

Reading List – Battle of the Books 2025

Animal Farm by George Orwell, 1945

George Orwell's renowned fable became an instant success on publication after the Second World War. The novel has continued to captivate readers of all ages and has secured Orwell's position as one of the great writers of the twentieth century.

When the downtrodden animals of Manor Farm overthrow their master Mr Jones and take over the farm themselves, they imagine it is the beginning of a life of freedom and equality. But gradually a cunning, ruthless elite among them, masterminded by the pigs Napoleon and Snowball, starts to take control. Soon the other animals discover that they are not all as equal as they thought and find themselves hopelessly ensnared as one form of tyranny is replaced with another.

TW: animal abuse, death, self-harm

Dumplin' by Julie Murphy, 2015

Dubbed "Dumplin'" by her former beauty queen mom, Willowdean has always been at home in her own skin. With her all-American-beauty best friend, Ellen, by her side, things have always worked . . . until Will takes a job at Harpy's, the local fast-food joint. There she meets Private School Bo, a hot former jock. Will isn't surprised to find herself attracted to Bo. But she is surprised when he seems to like her back. Instead of finding new heights of self-assurance in her relationship with Bo, Will starts to doubt herself. So she sets out to take back her confidence by doing the most horrifying thing she can imagine: entering the Miss Teen Blue Bonnet Pageant-along with several other unlikely candidates-to show the world that she deserves to be up there as much as any twiggy girl does. Along the way, she'll shock the hell out of Clover City—and maybe herself most of all.

TW: body shaming, fatphobia, bullying, grief

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas, 2017

Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, this is a powerful and gripping novel about one girl's struggle for justice.

Sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends. The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil at the hands of a police officer. Khalil was unarmed.

Soon afterward, his death is a national headline. Some are calling him a thug, maybe even a drug dealer and a gangbanger. Protesters are taking to the streets in Khalil's name. Some cops and the local drug lord try to intimidate Starr and her family. What everyone wants to know is: what really went down that night? And the only person alive who can answer that is Starr.

But what Starr does—or does not—say could upend her community. It could also endanger her life.

TW: racism, murder, abuse, police brutality, drug use

Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhà Lại, 2011

For all the ten years of her life, Hà has only known Saigon: the thrills of its markets, the joy of its traditions, the warmth of her friends close by, and the beauty of her very own papaya tree. But now, the Vietnam War has reached her home. Hà and her family are forced to flee as Saigon falls, and they board a ship headed toward hope. In America, Hà discovers the foreign world of Alabama: the coldness of its strangers, the dullness of its food . . . and the strength of her very own family.

This is the moving story of one girl's year of change, dreams, grief, and healing as she journeys from one country to another, one life to the next.

TW: war, grief, refugee experience, racism

Maus by Art Spiegelman, 1980

The Pulitzer Prize-winning "Maus" tells the story of Vladek Spiegelman, a Jewish survivor of Hitler's Europe, and his son, a cartoonist coming to terms with his father's story. Maus approaches the unspeakable through the diminutive. Its form, the cartoon (the Nazis are cats, the Jews mice), shocks us out of any lingering sense of familiarity and succeeds in 'drawing us closer to the bleak heart of the Holocaust' (The New York Times).

Maus is a haunting tale within a tale. Vladek's harrowing story of survival is woven into the author's account of his tortured relationship with his aging father. Against the backdrop of guilt brought by survival, they stage a normal life of small arguments and unhappy visits. This astonishing retelling of our century's grisliest news is a story of survival, not only of Vladek but of the children who survive even the survivors. Maus studies the bloody pawprints of history and tracks its meaning for all of us.

TW: genocide, antisemitism, abuse, concentration camps, Nazi imagery

Slam by Nick Hornby, 2007

Sam is sixteen and a skater. Just so there are no terrible misunderstandings: skating = skateboarding. There's no ice. Life is ticking along nicely for Sam; his Mum's got rid of her rubbish boyfriend, he's thinking about college, and he's met someone. Alicia. Then a little accident happens. One with big consequences for someone just finding his way in life. Sam can't run (let alone skate) away from this one. He's a boy facing a man's problems, and the question is - has he got what it takes to confront them?

TW: themes surrounding teen pregnancy

The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch, 2008

A lot of professors give talks titled 'The Last Lecture'. Professors are asked to consider their demise and to ruminate on what matters most to them: What wisdom would we impart to the world if we knew it was our last chance? If we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?

When Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon, was asked to give 'a last lecture' lecture, he didn't have to imagine it as his last, since he had recently been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. But the lecture he gave, 'Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams', wasn't about dying. It was about the importance of overcoming obstacles, of enabling the dreams of others, of seizing every moment (because time is all you have, and you may find one day that you have less than you think). It was a summation of everything Randy had come to believe. It was about living.

TW: death, cancer, grief

They Called Us Enemy by George Takei and others, 2019

A stunning graphic memoir recounting actor/author/activist George Takei's childhood imprisoned within American concentration camps during World War II.

George Takei has captured hearts and minds worldwide with his captivating stage presence and outspoken commitment to equal rights. But long before he braved new frontiers in Star Trek, he woke up as a four-year-old boy to find his own birth country at war with his father's -- and their entire family forced from their home into an uncertain future. In 1942, at the order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, every person of Japanese descent on the west coast was rounded up and shipped to one of ten "relocation centers," hundreds or thousands of miles from home, where they would be held for years under armed guard.

"They Called Us Enemy" is Takei's firsthand account of those years behind barbed wire, the joys and terrors of growing up under legalized racism, his mother's hard choices, his father's faith in democracy, and the way those experiences planted the seeds for his astonishing future. What does it mean to be American? Who gets to decide? When the world is against you, what can one person do?

TW: war, racism, death, concentration camps, grief

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee, 1960

A benchmark of classic American literature, "To Kill a Mockingbird" approaches the highly sensitive topic of racism in 1930s America with humor, warmth and compassion, making it widely recognized as one of the best books of the twentieth century and in American literature.

Lawyer Atticus Finch gives this advice to his children as he defends the real mockingbird of Harper Lee's classic novel - a Black man charged with the rape of a white girl. Through the young eyes of Scout and Jem Finch, Harper Lee explores with exuberant humor the irrationality of adult attitudes to race and class in the Deep South of the 1930s. The conscience of a town steeped in prejudice, violence and hypocrisy is pricked by the stamina of one man's struggle for justice. But the weight of history will only tolerate so much...

TW: racism, racist language, abuse, murder, rape

Wonder by R. J. Palacio, 2012

Auggie wants to be an ordinary ten-year-old. He does ordinary things - eating ice cream, playing on his Xbox. He feels ordinary - inside. But ordinary kids don't make other ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds. Ordinary kids aren't stared at wherever they go.

Born with a terrible facial abnormality, Auggie has been home-schooled by his parents his whole life. Now, for the first time, he's being sent to a real school - and he's dreading it. All he wants is to be accepted - but can he convince his new classmates that he's just like them, underneath it all?

TW: ableism, joke about self-harm, bullying

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