

A NON-DEFINITIVE BEACH READING LIST TO ENHANCE YOUR STUDY OF US HISTORY

Reading novels is an excellent way to improve your understanding of history by providing vital details about how people lived and what they thought. The list here includes novels that are both a pleasure to read and revealing of their time. It doesn't include any of the great American novels you'll read elsewhere in Commonwealth: *Huckleberry Finn*; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; *The Great Gatsby*; *Invisible Man*, but I encourage you to think about them as primary documents as well.

If you don't have a lot of time, I encourage you to read at least one of the following. (If you haven't read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, though, make that your priority.)

Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*
Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*
Richard Wright's *Native Son*
Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*
The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905). A brilliant and poignant description of the social elite of New York in the 1890s, showing the painful downside of a culture obsessed with status.

Frank Norris, *McTeague* (1899). This extraordinary claustrophobic novel was made into the powerful silent Erich von Stroheim movie, aptly titled *Greed*. It shows the painful downside of culture obsessed with wealth from the close point of view of a slow-thinking, violent-tempered dentist. Read just for its inexorable, tragic plot—based on a sensational crime of its day—it's a great read. When read in the context of America's late 19th century obsession with immigration, it's very revealing.

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906). "I aimed for men's hearts, and hit them in the stomach," the socialist Sinclair mourned. This graphic muckraking novel illustrated the human cost of immigrant workers being treated as machines in the meat-packing plants of Chicago. It was meant to rouse readers to the Socialist banner—instead, it led to the creation of the Food and Drug Administration.

Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (1925). Like *McTeague*, *An American Tragedy* was based on a real-life case; like *McTeague*, and *House of Mirth*, and, well, countless other American classics, it condemns a life corrupted by a love of money. Hard-hitting, relentless, and meaty, it's a rag to riches novel gone terrible wrong.

Nathaniel West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933). Cynical, merciless, nasty, brilliant—one of America's first and best existential novels after *Moby Dick*. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Read it with *The Great Gatsby* and have Big Thoughts.

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). So good that Woody Guthrie wrote a whole album of songs about this story of the Okies fleeing the 1930s dust bowl. The set up of the novel is neatly summed up by his words: "California's a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in and see, but believe it or not, you won't find it so hot if you ain't got the do-re-mi." Still, that doesn't start to capture the human dimensions of this sprawling rags-to-more-rags masterpiece.

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940). Wright's controversial novel is a brilliant example of the 1940s' rediscovery of the idea that racism and poverty not only bars opportunity but twists and distorts the human spirit. Brutal and unapologetic, it was widely acclaimed by many, but loathed by the writer **Chester Himes**, who felt it caricatured the problem and reaffirmed racist attitudes. In his ***If He Hollers...*** (1945) he basically retells the same story, but replaces Wright's brutish Bigger Thomas with an urbane, college educated black protagonist who can pass for white—and is similarly destroyed by the same racism system.

J.D. Salinger, *Catcher In the Rye* (1949). I just don't know a better novel to describe the alienation and loneliness of the 1950s, the searching for authenticity in a world of phoniness, finding it only in moments of passing poignancy.

Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (1953). Ostensibly about the Salem witch hunts of 1692, but actually condemning the *Communist* witch hunts of the 1950s! Tricky!

Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955). *Mad Men* in novel form. Wilson's story was seen in its time as a condemnation of the soul-crushing tedium of the 1950s suburban rat-race. It's also an excellent description of how post traumatic stress syndrome was viewed in the 1950s, as the hero, Tom Rath, tries to suppress memories of what he did in "the war before Korea."

Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (1955). Okay, not an American novel at all, but a brilliant, prescient account of how the brashly optimistic Americans behaved when they arrived to fix Vietnam.

Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (1957) "The most beautifully executed, the clearest and most important utterance" of the Beat generation, according to the *New York Times*. It's a sex, drugs, rock'n'roll road trip, with a side serving of searching for meaning—and shows how those buttoned up '50s were turning into the unbuttoned '60s.

Richard Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959) What happened to those POWs during the Korean War, anyway? Were they really taken prisoner and brainwashed by Chinese Operatives—and made to be activated as killing machines whenever they see the Queen of Diamonds? Was Joe McCarthy really right that Communists had taken over the state department—and did they maybe control those brainwashed killers? Cold war paranoid fun.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). So it's not a novel: sue me. It's still a deeply important work that deserves to be read almost fifty years after its writing. Betty Friedan was a college-educated reporter who was fascinated with the soul-crushing deadness of the suburban housewife—and asked how society had come to such a pass after the heady days of the suffragettes. It's an excellent introduction to feminist thought—and very easy to read.

Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). Also not a novel, and not really an autobiography, either, but a life story "as told to Alex Haley." Either way, it's entirely worth your reading, not only to see the description of growing up in the racist word of the 1930s and 40s, but to see Malcolm Little's transformation from child of great progress to convict to Black Muslim to separatist leader to his transforming pilgrimage to Mecca just before his assassination. You might also want to compare it to Claude Brown's beautiful *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), or a similar story of Spanish Harlem in Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). All three books illustrated the growing problem of racially-segregated ghettos that had grown up since the 1930s but were only visible to most Americans after 1962.

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). It's interesting that America's two greatest novels about World War II, *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*, were both written so much later than the war—and perhaps shaped by the Cold War that came after; both are absurdist takes on war and the human condition. *Catch-22* brilliantly parodies the war's contradictions and the evil banality of bureaucracy, but Vonnegut takes it one step further: Billy Pilgrim, like his creator Vonnegut, lives through the war's most horrific event—the fire bombing in Dresden—and becomes unhinged in time when he's taken captive by aliens from Tralfamadore. Is Vonnegut using Sci-Fi as a way to explore the atrocities of war and the meaningless of a short human existence, or are we to think Billy is driven mad by the horror of it all? (That's not a rhetorical question, actually.)

E.L. Doctorow *The Book of Daniel* (1971). A fictionalized account of the Rosenbergs—convicted spies from the 1950s—told through a 1960s lens as if by their orphaned son. Funny, irreverent, devastating... simply tremendous.

Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in the Combat Zone (Box Me Up and Send Me Home)* (1973). Not at all as good as his superb *The Things They Carried*, this autobiographical account of O'Brien's time in Vietnam gives a rawer, more immediate sense of the war. His 1979 *Going After Cacciato* is almost a magical-realist take on the war. Like many soldiers in Vietnam, Cacciato wants to go AWOL. Unlike the rest of them, he does run away—on foot—to Paris.

Other books that aren't really beach books but are very useful for thinking about American History:

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans—a Novel of 1757* (1826). Set in the French and Indian War, this slog of a novel is an excellent example of the romantic notion of Native Americans in the early 19th century. History buffs often love it; others find it tedious.

The 1850s were a heady time for American letters: Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851); Melville's masterful *Moby Dick* (1851); Thoreau's *Walden* (1854); Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The most significant work in its own time, however, was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), written in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. What it lacks in subtlety and literary charm it makes up in sheer moral outrage—and effectiveness among 1850s women. Taken out of its context, many find it a mediocre read. In its context, it was a bombshell.

Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age—A Novel of Today* (1873). Not nearly as interesting as Twain's great novels, but very revealing of the era on which it bestowed its ironic name. *The Gilded Age* is just one of many American stories about the corrupting influence of money.

Henry James, *The Bostonians* (1886). In the late 19th century, a small number of prominent women chose to eschew the bonds of traditional marriage and set up housekeeping instead with partner of their own sex. We have no way to know if these so-called "Boston Marriages" were romantic or not, but there is certainly an undercurrent of romance in the novel that gave them their name. Olive Chancellor, passionate supporter of women's rights, becomes deeply possessive of a young girl named Varena, and hopes to convince the girl to leave her parents and forswear men, moving in with Olive instead, where she is exposed to the advances of Olive's cousin Basil.... If James didn't look down so much on his female protagonists, the tension of the novel might be higher, but it is certainly an intriguing window into the way the women's movement was viewed in the 1880s.

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backwards* (1888). This Utopian story tells the tale of a man who wakes up after a hundred year's nap in 1980s Boston: a wonderful world of radios, credit cards, and, less accurately, perfect social harmony. It's more of a tract than a novel, but an excellent blueprint for a world with plenty of leisure and no money.

Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Often called America's greatest novel about the Civil War (others might respond "fiddledeedee"). This slim volume about a conflicted volunteer who wishes he could prove his manhood with "the red badge of courage" was written by someone who wasn't even born at the time of the war—you might read it in the spirit of a generation deeply concerned with "manliness" and longing to prove that they were as great as the great generation that came before them. Or you might also just read it; it's short.