freshmen who ought to have a somewhat more positive introduction to why colleges exist and why they are devoting time and money to the enterprise. No Samuel Beckett or H. L. Mencken here.
5. In fiction, we sought works that exemplify elegance of language and a degree of complexity, along with moral seriousness.
6. In non-fiction we looked for works that exemplify important ideas, lucidly argued, and writers who take their rhetorical task seriously.
7. We sought to accommodate colleges that approach common reading assignments at different levels of difficulty. To that end, we divide our list into two parts. Part A is a list of 37 books all of which are appropriate in level of difficulty and length to any college freshman. Part B is a list of six books that would be much more ambitious choices either because of length (*The Aeneid*) or intrinsic difficulty (*The Confidence-Man*.) Our goal is to offer constructive help.

List A: 37 Books Appropriate for Any College Common Book Program

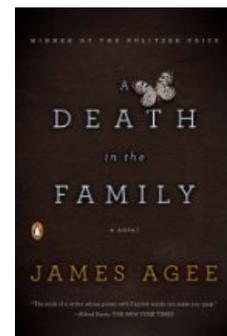
1. Edwin Abbott Abbott. *Flatland*. (1884) This short book is a mathematician's foray into fiction with a story about two-dimensional creatures—squares, triangles, and such—living on a plane. Their conceptual horizons are challenged when a three-dimensional creature, a sphere, drops in. We picked it because (a) it is a deft analogy for us of three-dimensional creatures trying to imagine our four-or-more dimensional universe, (b) it is one of few mathematical classics completely open to math-resistant students, and (c) it is a subtle provocation to students to open their minds to unexpected intellectual possibilities. It also contains some mild but amusing social satire.



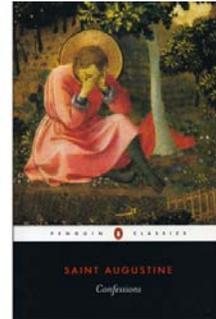
2. Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. (1958) Among the first African novels written in English, *Things Fall Apart* depicts the Igbo of southern Nigeria during the period of initial Western colonization. The protagonist is an ambitious young man in a traditional village who gains fame through a feat of wrestling and goes on to become a powerful leader, only to see his world collapse. We picked it because (a) it is a classic indictment of colonialism but comes with the complicating twist that it is written in a colonial language by an author who has thoroughly absorbed a Western aesthetic sensibility; and (b) it puts the real questions of cultural relativism on the table.



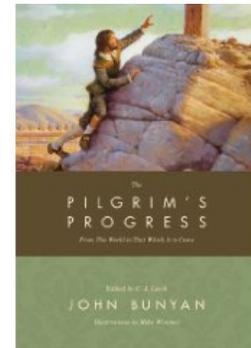
3. James Agee. *A Death in the Family*. (1957) A posthumous autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family* is based on the death of his father in an automobile accident when Agee was only six. The novel richly depicts life in Knoxville, Tennessee around 1915. We picked it because of (a) the sheer beauty of Agee's writing and its emotional depth, (b) its capacity to become a lasting presence in the lives of its readers, (c) the opportunity it affords independent-minded college students to think about the fragility of family and community and their own rootedness in the world.



4. Augustine. *Confessions*. (398 A.D.) The *Confessions* is perhaps the very first autobiography, at least in the modern sense of someone examining the interior side of his life as well as the external events. We picked it because (a) it shows a smart, ambitious student who thirsts for knowledge and who makes the most of his academic studies, (b) it presents the challenge of taking ideas not just as cold objects of study but as insights that may have life-changing consequences, and (c) it is one of the key books for understanding what is distinctive about Western civilization.



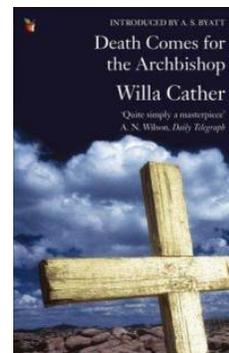
5. John Bunyan. *The Pilgrim's Progress*. (1678) Once the most widely read book in English besides the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an astonishingly successful allegory. We picked it because it is (a) a key influence on English fiction, (b) a tour-de-force of metaphor and analogy, and (c) a vivid introduction to Christianity that secular students can grasp. Though accessible to children at one level, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has depths of psychological and moral insight that fully justify it as a reading for college students.



6. Albert Camus. *The Plague*. (1947) The novel depicts a city in French colonial Algeria that is quarantined during an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Camus describes the divergent ways those trapped in the city cope with the situation. We picked it because it is a compelling depiction of some of the great themes of 20th century existential philosophy: the sense of a meaningless void against which humans struggle to achieve a sense of dignity; the feelings of alienation and exile poised against human solidarity and love; and the demand for something better than personal happiness.



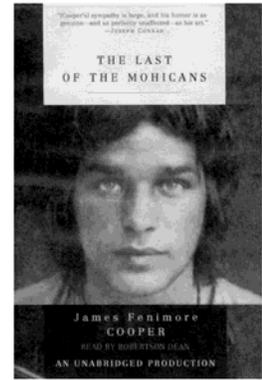
7. Willa Cather. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. (1927) This episodic novel, based on the life of Jean-Baptiste Lamy, depicts the work of a devout French priest sent to reorganize the Catholic mission in New Mexico after the territory has been annexed by the United States. We picked it because (a) Cather's quietly expansive vision of the American landscape is



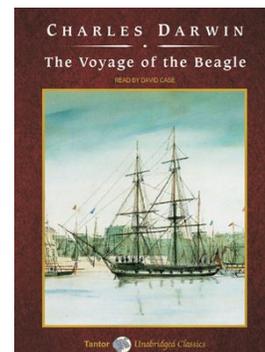
an unsurpassed literary accomplishment, (b) students can gain something vital from this account of steady purpose in the pursuit of an ideal, and (c) the book offers a perspective on the mingling of cultures that strongly contrasts to the currently fashionable accounts of ethnic antagonism.

8. James Fenimore Cooper. *The Last of the Mohicans*.

(1826) By the time Cooper wrote this novel, the French and Indian War was as distant a memory as World War II is today. The story is a complicated account of the sharp-shooting white orphan Hawkeye, raised by Indians to protect the daughters of a British colonel from the perils of war and the unwanted attentions of a treacherous Huron warrior. We picked it because, (a) despite its wildly implausible plot, the book captures America's exuberant vision of itself early in our history, (b) Cooper's romantic sense of place and sense of nostalgia for the lost grandeur of the Native American tribes of the east can also enrich contemporary students' understanding of their national heritage, and (c) the book is one kind of answer to the question, "Who are we?" And the answer involves a lot more cultural and racial "hybridity" than we typically recognize in the writings of America's first professional writers.

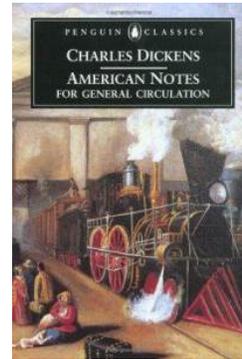


9. Charles Darwin. *The Voyage of the Beagle*. (1839) This is Darwin's classic account of his expedition from 1831 to 1836 around coastal South America to the Galapagos Islands, Tahiti, Australia, across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius, and back to England, on which he made most of the observations that led eventually to his theory of evolution by natural selection. (*The Voyage* went through several editions and one of the augmented later ones might be a better choice.) We picked it because (a) it is a dazzling display of young Darwin's curiosity and his powers of observation of people and places as well as the natural world, (b) students can benefit from a robust example of careful observation and collection of facts as worthy pursuits in their own right, and (c) *The Voyage* offers a fresh point of entry into the intellectual adventure of scientific inquiry.

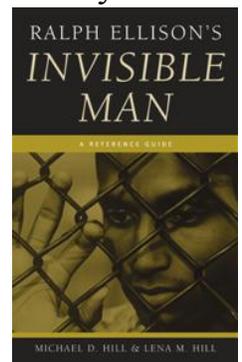


10. Charles Dickens. *American Notes for General Circulation*. (1842) Dickens

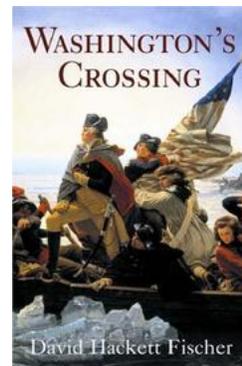
published this account of his travels just after his six-month visit to the United States. It is an unflattering portrait of a country that effusively welcomed him—far too effusively in his judgment. We picked it because (a) Dickens’ account of American character still resonates, (b) the book lampoons qualities in which Americans continue to take pride, and (c) it raises important questions about celebrity, status, travel, crime, law, and a host of other themes that still preoccupy us.



11. Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. (1952) This novel presents the memory of an unnamed African-American character who is currently living as a hermit in the basement of a New York City apartment building. In his youth in a small southern town he was school valedictorian and went on to college but was expelled. As he struggles to make a life for himself, he encounters a succession of people—most of whom see him not as the individual that he is but only in relation to their particular take on race—promoting various responses to white oppression: accommodation, communism, black nationalism, and cynicism. We picked it because (a) it is a powerful evocation of the deadening quality of ideological responses to racism, and (b) it depicts the struggle for individuality in circumstances that strongly reinforce the claims of group identity. These are very much living questions on most college campuses.

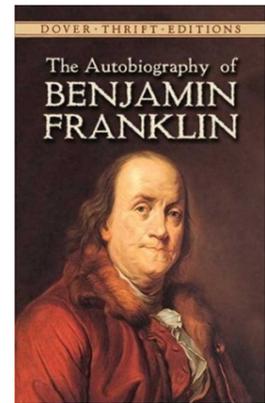


12. David Hackett Fischer. *Washington's Crossing*. (2004) We wanted to include a book about George Washington and had hundreds to pick from. We chose Fischer’s account of a pivotal moment, when General Washington, faced with the imminent collapse of the whole revolution, seized the initiative by crossing the Delaware River on Christmas night and mounting a surprise attack on the Hessian garrison at Trenton. We picked it because (a) Washington is a difficult figure for today’s American students to comprehend, and Fischer succeeds admirably in showing him as a vivid human being, (b) the book takes us out of “the American Revolution” as an abstraction and gives us a sense of the war as a matter of real choices made under life-and-death conditions, and (c) it is the kind of history writing that will whet students’ appetites for more.

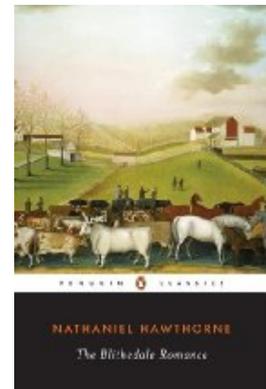


13. Benjamin Franklin. *Autobiography*. (1791) This unfinished autobiography,

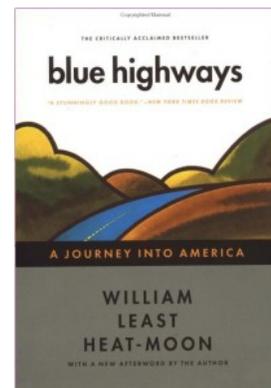
written as a letter to his son, opens a window into the life and mind of one of our nation's most beloved founding fathers. We picked it because (a) it captures Franklin's unique genius as equally accomplished as a scientist, inventor, entrepreneur, publisher, creative writer, aphorist, diplomat, and political thinker, (b) American college students should be familiar with the framers of the country, and Franklin stands out not only as the elder statesman of the Revolution but as one of the shapers of American character, (c) in our new age of thrift, Franklin's wisdom—(He coined the phrase, "Time is money" in his *Advice to a Young Tradesman*, 1748)—bears new attention.



14. Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Blithedale Romance*. (1852) This is Hawthorne's fictionalized account of the utopian Brook Farm community in which he participated for eight months in 1841. The tale includes characters whose contemporary counterparts will soon be part of the lives of the students entering college: a charismatic hater of the free market, an advocate of "freedom" intent on imposing her own tyranny, weak-willed followers eager to find someone to tell them what to think, aesthetes, and people eager to hide their ordinary appetites behind exotic poses. We picked *The Blithedale Romance* because (a) it is an effective warning against the seductions of utopianism, and (b) it helps us see that longing for social justice needs to be grounded in real understanding of human nature.

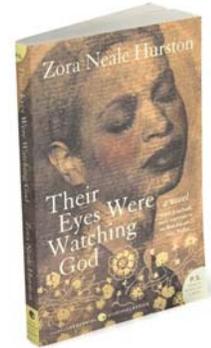


15. William Least Heat-Moon. *Blue Highways*. (1982) Heat-Moon heads out to see America from the vantage point of the back roads—the ones colored blue on highway maps. The book is largely built on the conversations he has with the people he meets: saloon keepers, fishermen, farmers, a prostitute, a Christian hitchhiker, a Hopi medical student and more. We chose it because (a) it is a quietly evocative picture of America—one that has stood the test of time, and (b) it is a model of first-person writing in which the speaker is unobtrusive and doesn't get in the way of what he sees and hears.

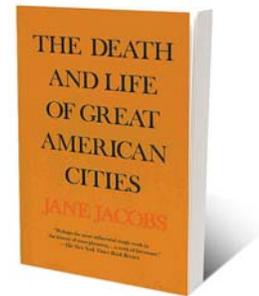


16. Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (1937) This novel by African-American folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston depicts the life

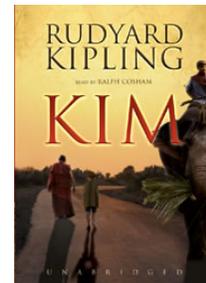
of a thrice-married Florida woman who kills her last husband in self-defense. Much of the dialogue is in black dialect and book has often been criticized for trading in stereotypes. We chose it because (a) it is an unromanticized picture of social oppression as well as of some fascinating and vanished American subcultures, and (b) a consummate work of artistry by a writer who defied the conventions of her time.



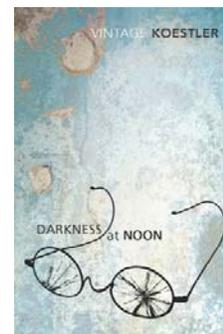
17. Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (1961) This book started the movement for preserving old neighborhoods in America. It was written as a critique of the kind of “urban renewal” that consisted of flattening whole sections of cities and replacing them with sterile modernist structures that had no connection with actual human communities. She was especially opposed to urban expressways. But Jacobs’ book somehow transcends the policy debates that gave birth to it. We chose it because (a) it is a model of public policy advocacy, (b) it remains a compelling vision of the best of urban life, and (c) it can provoke students to think more deeply about the material basis of American life: how our prosperity, our sense of community, depend on our use of space.



18. Rudyard Kipling. *Kim*. (1901) This is a book that vividly portrays British colonial India through a homeless white orphan’s eyes. We picked it because it (a) raises provocative questions about contemporary American views of personal identity, multiculturalism and colonialism, and (b) is an extraordinarily artful tale of political intrigue. American higher education today spends considerable effort denouncing colonialism, post-colonialism, Orientalism, etc. Why not give students a chance to read a masterpiece from the writer who was one of colonialism’s greatest and most sophisticated admirers?

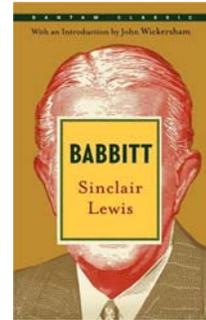


19. Arthur Koestler. *Darkness at Noon*. (1940) In this novel, Koestler, a former communist, depicts the world of Stalin’s show trials. The protagonist, Rubashov, is a true believer in the communist system, but is arrested, interrogated, and struggles with the meaning of his life and loyalties as he awaits his certain execution. The book is one of the classics of anti-totalitarian literature. We picked it because (a) it powerfully portrays the

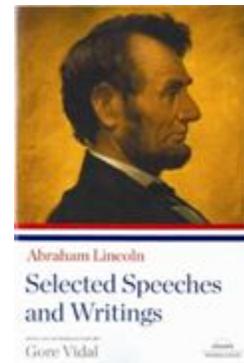


awful system of oppression at the heart of the Soviet system, (b) it is a testimony to the profound importance of individual rights and political freedom—so easily taken for granted by those who have always enjoyed them, and (c) Koestler takes us inside the mind of someone trapped by ideology.

20. Sinclair Lewis. *Babbitt*. (1922) Babbitt is a partner in an upper Midwest real estate firm in this satiric novel. His life is devoted to social climbing until in a moment of crisis he realizes the vapidness of his materialism. At that point he plunges headlong into flouting social conventions, but eventually becomes disillusioned with the emptiness of rebellion as well. We picked this book because it is the classic indictment of American middle class complacency, and students deserve the chance to think this through. Is American life the sum of culturally dead self-seeking Babbitts who conform even in their non-conformity? How true is this picture?



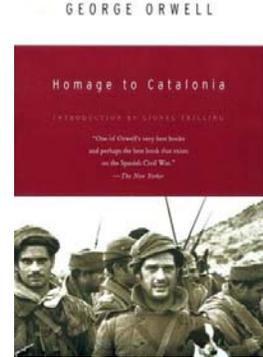
21. Abraham Lincoln. *Selected Speeches and Writings*. (1832-1865, published in this volume in 2009) (Selections) It was the Great Emancipator who held the United States together during the Civil War. His strength of character, sharp wit, and quest for peace made him one of our nation's greatest presidents. Of all Lincoln's speeches, our strongest recommendations for students are these three: the speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria (October 16, 1854); the address to the Washington Temperance Society of Springfield, Illinois (February 22, 1842); and the second inaugural address (March 4, 1865). And one of the best ways to learn the power of persuasive argument is to read some of the Lincoln-Douglas debates on slavery.



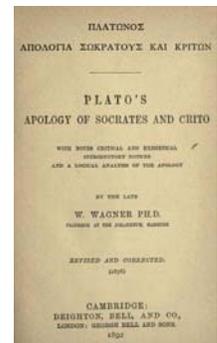
22. John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty*. (1869) This is a short book on the limits of political power. Mill argues, most importantly, for freedom of thought and speech, and points out that partisans who suppress criticism ultimately weaken the views they are trying to protect. We picked *On Liberty* because (a) the substance of the essay bears directly on contemporary higher education, where “political correctness” has limited the liberty to discuss important ideas, and (b) the book is a model of lucid philosophical exposition.



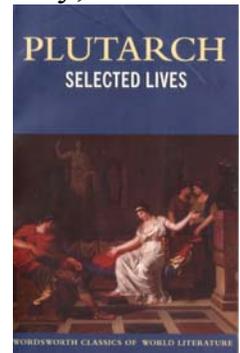
23. George Orwell. *Homage to Catalonia.* (1938) Orwell, a journalist, reflects on his experiences during the Spanish Civil War from December 1936 to June 1937, where he had the misfortune to enlist in a non-Stalinist Marxist militia that Soviet-controlled communists had secretly determined to liquidate. Betrayed by people he mistook as allies, Orwell began a painful reconsideration of his views. He remained a socialist but had grown wise to the lawless nature of totalitarian regimes, and he came to loathe Stalinism. We picked this book because (a) it represents a genuine act of personal courage, (b) it vividly depicts the human reality of the great contest of political ideals that defined the twentieth century, and (c) it exemplifies lucid political writing.



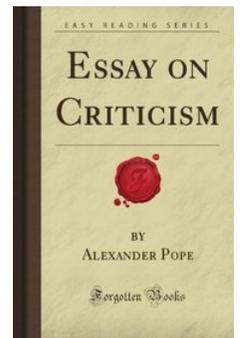
24. Plato. *Apology of Socrates and Crito.* (c. 399-387 B.C.) These are key works of philosophy that students who sign up for a philosophy course will probably read. But they are a common inheritance that everyone should know, and they can be read easily without a teacher's assistance. *The Apology* is Socrates' self-defense when he is charged with corrupting the youth of Athens. *Crito* is Socrates explanation to a friend why he must obey the laws of Athens and accept the death penalty. We picked these two dialogues because together they present a profound debate about the place of the intellectual in society, the pursuit of truth, and the necessity of the law.



25. Plutarch. *Parallel Lives.* (Second century A.D.) (Selections) Plutarch pairs biographies of famous men, one Greek, one Roman, to illuminate their character. We picked it because (a) it gives students a vibrant, narrative view of ancient Greek and Roman culture, (b) it examines what it means to be “good,” and (c) as a commentary on leadership, it influenced the writers of *The Federalist Papers*.

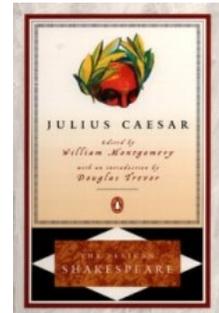


26. Alexander Pope. *Essay on Criticism.* (1711) This is the only English verse on our list. Pope's poem begins with a warning that incompetent criticism poses a greater danger than poor creative writing. The latter “tries our patience,” but poor judgment offered up authoritatively can “mis-lead our Sense.” *The Essay on Criticism* can be read hurriedly and with no profit, but for the reader

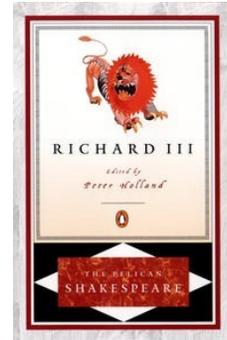


who pays attention, it is a font of good insight. We picked it because (a) it emphasizes the need for a moral seriousness in the critical inquiries that lie ahead for the college student, (b) it is one of those rare works that fully embodies the strictures it lays down: it practices what it preaches, and (c) it just might help some students improve their writing.

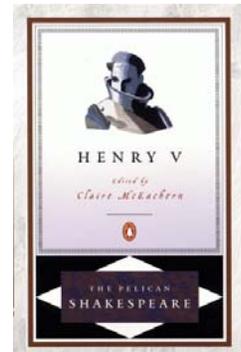
27. William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*. (c. 1599) This play once was and should still be a standard part of the high school English curriculum, but it is not. We picked it (a) to restore a vital literary reference point, (b) to invite students to think about demagoguery and the willingness of people to sacrifice freedom to follow a charismatic leader, and (c) to urge students to reflect on conflicts between personal loyalty and public duty.



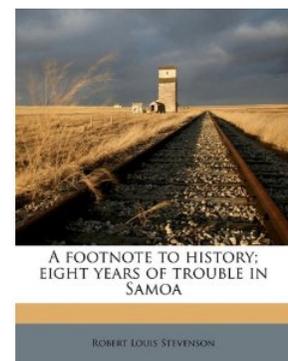
28. William Shakespeare. *Richard III*. (c. 1592) This play offers one of Shakespeare's great villains, who despite his awful deeds somehow wins a share of our sympathy. We picked it because it is English literature's best portrayal of political manipulation and cunning self-advancement, which are qualities that students need to be on guard against in college no less than in the rest of life.



29. William Shakespeare. *Henry V*. (c. 1598) This play is about the maturation of a king and his extraordinary success on the battlefield. The St. Crispin's Day speech is one that every student should know. We picked *Henry V* because it is the richest of Shakespeare's history plays. It has profound things to say about the responsibilities of leadership.

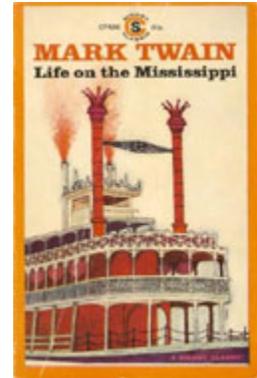


30. Robert Louis Stevenson. *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa*. (1892) The author of *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and other popular works moved to Samoa in 1890 in search of a place to recover his health. This book is his account of the colonial struggle to possess the island, as the United States, Germany, and Britain squabbled with each other and a hopelessly outgunned Samoan king. Stevenson is on the side of the Samoans. The *New York Times* hailed the book on its first publication as "an entertaining and brilliant piece of narrative." We picked it because (a) it is a superbly written work that makes an

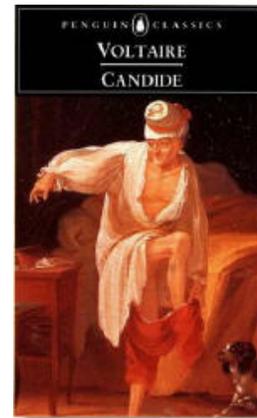


otherwise forgotten episode in colonial history into a lens for the vanities of politics and power, and (b) it is a good benchmark for students to think about American military ventures in faraway places.

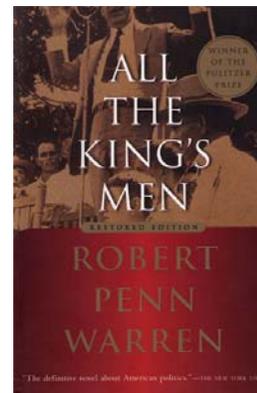
31. Mark Twain. *Life on the Mississippi*. (1883) Twain is remembering his life before the Civil War as an apprentice steamboat pilot. The book is as broad and digressive as the river itself, but we have a charming companion to keep it interesting. We picked it because (a) Twain is one of the great native talents of American literature and *Life on the Mississippi* shows him in a genial mood, (b) the book opens a window on a distinctly American combination of technical expertise, intellectual aspiration, and ironic observation.



32. Voltaire. *Candide*. (1759) This eighteenth century satire of a young man under the spell of a philosophy that glibly treats the order of the world as “all for the best,” would seem to be superfluous counsel in an age where students are more likely to be surrounded by dire warnings that things are bad and about to get much worse. But as a story of progressive (and sometime hilarious) disillusionment, *Candide* still has something to teach. We picked it because it is a timeless warning not to mistake beautiful theories for fact.

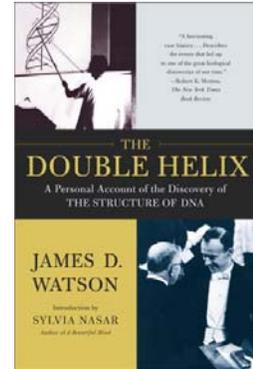


33. Robert Penn Warren. *All the King's Men*. (1946) Warren’s novel about the rise of a populist politician in the South presents the interplay of cynical calculation and idealistic yearning in American life. Based loosely on the life and death of Louisiana governor and senator Huey P. Long, the book is a classic portrayal of one of the weaknesses of our system of governance. We picked it because (a) it presents political corruption but is ultimately a counsel against viewing politics as mere manipulation, (b) it is a rich and vivid depiction of the insider’s view of political life, and (c) it provides students an occasion to come to terms with their own temptation to think of governance as a raw, anything-goes game.

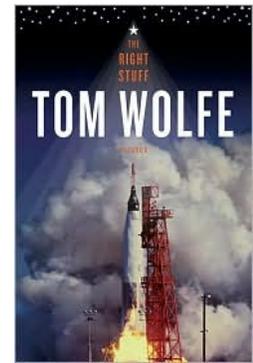


34. James D. Watson. *The Double Helix*. (1968) Watson’s first-person account of the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA continues to provoke controversy, especially over Watson’s cursory treatment of Rosalind Franklin,

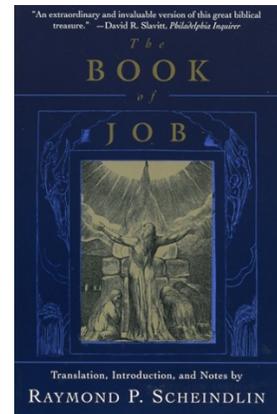
whose x-ray diffraction images of DNA were crucial to the hypothesis that he and his colleague Francis Crick developed. Nonetheless the book is a classic insider account of one of the great scientific breakthroughs of the last century. We picked it because (a) it is a vivid portrayal of how scientific reasoning, personal ambition, and individual character come together in actual research, and (b) students need to know about some of the foundational discoveries that underlie contemporary medicine and technology.



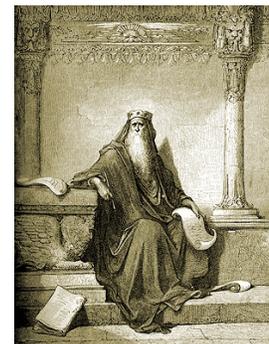
35. Tom Wolfe. *The Right Stuff*. (1979) This book examines the lives of test pilots and astronauts, and chronicles the early years of the U.S. manned space program. We picked it because (a) Wolfe’s sympathetic engagement with the pilots brings to life the human side of this hugely complex scientific and technical accomplishment, (b) the book exemplifies the rhetorical power of the “new journalism” when it was truly new, and (c) it offers a compelling portrait of courage and self-reliance.



36. *The Book of Job*. (c. 1000 B.C.) Among the most profound and unsettling stories in the Bible, the *Book of Job* depicts a righteous man brought to the depths of suffering by the seeming capriciousness of God. Job rejects the counsel of his friends to curse God for his fate, but he does eventually complain. God’s answer is awesome—and frightening. We picked this book because (a) it is among the most accessible points of entry to the Bible for secular students, and (b) it is a terrific story that can lead to important questions about the nature of justice.



37. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. (c. 970-930 B.C.) A king searches for meaning in life by successively seeking wisdom, pleasure, wealth, sex, and power. Having achieved them, he finds that they fail to fulfill his longings and are ultimately meaningless. We picked this book because it asks many of life’s deepest questions: Why work so hard if it doesn’t bring real happiness and death is inevitable? What is there to live for, really? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why are some people wealthy while others are poor? In this way it also speaks to the rising concern



on college campuses for social justice.

List B: Six More Ambitious Choices

- 1. Harold Bloom. *The Western Canon*.** (1994) Bloom's enthusiasm for great books is infectious. Students won't have read many of the books he discusses but will want to.
- 2. Alexis De Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*.** (1838) De Tocqueville remains the best observer of the American social and political experiment. A long read but not inherently difficult.
- 3. Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment*.** (1866) A psychological masterpiece. No one regrets reading it, though it is a long journey.
- 4. Herman Melville. *The Confidence-Man*.** (1857) Easy to read but baffling to some readers, since Melville refuses to say exactly who among the large cast of characters aboard the Mississippi steam ship *Fidèle* is *the* confidence man. Is America a confidence game?
- 5. Gary Rose, ed. *Shaping a Nation: 25 Supreme Court Cases*.** (2010) We are a nation of laws—and of Supreme Court opinions. It is a good idea for students to start college having read some of the most important ones.
- 6. Virgil. *The Aeneid*.** (19 B.C., Fagles's translation, 2006) An epic in every sense, *The Aeneid* is one of the masterpieces of Western civilization.