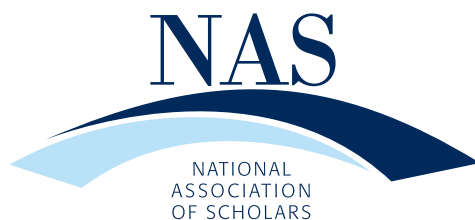


# BEACH BOOKS: 2012-2013

**What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?**



August 2013



A report by the National Association of Scholars' Center for the Study of the Curriculum

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What Do Colleges and Universities  
Want Students to Read Outside Class?

August 2013



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### **What We Do**

We publish a quarterly journal, *Academic Questions*, which examines the intellectual controversies and the institutional challenges of contemporary higher education.

We publish studies of current higher education policy and practice with the aim of documenting trends in academia and stimulating improvements.

Our website presents a daily stream of educated opinion and commentary on higher education and archives our research reports for public access.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each academic year, hundreds of colleges and universities assign a book as “common reading” to students. These assignments are often emblematic of colleges’ values. Common reading programs may be mandatory or optional and are designed for new students, honors students, or the entire student body.

Common reading programs historically arose after colleges eliminated their core curricula. When students were no longer required to take the same courses, many colleges and universities sought to provide them with at least one point of common intellectual experience by assigning a shared reading outside the formal curriculum. In this sense, common reading programs were intended to build community. As these common reading programs developed, many colleges and universities also aimed to acquaint students with themes related to the school’s mission and to set academic expectations. These three aims are the stated motives for most programs today.

While there are several databases of common reading assignments, the annual *Beach Books* reports by the National Association of Scholars are the most comprehensive and are the only ones to categorize the books according to their main subjects. The NAS records which book(s) each institution chooses, and each book’s publication date, author(s), genre, main subject, and any additional themes. We also assess the types of colleges and universities that have common reading programs, and we note whether these institutions are among the top 100 nationally ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Our study for the academic year 2012-2013 covers 309 colleges and universities and the 190 books they assigned. Our major findings are:

1. **Ninety-seven percent of colleges and universities chose books published in 1990 or later.**
2. **The most popular book by far was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.**
3. **Politically-themed books abounded.**
4. **Very few of the colleges with common reading programs chose classics.**

The top two subject categories were Science and Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism, and the top genres were memoir and biography. Some book types were notably missing from common reading assignments. Classic texts and books published before 1990 were scarce, and fiction was far outpaced by nonfiction. There were no classics of history; no biographies of, nor autobiographies, speeches, or writings by, American political leaders; no works by ancient philosophers; no works of the Enlightenment; no classical works of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Confucian thought; and no scientific classics.

While colleges, on the whole, did not choose books in contemporary bestselling series as common reading, they did tend to choose ones with mass appeal.

Of the institutions in our study, 26 ranked among the top 100 National Universities and 23 ranked among the top 100 National Liberal Arts Colleges listed by *U.S. News & World Report*. Most colleges with these programs are middle-tier, but a small number are elite or Ivy League.



A common book assignment is an excellent opportunity for colleges and universities to inspire students to read great books and foster intellectual friendship on campus, but for most it is a missed opportunity. The National Association of Scholars offers ten recommendations for choosing better books; these are listed at the end of this report.

## **INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY COMMON READING PROGRAMS?**

A college's curriculum reveals a great deal about what that college values. In recent years many colleges have created an academic element similar to but beyond the main curriculum: a common reading program. These reading programs likewise are good barometers of what colleges extol. Indeed, because they distill values down to one book, common reading programs may provide one of the most vivid indicators of what our colleges really value. Common reading assignments are designed for new students, honors students, or the entire student body.

Colleges typically establish these programs in order to place a campus-wide focus on a particular theme, often a theme that colleges explicitly say is meant to represent the values of the institution. For example, the University of Washington explained its 2012 goal for common reading:

Through *Respect: An Exploration*, we hope to discover new layers of understanding that can illuminate, inspire, advance, or even transform the human story. Respect. It's the Washington Way.<sup>1</sup>

Common reading programs may seem at first glance peripheral to campus academic life because they are extra-curricular. In most cases students earn no academic credit for doing the work. But the choice of a single book for this purpose can be a powerful signal to students (and to faculty members) about the college's educational priorities. In many cases, the book that is chosen is the only reading that all the members of a class or a college have in common.

Colleges and universities do not necessarily embrace the views expressed in the books they assign. A few institutions say they choose controversial books in order to stimulate debate. Such choices, of course, reveal what the college considers debatable and worth debating. More often, institutions select books not to debate but to promote views they believe students should adopt. In any case, it is worth taking note of the books colleges select for common reading programs and considering what these trends tell us about contemporary American higher education.

Because many colleges use common reading programs as a way to initiate new students, the selected book is often the first college-level intellectual endeavor that students will be asked to make—and their first experience of college reading.

The National Association of Scholars began studying college common reading programs in 2010 to find out what books were being selected, how many and what kinds of colleges had such programs, and how these assignments were being integrated into campuses' academic life.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Washington, UW Common Book, 2012, <http://commonbook.uw.edu/2012/>.

That year and the following, NAS published a comprehensive study showing the books colleges chose and giving an overview of themes that emerged. This year we continue our annual report, which remains, to our knowledge, the most up-to-date and complete resource for college common reading selections.

As a body of scholars committed to improving higher education, we believe this is a trend to pay attention to. Our analyses of common reading programs play an important role in giving a picture of a microcosm of college life that can illuminate the particular concepts that American colleges and universities care about and the kind of reading they expect of their students.

Since we began our annual series of reports on campus common reading, we have become a go-to source on this trend. At its 2012 national meeting, the Modern Language Association (MLA) talked about our findings in a panel session devoted to common book assignments.<sup>2</sup> The *Huffington Post* has an online slideshow featuring our set of recommended “Better Books for Next Year’s Beaches” (see Appendix IV for a full list of NAS’s suggested books). Journalists and scholars writing about common reading in colleges frequently consult with and cite us. We aim to continue to be the most comprehensive and reliable resource in this area, and we hope to shed light on this unique side of college academic life.

## MECHANICS OF COMMON READING PROGRAMS

A college conducting a common reading program chooses one book<sup>3</sup> for the academic year and asks students to read it. In some cases reading the book is mandatory and colleges require students to take a test or write an essay to demonstrate their comprehension. In other cases, there is an optional essay competition and a prize for the best one. In most cases, however, reading the book is entirely voluntary.

Most common reading programs are just for new students. During the summer before the students’ first semester, many colleges send a letter to matriculants informing them of the chosen book title and sometimes also enclosing a copy of the book. Freshman orientation events and first-year seminars may include discussions of the common book.

Common reading is thus a way to introduce new students to college-level reading and to offer them a shared intellectual experience to kick off their college careers. As noted above, it also introduces them to the college’s values.

Often the common reading program is associated with a yearlong theme. For instance, Bluffton University’s (Bluffton, Ohio) choice of *Arctic Rising*, a science fiction novel, complements the theme “Virtual Living: Technology’s Impact on Culture and Learning.”

Sometimes institutions, such as Hampshire College (*Sweet Heaven When I Die* by Jeff Sharlet), choose books written by alumni, presumably to boost school pride and showcase their graduates’ work.

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2 Thorne, Ashley, “MLA Panelists Analyze Beach Books,” National Association of Scholars, January 19, 2012, [http://www.nas.org/articles/mla\\_panelists\\_analyze\\_beach\\_books](http://www.nas.org/articles/mla_panelists_analyze_beach_books).

3 Each year some institutions choose more than one book, but this is rare. In the 2012-2013 academic year, six colleges and universities chose two or three assignments as common reading: Loras College (Dubuque, Iowa), The King’s College (New York, New York), Indiana University Southeast, the University of Alaska at Anchorage, Wartburg College (Waverly, Iowa), and Methodist University (Fayetteville, North Carolina).



Frequently colleges invite the author of the chosen book to come to campus to speak. Some, such as Austin Peay State University (Clarksville, Tennessee) and Utah State University, have offered one-on-one time with the author as the reward for students who have written the best essay responses to the book. Authors' availability is often a strong inducement for colleges to choose their books. Publishers take advantage of this opportunity by issuing lists of suggested authors who are on the speaking circuit. This rise of common reading careerists has contributed to homogeneity among colleges' book choices.

The departments sponsoring common reading programs vary. Most commonly the sponsor is a first-year experience program or first-year seminar, but English departments, libraries, provosts' offices, and honors colleges sometimes carry responsibility for the programs.

Book decisions are often made by committees helped by nominations, votes, and student suggestions (Mississippi State University, for instance, has an online form for such submissions<sup>4</sup>).

Names for common reading programs vary widely, e.g., "Common Read," "First-Year Summer Reading," "iRead," "One Book, Many Voices," "Reading TUgether," "Big Read," "Life of the Mind," "Writer as Witness," etc.

## **PURPOSES OF COMMON READING PROGRAMS**

Colleges and universities describe their common reading programs as being primarily oriented toward three goals: to build community engagement, to explore a theme that fits with the mission of the college, and to set academic expectations.

The kind of community that common reading programs ought to foster is, according to colleges, one that is full of "critical thinkers," serves as a setting for learning, and is "based on care and concern for others." According to Aquinas College (Grand Rapids, Michigan):

When we share reading experiences inside and outside the classroom, our discussions and reflections create a stronger community of critical thinkers—the hallmark of a liberal arts education.<sup>5</sup>

Barry University in Miami, Florida, writes:

The purpose of this program is to integrate you into the University learning community as early as possible.

And:

The book was selected to help students [...] accept responsibility for developing communities based on care and concern for others.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Mississippi State University, The Maroon Edition, Suggestions, <http://www.maroonedition.msstate.edu/suggestions/>.

5 Aquinas College, Common Reading Experience, <http://www.aquinas.edu/reading/>.

6 Barry University, Division of Student Affairs, First-Year Experience, Common Reader, <http://www.barry.edu/student-affairs/first-year-experience/common-reader.html>.

Creating a sense of community on a college campus is a need felt now more than ever as students feel increasingly alienated from their professors and from one another. A 1990 Carnegie Foundation study found that 40 percent of college students did not “feel a sense of community on campus” and that 50 percent said they felt “like a number in a book.”<sup>7</sup> More recently, Andrew Delbanco wrote in his 2012 book, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, that, “As a significant reality in the contemporary landscape of higher education, the university as community barely exists.”<sup>8</sup>

One reason for this sense of isolation may be that students today have little more than popular culture to bring them together around shared knowledge or curiosity. They arrive at college without having read the same set of books or studied the same ideas in high school. Their college education won’t change that, because most colleges no longer have core curricula. Distribution requirements do not result in any substantial number of students reading the same books. Colleges often make it a point of pride that every student is on his own individual path towards a degree, but one of the costs of this individuation is the weakening of intellectual community. Students can end up sharing a dorm, a cafeteria, a football team, and a commencement speaker, but not a single work by Plato, Shakespeare, Keats, or Hemingway.

Through common reading programs, it seems, colleges are trying to simulate a shared intellectual experience to fill the void left by their abandonment of a common core curriculum. Some make the reading the central assignment for a mandatory first-year seminar. Such seminars tend to be the only core courses that the whole student body takes.

Having students encounter themes in line with the college’s mission is another stated goal of these programs. Below are some sample descriptions of this goal.

Bluffton University:

Each year, the university focuses on a significant contemporary issue that is related to its mission and becomes the subject of cross-disciplinary exploration.<sup>9</sup>

Carroll College (Helena, Montana):

All freshmen are assigned a summer reading that is paired with the mandatory three-credit first semester course called Alpha Seminar. Its purpose is to introduce first year students to the distinctive practices and values of a Catholic liberal arts education.<sup>10</sup>

Marian University (Fond du Lac, Wisconsin):

Socially Responsible Action is one of the learning outcomes for the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum, which refers to students developing a personal sense of social justice. In

7 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Campus Life: In Search of Community. A Special Report*, Princeton University Press, Lawrenceville: 1990, <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED320492.pdf>.

8 Delbanco, Andrew, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2012.

9 Bluffton University, News and Events, “Author, Alumnus to Help Welcome Bluffton Class of 2016,” [http://www.bluffton.edu/about/news/newsreleases.asp?show=081712\\_00](http://www.bluffton.edu/about/news/newsreleases.asp?show=081712_00).

10 Carroll College, Academics, Core, Alpha Seminar, <http://www.carroll.edu/academics/core/alpha.cc>.

the seminar course, the students focus specifically on recognizing how individuals and groups can effect positive social change.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the purposes of building campus community and exploring a purposeful theme, some institutions, such as William Paterson University in Newark, Delaware, declare a desire to educate students in “critical thinking” and to “provide a foundation for student success.”<sup>12</sup>

Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, gives the following as its goals for common reading:

- Provide a shared intellectual experience
- Create a sense of community
- Encourage reading
- Promote critical engagement of ideas
- Set academic expectations
- Create dialog between students, faculty, staff and the community
- Promote interaction between Shepherd University and the community
- Introduce students to community resources<sup>13</sup>

The University of Idaho states: “The Common Read is a program designed to engage the university community, its students, staff and faculty, in a unified intellectual activity. For first-year students it introduces them to academic expectations, respectful discourse, and community building.”<sup>14</sup>

Several colleges also quote from a 2002 newsletter issued by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition which defined the purpose of a common reading program: “to provide a common academic experience for all first-year students and to strengthen the academic atmosphere of the institution from the first day the student arrives on campus.”<sup>15</sup>

We have not systematically collected evidence on how well colleges think their book selections and programs meet these purposes. One observer, however, has recently gathered some statements from officials at colleges and universities that have discontinued their common reading programs. In “The End of Summer Reading?” Duke Cheston reported on his conversation with Jason Pierce, assistant vice president for academic affairs at Mars Hill University in North Carolina. According to Cheston, Pierce said that Mars Hill ended its common reading program because it failed to achieve its goals of building community among students:

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11 Marian University, Academic Programs, First Year Studies Program, Transition and Adjustment to Campus, <http://www.marianuniversity.edu/academic-programs/first-year-studies-program/transition-and-adjustment-to-campus/>.

12 William Paterson University, First Year Experience, Welcome, <http://www.wpunj.edu/first-year-experience/index.dot>.

13 Shepherd University, Common Reading, Why Have a Common Reading? <http://www.shepherd.edu/commonreading/whyacr.html>.

14 University of Idaho, General Education, Common Read, <http://www.uidaho.edu/class/general-education/common-read>.

15 Patterson, L. (2002), “New Ideas in First-Year Reading Programs from Around the Country,” First-Year Experience Newsletter (FYE), 143, 8-9.

"We found that [the summer reading program] didn't help to bridge any of those gaps," Pierce said. "They weren't having those conversations outside of class." Many of the students—especially those who might have most benefited from it, Pierce said—didn't even read the book.<sup>16</sup>

Cheston also quotes Pierce to the effect that he has talked with leaders at other colleges who have similar doubts. Perhaps in a future edition of *Beach Books* we will survey colleges that have discontinued their common reading programs.

## OTHER COMMON READING DATABASES

To our knowledge the National Association of Scholars publishes the only comprehensive list of books assigned by colleges and universities as common reading. We did, however, find several other sources of information about common reading programs, including:

- National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (hosted by the University of South Carolina) summer reading database: 8 colleges included<sup>17</sup>
- Penguin Group (USA) Inc.: 46 colleges included<sup>18</sup>
- Barbara Fister, Academic Librarian, Gustavus Adolphus College: 111 colleges included<sup>19</sup>
- The Reading Life, "What College Students Are Reading This Summer": 12 colleges included<sup>20</sup>

Our goal was to provide a more complete coverage of this campus trend, so that any college with common reading would be included. We also went beyond these other lists by categorizing each book according to subject, theme, author, and date published.

## METHODS

Our study for the academic year 2012-2013 covers 309 colleges and universities and the 190 books they assigned. Most of the 309 institutions assigned only one text, but several assigned two or three. Altogether, there were 318 common reading assignments.

While we paid attention to trends in the mechanics and purposes of common reading programs, our primary object was to document the books that were assigned and the colleges that assigned them.

<sup>16</sup> Cheston, Duke, "The End of Summer Reading?" The John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, <http://www.popecenter.org/commentaries/article.html?id=2867>.

<sup>17</sup> National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, <http://sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr/srp/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Penguin Group, Services, Academic, Campus-Wide Reading Programs, 2012, <http://www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/services-academic/campuswidelists.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Fister, Barbara, "One Book, One College: Common Reading Programs," <http://homepages.gac.edu/~fister/onebook.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Kelley, Pam, "What College Students Are Reading This Summer," The Reading Life, June 15, 2012, <http://readinglifeobs.blogspot.com/2012/06/what-college-students-are-reading-this.html>.

Breaking these down, we noted the authors and the years of publication for each book; we categorized each book according to its main subject and its genre; and we observed additional themes, such as whether the book was a graphic novel or whether it conveyed a strong environmental message. We chose only one subject category for each book because we wanted to convey that book's main topic. In determining the subject of a book, we referred both to its content and to reviews of it on Amazon and Goodreads. Of course, some books were difficult to classify. When in doubt we used the category closest to the subject headings listed by the Library of Congress.

Our distinction between "subject category" and "theme" requires a little bit of elaboration. By "subject category" we mean the explicit and encompassing topic of a book. The "subject category" of the *Iliad* is war. (No college we studied selected the *Iliad*, but if one had, we would have classified it as a book about war.) By "theme" we mean an important and recurrent aspect of the book that seems worth noting. Some themes of the *Iliad* that might be worth noting are that it deals with the actions of gods in the life of humanity, the pursuit of glory, and the role of fate. (These are not themes that we noted in any of the actual college readings.) The "themes" that we take note of as recurrent aspects of many of the selected books are emphases on various racial and ethnic groups, geographic or cultural regions, Hurricane Katrina, and environmentalism. "Environmentalism" comes into our study both as a "subject category" and as a "theme" for books that are assigned to other subject categories. We also use the term "theme" to take note of three other factors: whether a book has been translated; whether a film version exists, and whether it is a comic book or graphic work. Not every book had a theme, and some books had more than one.

We classified each college and university by type—public, private sectarian, private nonsectarian (we counted as nonsectarian institutions that have only nominal religious affiliations), community colleges, women's colleges, and historically black colleges and universities—and by whether they are ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* among either the top 100 National Universities or the top 100 National Liberal Arts Colleges. We aimed at comprehensiveness rather than selecting a specific cohort, and the common reading programs in our study represent all the institutions that we identified. We welcome tips on others that we do not have here.

The table below shows the elements we measured in this study, with respect to books and institutions:

<b>Book</b>	<b>Institution</b>
Title	Name
Author	Type
Publication Year	Whether ranked in top 100 <i>U.S. News &amp; World Report</i>
Subject Category	
Genre	
Themes	

In our study we did not include reading programs that did not conform to the typical common reading program pattern. For instance, we did not include faculty compilations of summer reading recommendations, “friends of the library” book discussion groups, and books limited to one academic department. We have, however, made an exception for honors programs that have their own common readings. There are seven<sup>21</sup> of these and they are appropriately marked. We include these honors programs because they are generally presented as colleges within colleges. Their common reading programs are typically framed with the same rationales as college-wide programs.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

This study has four major findings:

1. Ninety-seven percent of colleges and universities chose books published in 1990 or later.
2. The most popular book by far was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.
3. Politically-themed books abounded.
4. Very few of the colleges with common reading programs chose classics.

### Recent

1. Ninety-seven percent of colleges and universities chose books published in 1990 or later.

The most striking trend we found was that the large majority of colleges and universities assigned recently published books, rather than older ones that are recognized as classics or literary masterpieces. Out of the 309 universities surveyed, 301 (97 percent) chose books published in or after 1990. Books published in 2009, 2010, and 2011 were the most highly assigned. Only nine books, chosen by eight colleges, were published before 1990. These were:

- The King’s College: *Antigone* (441 BC) and *King Lear* (1608)
- Fairmont State University: *Frankenstein* (1818)
- Le Moyne College: “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853)
- Goucher College: *An Enemy of the People* (1882)
- Belmont Abbey College: *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959)
- Cornell University: *The Life Before Us* (1975)
- University of Virginia (School of Engineering & Applied Science): *To Engineer Is Human* (1985)
- Queens University of Charlotte: *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1987)

BOOK ASSIGNMENTS & YEAR PUBLISHED	
Year	Number
2012	20
2011	47
2010	85
2009	54
2008	25
2007	11
2006	20
2005	13
2004	6
2003	10
2002	1
2001	3
2000	1
1999	3
1998	3
1997	2
1995	1
1991	2
1990	2
1987	1
1985	1
1975	1
1959	1
1882	1
1853	1
1818	1
1608	1
441 BC	1

<sup>21</sup> West Liberty University (West Liberty, West Virginia), Aquinas College (Grand Rapids, Michigan), South Dakota State University, Baylor University (Waco, Texas), the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University (New Brunswick, New Jersey), the University of Arizona, and the University of Maine.

Colleges, on the whole, chose books that correspond to recent events or current cultural issues, such as environmentalism, multiculturalism, Hurricane Katrina, bioethics, social justice, information technology, urban poverty in America, alternative energy, animal rights, healthy eating and vegetarianism, and the war in Iraq.

### **The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks**

#### **2. The most popular book by far was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.**

Rebecca Skloot's biography of Henrietta Lacks and the controversy over her laboratory-cultured cervical cancer cells is the top book for the second year in a row. The book was published in 2010 and was a popular choice in common reading even that same year. This year it was chosen by 31 institutions and represents 10 percent of common reading assignments. No other book compared in popularity; the next most-assigned book was *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*, which was chosen by 18 institutions.

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* has three main threads: (1) a biography of Henrietta Lacks' life and death; (2) a scientific history of how the use of Henrietta Lacks' cells—the first human cells known to self-replicate in vitro rather than die—transformed and aided medical research; and (3) a journalistic first-person account by the author, Rebecca Skloot, on her relationship with many family members of Henrietta Lacks.

One convenient reason that colleges choose this particular book is its commodification. The author has made a career of speaking about her book, especially at colleges and universities. Rebecca Skloot and members of the Lacks family travel extensively to promote the book and discuss its themes. (As noted above, other authors of popular common reading books go on college speaking tours as well.) Skloot has developed a presentation to deliver wherever she goes. She has also created videos, a teacher's guide, and even a jeopardy game as part of the teaching resources accompanying the book.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond its ready-made commercial features, colleges say they chose the book for its plural themes.

The University of Richmond praised it:

Intimate in feeling, astonishing in scope, and impossible to put down, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* captures the beauty and drama of scientific discovery, as well as its human consequences.<sup>23</sup>

Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, wrote:

We are excited about the book in part because it engages nearly every discipline in meaningful ways. It is a work of American history concerning everything from science

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<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Skloot's website: <http://rebeccaskloot.com/the-immortal-life/>.

<sup>23</sup> University of Richmond, Chaplaincy, Programs & Lectures, One Book, One Campus, <http://chaplaincy.richmond.edu/programs/one-book/2012-selection.html>.

and medicine to various ethical and legal concerns, from matters of speech and representation to those of social justice and religious belief.<sup>24</sup>

“Every discipline” is an exaggeration, but *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* covers both scientific discovery and “its human consequences.” The book combines racial identity with scientific progress and results in a not-so-subtle suggestion that the Lacks family members ought to profit financially from their mother’s unintentional contribution to science. Skloot quotes Henrietta’s son Lawrence Lacks on Johns Hopkins Hospital and the injustice of not being able to afford health insurance:

“Hopkins say they gave them cells away,” Lawrence yelled, “but they made millions! It’s not fair! She’s the most important person in the world and her family living in poverty. If our mother so important to science, why can’t we get health insurance?”<sup>25</sup>

Several colleges explained that they chose this book because of its broad appeal: it is a book about science but not just about science. For instance, a Wheaton College librarian said, “The science is interesting; the ethical questions are interesting, (as well as) the politics, social policy and race.”<sup>26</sup>

After much thought, we classified the book under the subject category Science because of its emphasis on scientific history and on bioethical questions arising from this particular case.<sup>27</sup> One reason we had difficulty classifying it is because it touches on many of the themes we found in common readings (we also considered Multiculturalism, Women, and Disease).

Our classifying *The Immortal Life* under Science made that the top subject category in this study. But science doesn’t seem to be foremost on the minds of common reading committees. If colleges were primarily moved by the goal of teaching students something about science, we would expect that other books about science would also have registered strongly in the list of choices. That, however, did not happen. Accordingly it is probably best to conclude that *The Immortal Life* owes its popularity not to being a book about science but to being a book about science whose subjects—the Lacks family—happen to be black and poor and furnished with a victimhood narrative.

24 Kingsborough Community College, KCC Reads, <http://www.kbcc.cuny.edu/kccreads/Pages/currentbook.aspx>.

25 Skloot, Rebecca, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, New York: Broadway, 2010.

26 Young, Jasmine, “The Story Buried Beneath the Immortal Cells,” *Wheaton Record*, September 28, 2012, <http://www.wheaton.edu/Students/The-Record/Archives/September-28-2012/The-Story-Buried-Beneath-the-Immortal-Cells>.

27 The Library of Congress lists the following as the subjects of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*:

Lacks, Henrietta, 1920-1951 --Health.

Cancer --Patients --Virginia --Biography.

African American women --History.

Human experimentation in medicine --United States --History.

HeLa cells.

Cancer --Research.

Cell culture.

Medical ethics.

Library of Congress Online Catalog, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Subjects/Content. [http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?V2=1&ti=1,1&SEQ=20130619131342&Search\\_Arg=the%20immortal%20life%20of%20henrietta%20lacks&Search\\_Code=TKEY%5E%2A&CNT=100&type=quick&PID=4h68vjSTn\\_7YJ-3SR2rls-hGSXbS&SID=1](http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?V2=1&ti=1,1&SEQ=20130619131342&Search_Arg=the%20immortal%20life%20of%20henrietta%20lacks&Search_Code=TKEY%5E%2A&CNT=100&type=quick&PID=4h68vjSTn_7YJ-3SR2rls-hGSXbS&SID=1).



In short, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is popular because it puts a racial grievance spin on science.

This is borne out by the text. At one point, Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's daughter, told Skloot she rejected the racism narrative that others pushed on her:

"Everybody always yellin, 'Racism! Racism! That white man stole that black woman's cells! That white man killed that black woman!' That's crazy talk," she told me. "We all black and white and everything else—this isn't a race thing. There's two sides to the story, and that's what we want to bring out. Nothing about my mother is truth if it's about wantin to fry the researchers. It's not about punish the doctors or slander the hospital. I don't want that."<sup>28</sup>

But Deborah later wrote this poem:

*cancer  
check up  
can't afford  
white and rich get it  
my mother was black  
black poor people don't have the money to pay for it  
mad yes I am mad  
we were used by taking our blood and lied to  
We had to pay for our own medical, can you relieve that.  
John Hopkin Hospital and all other places, that has my mother cells, don't give her  
Nothing.*<sup>29</sup>

One adjunct faculty member, Rebecca Kumar, a Ph.D. candidate in English at Emory University, dissents from the widely held view that Skloot's book is a positive contribution to the discussion of race in America. In 2012 Kumar published "An Open Letter to Those Colleges and Universities That Have Assigned Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as the 'Common' Freshmen Reading for the Class of 2016." Kumar complained as a self-identified "woman of color" that Skloot's book is "racist"; that Skloot is paid "exorbitant fees (rumored to be over \$12,000 per visit)"; and that Kumar is "appalled and offended by this required reading selection and the praise given to it." Kumar's criticisms of Skloot are overheated but are worth noting. She finds that "Skloot's depiction of African American life can only be called cartoonish," and says that Skloot "seems to go out of her way to make black life seem strange, funny, and sometimes with her depictions of religion, misguided and uninformed."<sup>30</sup>

What seems most to have riled Kumar is Skloot's depiction of herself as a central character and the wise heroine of the story. Kumar's overreaction appears to be yet another part of the racial grievance theme that the book perpetuates.

<sup>28</sup> Skloot, Rebecca, *The Immortal Life*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Kumar, Rebecca, "An Open Letter to Those Colleges and Universities That Have Assigned Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as the 'Common' Freshmen Reading for the Class of 2016," *Brown Town Magazine*, <http://itsbrowntown.blogspot.com/2012/08/an-open-letter-to-those-colleges-and.html>.

The chart below lists the 31 colleges and universities that assigned *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as common reading this year.

<b>INSTITUTIONS THAT ASSIGNED <i>THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS</i> AS COMMON READING IN 2012-2013</b>	
<b>Institution Name</b>	<b>Type</b>
Agnes Scott College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)
Barry University	Private, sectarian
Brooklyn College	Public
Carroll College (Montana)	Private, sectarian
Coastal Carolina University	Public
Cosumnes River College	Community
Earlham College	Private, sectarian
East Carolina University	Public
Eastern Illinois University	Public
Georgia Institute of Technology	Public
Illinois Wesleyan University	Private, nonsectarian
Kansas State University	Public
Kingsborough Community College	Community
Linfield College	Private, nonsectarian
Longwood University	Public
Ohio State University	Public
Otterbein College	Private, nonsectarian
Rhode Island College	Public
Rutgers, School of Arts & Sciences (honors program)	Public
Sam Houston State University	Public
Shepherd University	Public
University of Alabama, Birmingham	Public
University of Idaho	Public
University of Maryland, Baltimore County	Public
University of Michigan, Flint	Public
University of Richmond	Private, nonsectarian
University of West Florida	Public
Washington State University	Public
Western Michigan University	Public
Western Washington University	Public
Wheaton College (Illinois)	Private, sectarian

## Political Topics

### 3. Politically-themed books abounded.

Social justice, sustainability, diversity, and economic justice are four major themes that emerge from the pages in this year's assignments. These are themes that play a prominent part in contemporary progressive ideology. Though they can, in principle, be addressed in a non-ideological way, the books chosen for common readings generally dovetail with progressive goals.

The motivation for choosing a certain book often stems from the overall mission of a college's common book program. As stated above, common book programs in many cases say that they exist to promote "social action" or to generate understanding about a topic pertinent to modern-day society. At Marian University, the theme of this year's Common Read program was "Socially Responsible Action," which is meant to help students develop a "personal sense of social justice" and learn how to "effect social change."<sup>31</sup> At Philadelphia University, the Summer Reading Selection was sponsored by the university's chapter of Students for Social Justice. The chosen book by TOMS (shoe) entrepreneur Blake Mycoskie, *Start Something That Matters*, is meant to inspire students to take political and social action.

Though there are generally good intentions behind them, "social justice" and "social action" have become buzzwords on campuses, and today they are associated with a one-sided set of ideologies related to identity politics and the role of government.<sup>32</sup> These include particular positions on welfare, same-sex marriage, affirmative action, criminal justice, education pedagogy, health care, immigration, reparations, and the distribution of wealth. Proponents of social justice tend to see the world in terms of oppressors and the oppressed.

Another partisan theme in common reading is environmentalism, for which we added this year a theme classification after observing it in a number of books assigned. We have a subject category for environmentalism as well, but while some books were centered on environmentalism, others were chiefly focused on something else but still had themes of environmentalism. Altogether, we found that 27 of the assigned books had an environmentalism theme. For some, this took the form of a more overtly political message about capitalism or government policy with regard to waste. For others, the theme was a more subtle approach, as in a recommendation to boycott factory farms because, among other reasons, the industry is "the number one contributor to the most serious threat facing the planet (global warming)."<sup>33</sup> The common factor among books categorized as having environmentalist themes was that each one

31 Marian University, SOAR (Student Orientation and Registration), "Academic Success," <http://www.marianuniversity.edu/Academic-Programs/First-Year-Studies-Program/Transition-and-Adjustment-to-Campus/?terms=common%20read>.

32 For more on social justice, see Wood, Peter, "Social Justice and the Curriculum: American Higher Education Dives In," National Association of Scholars, April 12, 2013, [http://www.nas.org/articles/social\\_justice\\_and\\_the\\_curriculum\\_american\\_higher\\_education\\_dives\\_in](http://www.nas.org/articles/social_justice_and_the_curriculum_american_higher_education_dives_in). Wood stated:

Social justice has become our rhetoric for social divisiveness, in that it elevates social divisiveness to a positive good. It rejects out of hand the concept that justice itself arises from our recognition of common and shared humanity. It turns instead to the insistence on priority and group affiliation. That's a doctrine that cuts against the deepest values of the university, among other things. It rules out the emphasis on individual merit. It vitiates the notion of equal opportunity; it elevates instead the idea of equity; and it sweeps aside the idea of open inquiry to produce inclusion as some greater endeavor.

33 Foer, Jonathan Safran, *Eating Animals*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

insists—either quietly or otherwise—on radical transformations of human institutions in deference to the environment.

This theme was seen across genres, from a novel by Ann Pancake about a West Virginia coalmining family, *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, to a cartoon-illustrated book by Annie Leonard on human wastefulness, *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—and a Vision for Change* (based on the 20-minute video *The Story of Stuff*, which has been seen by over 12 million people<sup>34</sup> since it first launched online in 2007).

Environmentalism on campuses in the last decade has become more and more politicized, morphing into a movement to promote “sustainability.” NAS has followed the rise of the sustainability movement at American colleges and universities in recent years, and we have found that this reimagining of environmentalism is a more comprehensive view of the world which promotes not only stewardship of the natural world, but also particular social and economic norms. As the NAS statement “Fixing Sustainability and Sustaining Liberal Education” notes, “Sustainability is used as a means of promoting to students a view that capitalism and individualism are ‘unsustainable,’ morally unworthy, and a present danger to the future of the planet.”<sup>35</sup>

In another article, NAS president Peter Wood explained the nuances of sustainability:

“Sustainability” has come to mean a lot more than [saving energy]. It is a doctrine with a peculiarly blinkered view of scarcity. It emphasizes maximal conservation of resources and government regulation to the near exclusion of other approaches [...] And in its campus incarnation, the sustainability movement has proven itself an enemy to free inquiry.<sup>36</sup>

The theme of environmental sustainability in common reading programs reflects the broader campus movement, with its strong anti-free market, big government, and anti-individual liberty objectives.

Diversity-focused books are a third strain of politicization in college common reading. Again, this is connected to the broader picture in higher education, in which “diversity” has been the dominant ideology for the last three decades. The most assigned subject category in common reading this year, after Science, was Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism. This coincided with the most popular theme, the African American theme. Some of the books in this category describe clashes between cultures, as in *Clybourne Park*, a play about a white couple moving into a black neighborhood; *The Tortilla Curtain*, in which the worlds of a white couple and a Mexican immigrant couple collide in Los Angeles; and *I’m Down*, a memoir about growing up (and not fitting in) in an all-black part of Seattle as the daughter of a white man who was convinced he was black. Some of the books in this category were about immigrants adjusting to new cultures, while others focused more explicitly on racial divisions.

34 Roosevelt, Margot, “Teaching ‘Stuff’ About Ecology,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/13/local/la-me-story-of-stuff-20100713>.

35 “Fixing Sustainability and Sustaining Liberal Education,” National Association of Scholars statement, April 21, 2011, [http://www.nas.org/articles/fixing\\_sustainability\\_and\\_sustaining\\_liberal\\_education](http://www.nas.org/articles/fixing_sustainability_and_sustaining_liberal_education).

36 Wood, Peter, “Tyranny or Theft? Part II,” National Association of Scholars, June 27, 2011, [http://www.nas.org/articles/Tyranny\\_or\\_Theft\\_Part\\_II](http://www.nas.org/articles/Tyranny_or_Theft_Part_II).

The diversity doctrine in higher education has been popular ever since Justice Powell's opinion in the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* Supreme Court case empowered universities to use racial preferences in admissions to gain "educational benefits" of "diversity." As Peter Wood wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Diversity asks us to focus on group identity and personal affiliation, and it puts race at the center of the discussion."<sup>37</sup> Beyond treating individuals as being first and foremost identity group members, diversity "authorizes double standards in admissions and hiring, breeds a campus culture of hypocrisy, mismatches students to educational opportunities, fosters ethnic resentments, elevates group identity over individual achievement, and trivializes the curriculum."

But diversity's enthusiasts in higher education do not see these kinds of contradictions. Instead, college administrators and faculty members seek opportunities to show that they are on board with "diversity." Choosing a common reading book with diversity-related themes is one such occasion.

A fourth genre of common reading books aims to show the plight of the poor in America, the limits of the American dream, and the need for federal intervention. Books in this genre include *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*; *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*; and *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. Here again there is a strong political perspective on display. Government policy is frequently depicted as the answer to the problem of poverty instead of individual responsibility, compassionate ministry, or private innovation.

As popular causes on college campuses, social justice, sustainability, diversity, and socioeconomic equality each figure prominently in common book assignments. These ideas are worth reading about, studying, and debating. Our study does not account for all the ways these books are treated by the colleges assigning them, but the emphasis by a number of institutions on "social action" suggests that they intend for students' behavior to be guided by the reading. One professor who led a small-group discussion about the common book wrote, "As it happens, *Eating Animals* seems not to have made much of an impact on the students. None of the 20 who came to the seminar became a vegetarian. The best I got were vague professions about more ethical eating."<sup>38</sup> In at least some cases, colleges choose books with politically correct themes specifically because they they want to steer students' actions in a particular direction.

## Few Classics

### 4. Very few of the colleges with common reading programs chose classics.

Considering that the vast majority of assignments consists of recently published books, that *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* capitalizes on a racial grievance narrative, and that progressive political perspectives

37 Wood, Peter, "From Diversity to Sustainability: How Campus Ideology Is Born," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 3, 2010, [http://chronicle.com/article/From-Diversity-to/124773/?sid=at&utm\\_source=at&utm\\_medium=en](http://chronicle.com/article/From-Diversity-to/124773/?sid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en).

38 Boyle, Brendan, "Tolstoy in the Slaughterhouse," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 22, 2011, [http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/09/22/essay\\_on\\_a\\_professor\\_s\\_evolution\\_views\\_on\\_first\\_year\\_reading\\_programs](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/09/22/essay_on_a_professor_s_evolution_views_on_first_year_reading_programs).

are a recurring theme, it is plain that colleges and universities have made a decision about how to orient their common reading programs. They have decided to assign books that appeal to students on a surface level rather than introducing them to important works of literature that have long been held as the foundations of cultural conversation.

Of the 190 books assigned as common reading, only five, chosen by four colleges and universities, could be considered “classics.” The five classic books were Henrik Ibsen’s play *An Enemy of the People*; Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone*; Herman Melville’s puzzling short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener”; Mary Shelley’s gothic horror story *Frankenstein*, and Shakespeare’s tragedy *King Lear*. We trust that no argument is needed that these are classic works in the broad sense of exemplary literary achievements that have been held in high regard by many generations of general readers as well as scholars.<sup>39</sup>

It may be worth noting some shared characteristics in this small batch of classics chosen as college common reading. Of the five, three are plays, two are tragic plays, and all are in some way concerned with the dark side of human nature.

When we raised some concern in previous years about the lack of classics, we received some responses along the lines that all those sorts of books are to be found in the regular curriculum, so that there is no need to select among them for common readings. This argument looks shaky. There may be colleges that have general education requirements that include books of enduring philosophy, history, or literature, but apart from the few “great books” programs, such as St. John’s College, these are difficult to find. Moreover, while individual students can and do encounter classic works here and there among non-required courses, the relegation of classics to the elective curriculum means that students never have the opportunity to be part of a community in which any classic work is common intellectual property. Some students may know that Antigone had to choose between loyalty to family and obedience to the law, but most won’t. Some will know that Bartleby’s spirit was crushed by a job in the dead letter section of the post office, but he will be an obscure reference to others. Some will know why Dr. Frankenstein’s monster turns relentlessly against his creator, but many who hear the name think only of Boris Karloff being chased by villagers with torches and pitchforks.

We aren’t advocating for any particular classic as a common reading. Rather we dispute the idea that there is nothing to gain from having a classic as a common reading.

So there is something here that needs to be explained: why is American higher education paying so little attention to common readings of books traditionally held in high esteem among educated people?

Perhaps the problem is that colleges are refusing to pose real intellectual challenges to first-year students. Classic books are indeed a little more difficult than non-classics, and they require the reader to insert himself into a different era from his own. One reason why some colleges may shy away from assigning

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39 We use “classics” in the common sense of writings that are broadly recognized as having stood the test of time. These are books that have gone through many editions and have standing with a general readership as well as high regard among scholars. The National Association of Scholars does not have a canon in the sense of a supposedly exhaustive list of great works of literature, but we acknowledge the test of time.

slightly more demanding works is that they admit significant numbers of “underprepared” students whose need for remedial instruction in English lowers the bar for what their whole class can be expected to read in common. A journalist inquiring at NAS about this study asked, “Where is the balance between high standards and realism?”

While it is better for college students to read something rather than nothing, realism doesn’t have to mean catering to students’ comfort zones. It is not unrealistic to expect students who aspire to a college education to read challenging books. As noted on the Southern Methodist University website, “To come to college means to come into a new relationship with books.”<sup>40</sup> If colleges are admitting students who dislike reading or who are incapable of reading moderately challenging books, then there is a fundamental disconnect between the purpose of higher education and colleges’ actual behavior. But colleges have a good opportunity to remedy the problem using common reading programs—to introduce students to college-level reading and instill in them a taste for time-tested books. Unfortunately, for most it is a missed opportunity.

## THE BOOKS

### Most Assigned Books, Authors

Rebecca Skloot’s nonfiction book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* was by far the most assigned book, selected by 31 colleges and universities. The second most assigned, chosen by 18 institutions, was *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*. It is the author’s memoir, written after learning that a man who shared his name and hometown was convicted of murder. The book’s description reads:

One [Wes Moore] grew up to be a Rhodes Scholar, decorated combat veteran, White House Fellow, and business leader. The other is serving a life sentence in prison for felony murder. Here is the story of two boys and the journey of a generation.<sup>41</sup>

The third most popular book, assigned by nine institutions, was *Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town*, the true story of a ragtag soccer team in Clarkston, Georgia, composed of refugee boys from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.

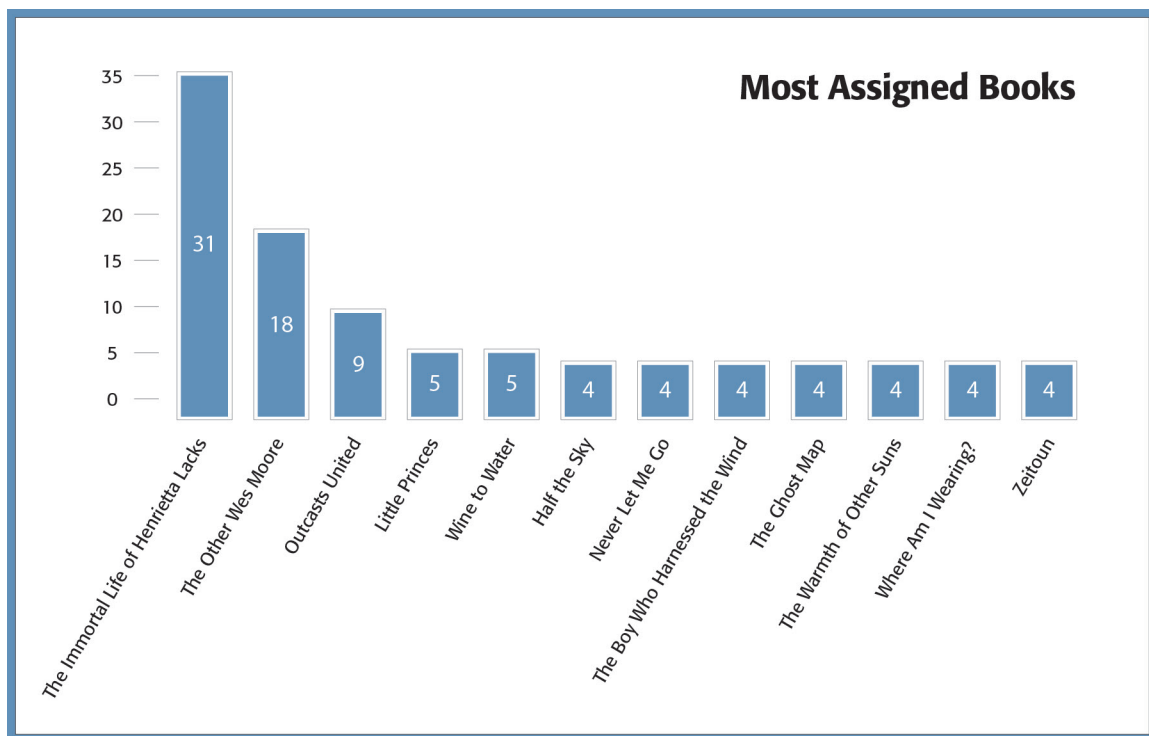
The top 12 assigned common reading books are listed in the chart below.

Perhaps the most striking common factor among these top 12 titles is that, with the exception of *Never Let Me Go*, all are nonfiction. Other smaller themes are that the top two focus on African Americans; two focus on Africans (*Outcasts United* and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*); two focus on science (*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*); and two focus on orphans (*Outcasts United* and *Little Princes*).

40 Southern Methodist University, Central University Libraries, Common Reading 2010, <http://smu.edu/cul/commonreading/2010/index.asp>.

41 *The Other Wes Moore: The Official Home Page of Westley Moore and Home Page for the Book The Other Wes Moore*, <http://theotherwesmoore.com/>.

MOST ASSIGNED BOOKS	
Book	Number of Times Assigned
The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks	31
The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates	18
Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town	9
Little Princes: One Man’s Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal	5
Wine to Water: A Bartender’s Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World	5
Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide	4
Never Let Me Go	4
The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope	4
The Ghost Map: The Story of London’s Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World	4
The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration	4
Where Am I Wearing?: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People that Make Our Clothes	4
Zeitoun	4





The rest of the books were assigned by one, two, or three institutions. Some authors—Dave Eggers, Sherman Alexie, Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, Tracy Kidder, Luis Urrea, Julie Otsuka, Michael Pollan, and Jeannette Walls—had multiple books selected as common reading.

### Categories

We classified all assigned common reading books in one of 24 subject categories, except one, *420 Characters*, a collection of Facebook updates without a unifying subject. While each book can certainly be said to cover multiple topics, for each one we chose the category that most closely matched its central subject. Books are by their nature many-sided. Our aim was to offer a broad overview of the kinds of books colleges are assigning, not to pigeonhole individual books.

MOST ASSIGNED AUTHORS	
Author	Number
Rebecca Skloot	31
Wes Moore	18
Warren St. John	9
Dave Eggers	5
Conor Grennan	5
Doc Hendley	5
Isabel Wilkerson	4
Jay Allison & Dan Gediman	4
Jeannette Walls	4
Kazuo Ishiguro	4
Kelsey Timmerman	4
Nicholas Kristof & Sheryl WuDunn	4
Steven Johnson	4
William Kamkwamba & Bryan Mealer	4

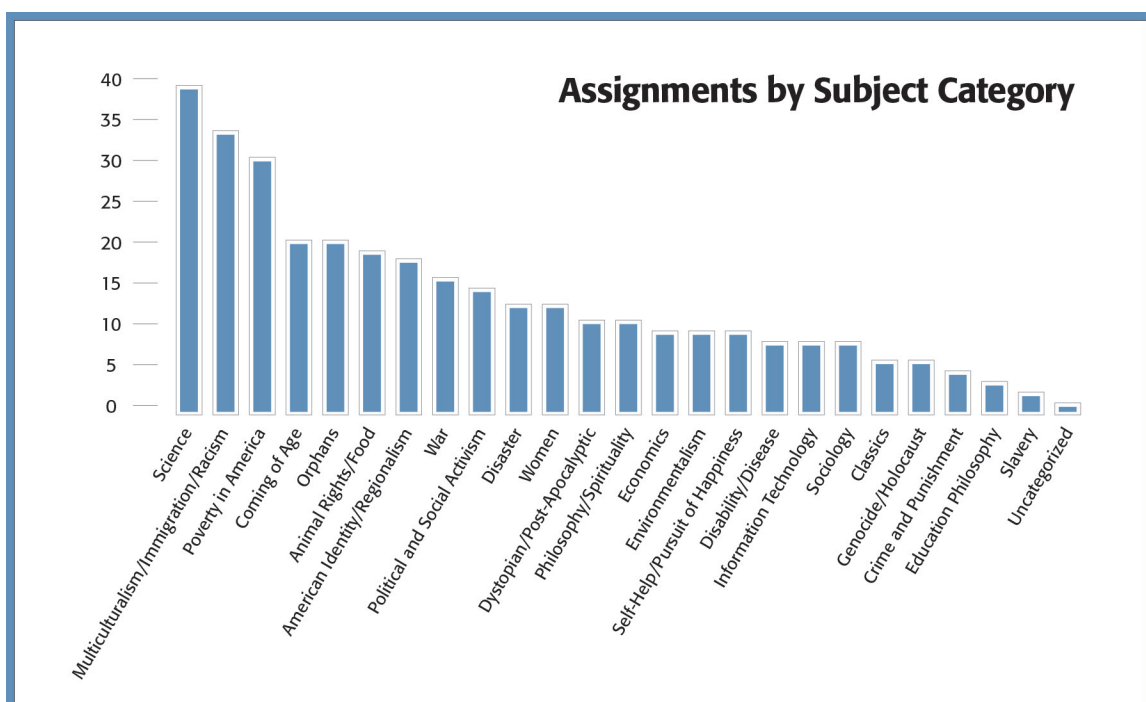
To some categories we gave multiple names. For example, one category is “Animal Rights/Food.” We put these together because books on animal rights tend to treat the issue of eating animals, and books on food and farming tend to treat the issue of how animals are raised.

The top subject category in 2012-2013 for common reading books was Science, but only six individual books were in this category. Thirty-one of the 39 assignments in Science were of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, a book that might have fit in several other categories, such as Multiculturalism, Women, or Disease. (For more on how we categorized this book, see the “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks” section above.) The next most popular subject categories were Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism, Poverty in America, Coming of Age, and Orphans. The chart and bar graph below show all subject categories and the number of common reading assignments made in each.

### Themes

In addition to categorizing each book by subject, we observed various themes running through a number of books. Many of these were in the form of a focus on a particular racial or ethnic group. Books with an African American theme far outnumbered those with other racial and ethnic themes. Of the 133 colleges that selected books with a racial or ethnic theme, 66 (50 percent) chose books that focused on African Americans (31 of these assignments were of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*). This theme was the most frequent one last year as well.

<b>ASSIGNMENTS BY SUBJECT CATEGORY</b>			
<b>Subject Category</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Subject Category (cont.)</b>	<b>Number</b>
Science	39	Economics	9
Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism	33	Environmentalism	9
Poverty in America	30	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	9
Coming of Age	20	Disability/Disease	7
Orphans	20	Information Technology	7
Animal Rights/Food	18	Sociology	7
American Identity/Regionalism	17	Classics	5
War	15	Genocide/Holocaust	5
Political and Social Activism	14	Crime and Punishment	4
Disaster	12	Education Philosophy	3
Women	12	Slavery	2
Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	10	Uncategorized	1
Philosophy/Spirituality	10		



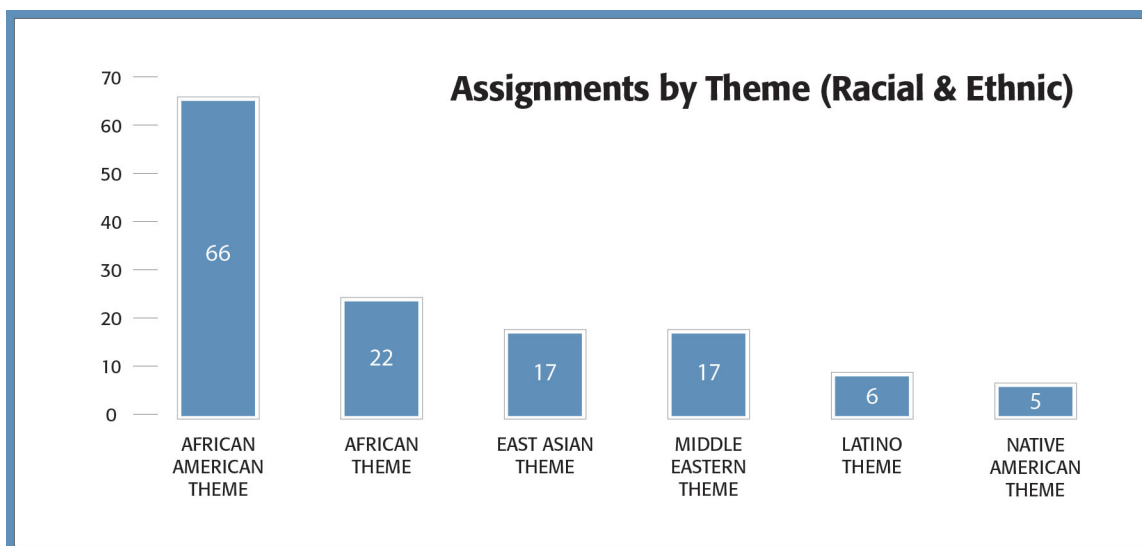
The chart to the right and bar graph below show all the racial and ethnic themes and the number of assignments in which they appeared.<sup>42</sup>

Other non-racial/ethnic themes emerged: 58 assignments were of books that have or are about to have a film version (once again, 31 of these were of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, of which an HBO film version is planned); 27 assignments were of books that had an environmentalism theme; seven assignments were of books with a Hurricane Katrina theme. The Katrina-themed books were *Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, and Life in New Orleans*; *Zeitoun*; *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*; and *Wading Home: A Novel of New Orleans*.

We also made note of format, with a theme for comic books and one for books translated from another language. The comic-book format books were *The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media*; *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*; *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey*; and *The Complete Persepolis*. All four are nonfiction.

*The Life Before Us* was originally in French; *An Enemy of the People* in Norwegian; *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* in Italian; *Antigone* in Greek.

<b>ASSIGNMENTS BY THEME (RACIAL AND ETHNIC)</b>	
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Number</b>
▲ Indicates an African American theme	66
☀ Indicates an African theme	22
⊕ Indicates an East Asian theme	17
✦ Indicates a Middle Eastern theme	17
★ Indicates a Latino theme	6
■ Indicates a Native American theme	5



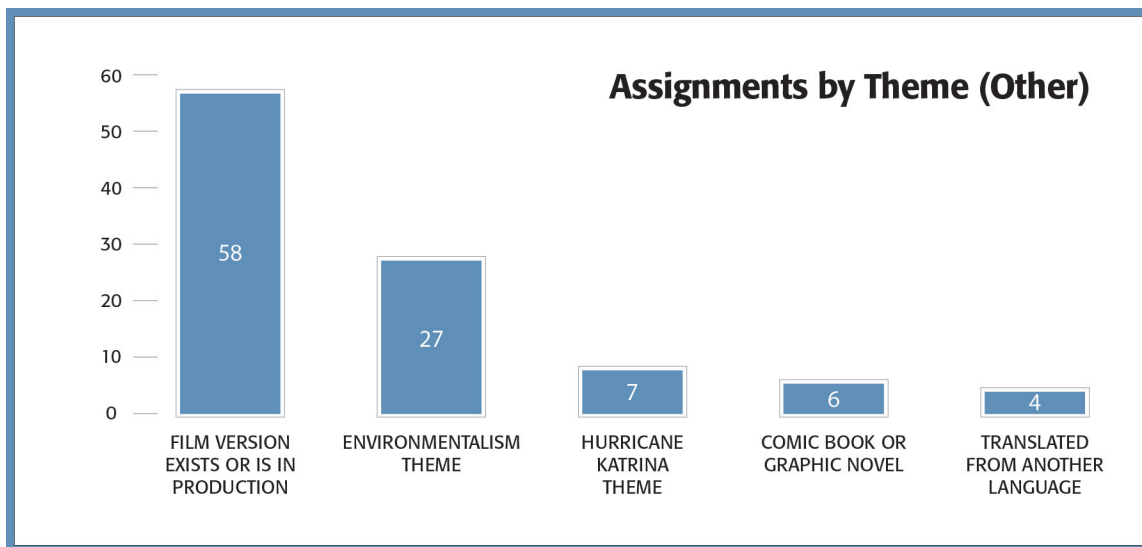
<sup>42</sup> When compiling our list of common reading assignments, we used symbols to indicate themes. These symbols appear in Appendix II, which contains the complete list of books assigned as common reading in 2012-2013.

ASSIGNMENTS BY THEME (OTHER)	
Themes	Number
★ Indicates a film version exists or is in production	66
🌐 Indicates environmentalism theme	22
🌀 Indicates Hurricane Katrina theme	17
📖 Indicates comic book or graphic novel	17
✚ Indicates books translated from another language	6

Environmentalism is a new theme we added this year. Although we also have a subject category for this, there were other books not in the Environmentalism category that had themes of environmentalism. For example, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Eating Animals*, chosen by the College of Charleston, is categorized under Animal Rights/Food, but one of the arguments Foer gives for vegetarianism is that factory farms contribute to global warming (the underlying assumption is that readers want to prevent this). Likewise, *Arctic Rising*, chosen by Bluffton University, is classified

as Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic; it is set on an earth that is largely submerged because of global warming. The plot hinges on whether global warming can be reversed by a group called the Gaia Corporation. In cases such as these, environmental messages were packaged in books that did not present themselves as environmental treatises.

The chart above and bar graph below show all the non-racial/ethnic themes and the number of assignments in which they appeared.



### Genres

We also classified books assigned as common reading according to their genre: memoir, biography, other nonfiction, fiction, essay, drama, and poetry.

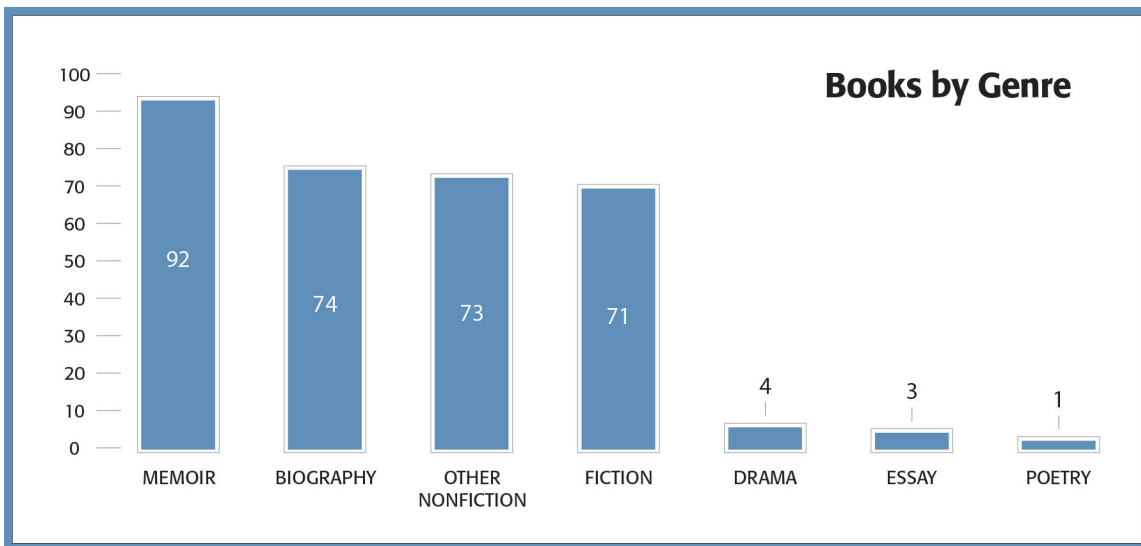
An overwhelming number of common reading assignments were nonfiction, and the top genre was memoir. Memoirs, biographies, essays, and other nonfiction combined comprised 242 assignments,

whereas fiction comprised only 71. This trend is in keeping with previous selections for common reading; in 2011-2012 memoirs and biographies were the most popular genres.

The lack of fiction in common reading programs was a source of disappointment to a classics professor at the University of North Carolina, Brendan Boyle, whose recommendation of Tolstoy’s short story *Hadji Murat* was not chosen for 2011. In “Tolstoy in the Slaughterhouse,” he wrote, “the paucity of fiction in these programs is stunning.” He argued that good fiction has the ability to stretch students’ minds to grasp difficult truths: “Reading fiction doesn’t inoculate you against bad ideas. It doesn’t make you a more moral person either, many ‘save-the-humanities’ cases notwithstanding. But reading fiction makes you a better reader. Somehow, administrators of these programs seem to have lost sight of that.”<sup>43</sup>

One reason the memoir genre is most prominent may be that self-reflection is becoming the main writing style in U.S. classrooms.<sup>44</sup> Blogs, journal entries, and personal histories are the format for much of the writing assignments in schools and universities, and college application questions almost always solicit personal statements.

BOOKS BY GENRE	
Genres	Number
M = Memoir	92
B = Biography	74
N = Other Nonfiction	73
F = Fiction	71
D = Drama	4
E = Essay	3
P = Poetry	1



43 Boyle, Brendan, “Tolstoy in the Slaughterhouse,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 22, 2011, [http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/09/22/essay\\_on\\_a\\_professor\\_s\\_evolution\\_views\\_on\\_first\\_year\\_reading\\_programs](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/09/22/essay_on_a_professor_s_evolution_views_on_first_year_reading_programs).

44 Bauerlein, Mark, “Teaching Writing Through Personal Reflection: Bad Idea,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 7, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2013/02/07/teaching-writing-through-personal-reflection-bad-idea/>.

The dearth of fiction assignments in common reading reflects a trend in K-12 education, where the Common Core State Standards, now adopted by forty-five states, require a hefty dose of nonfiction reading (referred to as “Informational Texts”). Specifically, for all reading in each grade the Standards require 50 percent in grades K-5 and 70 percent in grades 6-12 to be “informational.”<sup>45,46</sup>

Sandra Stotsky, who served on Common Core’s validation committee, wrote in an issue brief that this allocation will likely reduce the time that teachers can devote to reading fiction. “By reducing literary study,” Stotsky wrote, “Common Core decreases students’ opportunity to develop the analytical thinking once developed in just an elite group by the vocabulary, structure, style, ambiguity, point of view, figurative language, and irony in classic literary texts.”<sup>47</sup>

Fiction and nonfiction are both part of an educated person’s repertoire. They train the mind and condition the soul in varied and overlapping ways. We need both, parables and plain speaking, each in its place, each illuminating the other. There is something lopsided in the common readings: a readiness to discard the imagined texture of life for the supposedly factual.

A small number of common reading assignments were either essays or plays. The three essays are journal articles on liberal education compiled in a reading packet by Loras College. Three of the four plays are classics: *An Enemy of the People*, *King Lear*, and *Antigone*. The other is the 2010 play *Clybourne Park*.

### **What’s Different This Year**

We compared the results of this year’s study to those of 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 and found several changes among the books assigned:

- Out of 190 books this year, 141 are new since last year.
- *This I Believe* and *This I Believe II* are no longer top choices. In 2010-2011 they were the most assigned books, and in 2011-2012 the second most assigned. This year they are not even in the top 12. Meanwhile, *The Other Wes Moore*, which two years ago was not assigned at all, gained popularity and became the second most assigned book.
- While there were fewer books explicitly focused on the environment, environmental themes ran through books on other subjects, such as Science and Animal Rights/Food.
- We added five new subject categories: Crime and Punishment, Education Philosophy, Orphans, Political and Social Activism, and Sociology.
- We split Animal Rights and Environmentalism into two categories and War, Disaster, and Genocide/Holocaust into three categories.

45 Common Core State Standards Initiative, English Language Arts Standards, Introduction, Key Design Consideration, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/introduction/key-design-consideration>.

46 Diane Ravitch’s blog, “Why Does David Coleman Dislike Fiction?” Comment, David Coleman, <http://dianeravitch.net/2012/05/19/why-does-david-coleman-dislike-fiction/comment-page-1/#comment-738>.

47 Stotsky, Sandra, “Common Core Standards’ Devastating Impact on Literary Study and Analytical Thinking,” Heritage Foundation, December 11, 2012, [http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/pdf/ib3800.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/pdf/ib3800.pdf).

- We changed the Fantasy/Sci-Fi category to Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic; the Spirituality/Philosophy/New Age category to Philosophy/Spirituality; and Historical Depictions of American Society to American Identity/Regionalism.
- We replaced the subject category Islamic World with a Middle Eastern theme, which applied to 17 assignments this year. Two years ago (2010-2011 academic year), books that focused on the Islamic world were more popular choices for common reading and were assigned by 27 institutions. Since then, controversy over Brooklyn College's choice of *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*<sup>48</sup> and over Greg Mortenson's books (such as *Three Cups of Tea*) after a CBS exposé accused him of making fraudulent claims in his nonfiction,<sup>49</sup> seems to have contributed to the decline in books focusing on Islamic culture.
- Three small subject categories from last year did not appear this year: Forgiveness/Redemption, Homosexuality, and Rapacious Capitalism.

### **What's Missing from Common Reading**

While part of what we did in this study was to notice the trends in assignments, another part was to notice the gaps. What is missing from the body of literature that makes up common reading assignments also reveals something about colleges and universities.

As noted above, classic literature and books published before 1990 were extremely scarce, and fiction was eclipsed by nonfiction. Poetry was also extremely rare.

Furthermore, there were no classics of history (e.g., Thucydides, Livy, Gibbon, Carlyle, Parkman), and history of any kind was very thinly represented. There were no biographies of, nor autobiographies, speeches, or writings by, American political leaders. There were no works by ancient philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero); no works of the Enlightenment (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Diderot, Samuel Johnson); and among writers of the Renaissance, only one play by Shakespeare was assigned. Among acknowledged masters of American literature, such as Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, James, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Twain, etc., only Herman Melville was represented, and only in one short story. There were no classical works of Christian thought (Aquinas, Augustine, Pascal, Lewis, the Bible), none in other major religious traditions, and no scientific classics (e.g. Bacon, Galileo, Darwin, Einstein).

On the other hand, bestselling serial books were also missing from common reading. No *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Game of Thrones*, or *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* here, and only one assignment of *The Hunger Games*. Colleges and universities may perhaps believe that because their common reading selections move beyond this sort of pop fiction, they are raising the bar and expanding students' horizons.

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48 Thorne, Ashley, "Common Reading Controversy at Brooklyn College," *National Association of Scholars*, August 27, 2010, [http://www.nas.org/articles/Common\\_Reading\\_Controversy\\_at\\_Brooklyn\\_College](http://www.nas.org/articles/Common_Reading_Controversy_at_Brooklyn_College).

49 Thorne, Ashley, "Campus Favorite Greg Mortenson, Writing Lies?" *National Association of Scholars*, August 26, 2011, [http://www.nas.org/articles/Campus\\_Favorite\\_Greg\\_Mortenson\\_Writing\\_Lies](http://www.nas.org/articles/Campus_Favorite_Greg_Mortenson_Writing_Lies).

How is *Eating Animals* different from *Twilight* (other than the obvious dietary implications)? Dwight MacDonald's distinction in 1960 between Mass Culture—"or better Masscult, since it really isn't culture at all"—and Midcult is illuminating. He wrote:

This intermediate form—let us call it Midcult—has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf. In Masscult the trick is plain—to please the crowd by any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.<sup>50</sup>

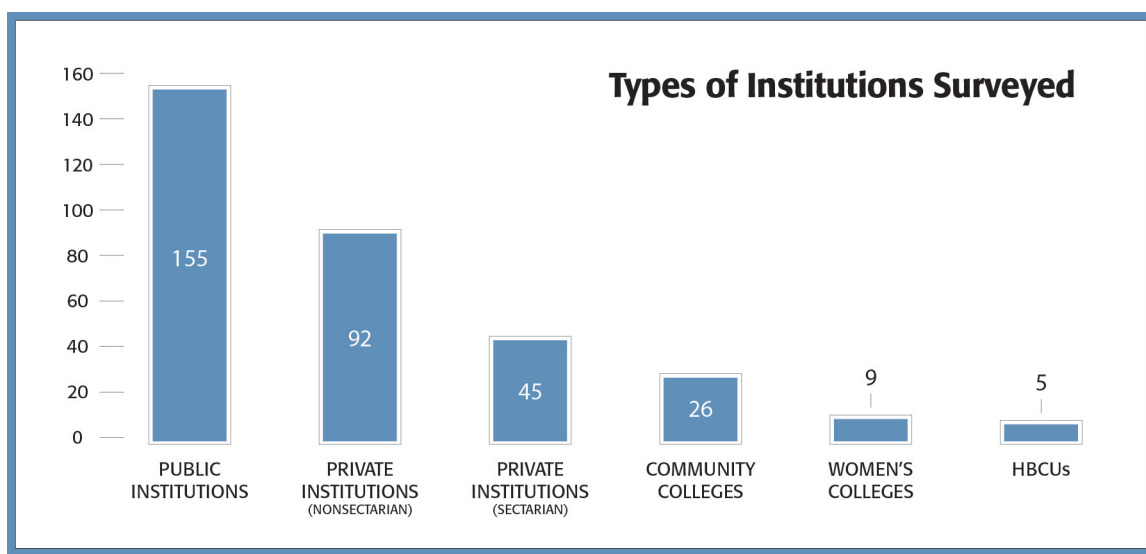
Common reading selections are, on the whole, Midcult. They seem to be above pop culture but fall far short of the best books and remain, in general, politically correct crowd-pleasers.

By declining to assign works from formative eras in history, colleges are implying that students have little to learn from the past. Or perhaps they simply think students' attention spans are too limited for them to want to pick up such a book and read it on their own. But colleges don't make the effort to find out. As a result, common reading programs remain, merely, common.

## THE COLLEGES

In addition to categorizing the books assigned as common reading, we made observations about the kinds of colleges and universities that have common reading programs. We listed colleges by type and by whether they are top-ranked in *U.S. News & World Report*.

Institution Type	Number
Public Institutions	155
Private Institutions (Nonsectarian)	92
Private Institutions (Sectarian)	45
Community Colleges	26
Women's Colleges	9
HBCUs	5



50 McDonald, Dwight, "Masscult & Midcult," *Partisan Review* Spring 27.4 (1960).



## Type

We classified each institution as one of four types: public university, private sectarian (religious), private nonsectarian, and community college. We also noted single-sex institutions (in this case, women's colleges) and HBCUs. None of the institutions in our study were for-profit colleges or universities.

## Rankings

Many of the colleges and universities that have common reading programs are nationally ranked. We noted which of the 309 institutions were listed by *U.S. News & World Report* as being in either the top 100 National Universities or top 100 National Liberal Arts Colleges. Twenty-six of the institutions we studied rank among the top 100 National Universities, and 23 rank with the top 100 National Liberal Arts Colleges. The remaining 260 institutions are not ranked on either list.

Ranking Category	Number
National Universities	26
National Liberal Arts Colleges	23
Unranked	260

Colleges that have common reading programs are largely middle-tier. A few, however, are Ivy League:

- Brown University (*Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*)
- Cornell University (*The Life Before Us*)
- Dartmouth University (*Strange as This Weather Has Been*)

Other elites include:

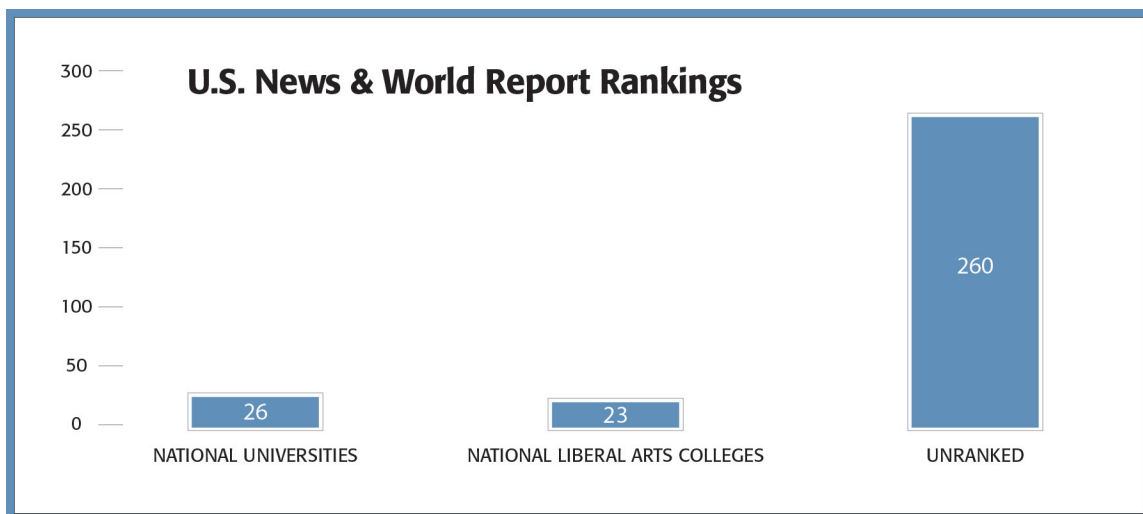
- Duke University (*State of Wonder: A Novel*)
- Georgetown University (*The Tiger's Wife: A Novel*)
- Macalester College (*The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World*)
- Northwestern University (*Never a City So Real: A Walk in Chicago*)
- Vanderbilt University (*Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*)
- Vassar College (*Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food*)

## AN OPPORTUNITY

Common reading programs offer an excellent platform from which to engage the campus community in conversation on a single theme, introduce new students to college-level reading, expand students' thought lives, and explore the values of the college or university. Shapers of common reading programs ought to make the most of this opportunity.

Some do. While many choices, such as *Where Am I Wearing?* (Cedar Crest College, Ball State University, Texas State University, Winthrop University), *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Thomas College), and *Outliers* (College





of the Redwoods, Humboldt State University) seem more like book club selections inspired by bestseller lists than works of intellectual savor, there are some notable exceptions.

These higher-aiming choices include the classics listed above, as well as the essays on education philosophy assigned by Loras College,<sup>51</sup> *Ludlow* (Colorado Mountain College), an ambitious verse novel, and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a perceptive tale about civilizational collapse. The Loras College anthology consists of three very brief essays and may not stand as a very good example of a common book, but the essays are at least intellectually serious.

We commend colleges and universities for promoting reading, and for choosing books rather than other media (past choices have included a film, a mural, and students' own DNA samples) as the centerpieces of these common intellectual experiences.

Nationwide, leisure reading—shown to correspond to numerous lifestyle benefits—is on the decline, especially among the college-aged and college graduates. A 2007 report on reading habits by the National Endowment for the Arts found that “74%–80% of college freshmen and seniors read 0–4 books on their own during the school year,” and indeed that “College attendance no longer guarantees active reading habits.”<sup>52</sup>

The same study, *To Read or Not to Read*, found correlations between reading and flourishing: “Regular reading not only boosts the likelihood of an individual’s academic and economic success—facts that are not especially surprising—but it also seems to awaken a person’s social and civic sense.” Unfortunately, with young adults reading little that is not required for school or work, such flourishing stands at risk:

51 The three essays are “Only Connect...’ The Goals of a Liberal Education” by William Cronon (1998), “On the Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education” by Robert Harris (1991), and “They Knew Calculus When They Left: The Thinking Disconnect Between High School and University” by Kevin St. Jarre (2008).

52 National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, November 2007, <http://www.nea.gov/research/toread.pdf>.

There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. [...]

With lower levels of reading and writing ability, people do less well in the job market. Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement... And deficient readers are less likely to become active in civic and cultural life, most notably in volunteerism and voting. [...]

It is a serious national problem. If, at the current pace, America continues to lose the habit of regular reading, the nation will suffer substantial economic, social, and civic setbacks.

In encouraging leisure reading, common book programs are thus a vestige of a disappearing custom. But because the common reading programs are in the vast majority of cases not connected to the award of college credit, colleges have no strong way to compel students to read the books they select. Usually when the reading is optional, and especially if the book is challenging, students may simply ignore it. Perhaps this helps explain colleges' compulsion to choose recent, "relevant" books on popular current issues: they hope this will entice students to do something they aren't required to do.

If students are reading something, that's better than their reading nothing. But most colleges and universities can do a better job of aiming higher and inspiring students to do the same.

## **ANALYSIS**

We declared at the outset that studying this trend can illuminate colleges' values. So what broad traits can we learn about colleges from the trends in their common reading programs?

First, colleges have worthy goals for common reading. They want to build community, engage in a campus-wide conversation, set academic expectations, and encourage reading.

Second, colleges try to simulate a core requirement. In the absence of true core curricula (which have been replaced at most colleges and universities by general education distribution requirements), they aim to give students the opportunity to partake in a shared intellectual experience.

Third, colleges often do what other colleges do. They follow the crowd when selecting common reading and pick the same books, or books in the same style and reading level.

Fourth, colleges often pick books with overtly political themes. They select books that glorify "green" living, disparage free market economics, emphasize racial division, and depict government policy as the answer to the problem of poverty.

Fifth, colleges typically ignore time-tested books and classics. They skip over books that have been held in high regard by many generations of readers and scholars, and instead they choose ones published in recent years, with living authors, focused on recent events and current cultural issues.

Sixth, colleges typically settle for Midcult books. They select as common reading popular books that affect to have higher standards than mass culture books but are in fact merely faddish.

Common reading programs can also illuminate some aspects of colleges' role in shaping American culture.

Reading for pleasure continues to decline among young people and college graduates, and it is possible that one reason for this is that colleges are failing to instill in students a love of books. As the study *To Read or Not to Read*, cited above, shows, there is a correlation between lack of reading and diminished likelihood for career success, physical activity, and civic participation.

Not only do college students lack shared intellectual experiences with each other, now Americans as a whole lack shared intellectual experiences. "These collective moments that we used to have, that Americans did as a culture—nowadays, those things don't exist," said Don Troop, who for seven years published "What They're Reading on College Campuses," a column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.<sup>53</sup>

Common reading programs are a thin and fraying thread to a collegiate past in which students in the ordinary course of their education, both in high school and in college, absorbed a substantial body of shared texts. Faculty members a few generations ago could assume without a moment's doubt that every freshman would have easy familiarity with *Julius Caesar*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Odyssey*, the Declaration of Independence, *Genesis*, and many others once considered essential. That level of common literary and intellectual experience is gone. Some students today reach college having read such books, but many have not. The baseline of common intellectual experience has been erased and colleges have to cope with the results. The advent of the Common Core State Standards in K-12 education may create a new baseline, but those standards emphasize "informational texts" and have a limited place for literature. If a new baseline emerges, it will still leave college students with a thin level of common intellectual and especially humanistic experience.

Assigning a single book, a collection of essays, or a pairing of books as common reading is surely better than nothing, but common reading programs of the sort we have described in this report cannot repair the large gap in learning. That would require more than a one-off assignment. Common reading in a truly meaningful sense requires a commitment to sustained reading as well, so that students can discover and involve themselves in the way books speak to each other.

We realize that this broader goal has little prospect in contemporary higher education, which remains focused on the premise that each student should chart his or her own path through the world of ideas and letters. In the absence of any turn back to the ideal of a broader common learning, the thin thread of common reading programs is all that remains. Short of establishing true core curricula at the high school and higher education levels, American colleges and universities can use common book programs to build intellectual friendship among students and the nation—and they can inspire a love of reading. One way they can do so is by making better book choices.

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53 Wu, Angela, "What Princeton Students Are Reading," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, January 18, 2012, <http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2012/01/18/pages/1490/index.xml?page=2&>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges and universities face various pitfalls in choosing a book for common reading. Perhaps the first and most important is that the task of selection is often handed to individuals who are not suited for the job. Committees may include people who lack the habit of good reading or read narrowly within a specialization. Sometimes it appears the committee includes individuals who possess a thin knowledge of the curriculum. One reason why the selections tend to be bland, contemporary, and lightweight texts is that such texts reflect the constrained intellectual horizons of the committee members. If a college chooses to proceed with a common reading program, it will achieve very little if it does not first assign the task of selection to serious, broadly-educated, and well-read individuals who also understand the shape and trajectory of the curriculum. The following recommendations proceed from the idea that the college has first convened the kind of committee that can actually do the task to which it has been appointed.

1. Seek diversity—the intellectual kind. Mix it up. Bioethics, healthy eating, and oppression are important themes but so are human unity, courage, fidelity, redemption, self-sacrifice, fellowship, and truth, among others.
2. Seek 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 (i.e., *War and Peace*). In some cases, colleges would do well to choose long books but 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 (i.e., President Kennedy’s “Ask not” inaugural address).
3. Seek texts that are just a bit over students’ heads, but not so far that they are beyond reach. This excludes many works of classical antiquity. Sophocles is best read with the guidance of an instructor. Nietzsche invites wild misreadings from those who lack the philosophical context. Select books that are not found in high school curricula and that represent the reading level you would like students to attain, not the reading level you think they are already on.
4. Seek works that are not contemptuous of humanity or dyed in profound cynicism. Some such books (by, for instance, Samuel Beckett or H. L. Mencken) belong in the college curriculum but are a poor welcome mat to 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.
5. In fiction, seek works that exemplify elegance of language and a degree of complexity, along with moral seriousness.
6. In nonfiction, seek works that exemplify important ideas lucidly argued and writers who take their rhetorical task seriously.
7. Pay deliberate attention to important books from earlier eras. Don’t be dazzled by the contemporary or the idea that students will automatically find the present more

“relevant” than the past. College is a place where the claims of authors who lie outside the preoccupations of the moment should be respected.

8. Consider that the book you choose will be more than a reading for the students. It will also be a public representation of the college’s academic standards, values, and reputation.
  - A book that is undemanding or merely popular says that a college is intellectually superficial.
  - A novelty book says that a college doesn’t take itself with sufficient seriousness and is intellectually immature. Johnson State University assigned *420 Characters*, a series of short stories written in the number of characters permitted for a Facebook status update. Millersville University and the University of Maryland, College Park assigned *The Influencing Machine*, a cartoon version of NPR reporter Brooke Gladstone’s aperçu on the media.
  - A book that aggressively promotes a political agenda says that a college is ideologically narrow.
  - A book that has achieved celebrity but hasn’t really been tested by time risks embarrassment, as when Greg Mortenson’s memoir, *Three Cups of Tea*, the third most widely-assigned common reading in 2010-2011, was discovered to have presented a substantially false account of the facts. (*Three Cups of Tea* has not been assigned since then.)
9. Be wary of assigning any book that all the members of the committee haven’t actually read.
10. Consult with others who read widely and well and who are intimately acquainted with good books. Ask several generations of alumni, “Which book that you read in college influenced you the most?” and consider their answers as candidates for common reading.
11. Consult outside sources, such as the National Association of Scholars’ list (see Appendix IV: Recommended Books for College Common Reading) or the National Endowment for the Arts program The Big Read.
12. Consider pairing new with old. Try assigning two books for the year: one from an earlier era and one more recent book that complement each another.

**APPENDIX I: KEY AND TOTALS**

<b>Subject Category</b>	<b>Number</b>
American Identity/Regionalism	17
Animal Rights/Food	18
Classics	5
Coming of Age	20
Crime and Punishment	4
Disability/Disease	7
Disaster	12
Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	10
Economics	9
Education Philosophy	3
Environmentalism	9
Genocide/Holocaust	5
Information Technology	7
Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism	33
Orphans	20
Philosophy/Spirituality	10
Political and Social Activism	14
Poverty in America	30
Science	39
Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	9
Slavery	2
Sociology	7
Uncategorized	1
War	15
Women	12

Ranking Category	Number	Symbol
National Universities	26	Ω
National Liberal Arts Colleges	23	§
Unranked	260	none

Themes	Number
▲ Indicates an African American theme	66
★ Indicates a film version exists or is in production	58
🌍 Indicates environmentalism theme	27
☀️ Indicates an African theme	22
⊕ Indicates an East Asian theme	17
✦ Indicates a Middle Eastern theme	17
© Indicates Hurricane Katrina theme	7
★ Indicates a Latino theme	6
■ Indicates a Native American theme	5
📖 Indicates comic book or graphic novel	5
✚ Indicates books translated from another language	4

Genres	Number
M = Memoir	92
B = Biography	74
N = Other Nonfiction	73
F = Fiction	71
D = Drama	4
E = Essay	3
P = Poetry	1



**APPENDIX II: BOOKS CHOSEN AS COMMON READING  
2012-2013: FULL LIST BY INSTITUTION NAME**

<b>College/University</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Book</b>
Adams State College	Public	Enrique's Journey
Adelphi University	Private, nonsectarian	The Omnivore's Dilemma
Adler School of Professional Psychology	Private, nonsectarian (grad school)	Left Neglected
§ Agnes Scott College	Private, nonsectarian (women's)	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Albion College	Private, nonsectarian	A School for My Village: A Promise to the Orphans of Nyaka
Amarillo College	Community	The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl
American University	Private, nonsectarian	The End of Country: Dispatched from the Frack Zone
Appalachian State University	Public	Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer
Aquinas College (Michigan) (honors college)	Private, sectarian	The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
Armstrong Atlantic University	Public	The Omnivore's Dilemma
Assumption College	Private, sectarian	The Last American Man
Atlantic Cape Community College	Community	War Dances
Austin Peay State University	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Baker University	Private, nonsectarian	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
Ball State University	Public	Where Am I Wearing? A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes
Bard College at Simon's Rock	Private, nonsectarian	The Buddha in the Attic
Barry University	Private, sectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Baruch College	Public	Brooklyn: A Novel
§ Bates College	Private, nonsectarian	The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It

Author	Year	Subject Category	Genre	Theme
Nazario, Sonia	2006	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	B	✧
Pollan, Michael	2006	Animal Rights/Food	N	🌐
Genova, Lisa	2011	Women	F	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Kaguri, Twesigye Jackson	2011	Orphans	M	■
Egan, Timothy	2005	Disaster	N	🌐
McGraw, Seamus	2011	Environmentalism	N	🌐
Carpenter, Novella	2009	Animal Rights/Food	M	🌐
Alexie, Sherman	2009	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	■
Pollan, Michael	2006	Animal Rights/Food	N	
Gilbert, Elizabeth	2003	American Identity/Regionalism	N	
Alexie, Sherman	2009	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	■
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☀
Timmerman, Kelsey	2008	Economics	N	
Otsuka, Julie	2011	Women	F	⊕
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Tóibín, Colm	2009	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	
Gutmann, Amy & Denis Thompson	2012	Political and Social Activism	N	

Baylor University (honors program)	Private, sectarian	The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World
Bellevue College	Public	Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future
Belmont Abbey College	Private, sectarian	A Canticle for Leibowitz
Belmont University	Private, sectarian	Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy
Berry College	Private, sectarian	The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe
Bluffton University	Private, sectarian	Arctic Rising
Boise State University	Public	The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird
Bowling Green State University	Public	A Pearl in the Storm: How I Found My Heart in the Middle of the Ocean
Ω Brandeis University	Private, nonsectarian	When the Emperor Was Divine
Brenau University Women's College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	Matched
Brookhaven College	Community	In the Sea There Are Crocodiles
Brooklyn College	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Brown University	Private, nonsectarian	Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution
Butler University	Private, nonsectarian	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
California State University, Bakersfield	Public	The House on Mango Street
California State University, Channel Islands	Public	The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
California State University, Chico	Public	Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What to Do About It
California State University, Northridge	Public	One Amazing Thing
California State University, Sacramento	Public	One Amazing Thing
Carroll College (Montana)	Private, sectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Ω Case Western Reserve University	Private, nonsectarian	The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope

Johnson, Steven	2006	Disability/Disease	N	
McKibben, Bill	2007	Environmentalism	N	🌐
Miller, Walter M.	1959	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	
Carter, Stephen	1999	Philosophy/Spirituality	N	
Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach	2011	Women	B	✦
Buckell, Tobias	2012	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	🌐
Barcott, Bruce	2008	Animal Rights/Food	B	🌐
McClure, Toti Murden	2009	Women	M	
Otsuka, Julie	2003	War	F	⊕
Condie, Ally	2010	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Geda, Fabio	2010	Coming of Age	F	✦ ✦
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Rappleye, Charles	2006	Slavery	B	▲
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☀
Cisneros, Sandra	1991	Coming of Age	F	
Diaz, Junot	2007	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	★
Glennon, Robert	2009	Environmentalism	N	🌐
Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee	2010	Disaster	F	
Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee	2010	Disaster	F	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Kamkwamba, William & Bryan Mealer	2009	Science	M	☀

Catawba College	Private, nonsectarian	The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right
Cedar Crest College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	Where Am I Wearing?: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes
Central College	Private, nonsectarian	Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal
Century College	Community	The Grace of Silence: A Memoir
Chadbourne Residential College (University of Wisconsin, Madison)	Public	Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago
Chaffey College	Community	The Glass Castle: A Memoir
Chesapeake College	Community	The Cellist of Sarajevo
Clemson University	Public	Wading Home: A Novel of New Orleans
Cleveland State University	Public	In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto
Coastal Carolina University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
College of Charleston	Public	Eating Animals
College of the Redwoods	Community	Outliers: The Story of Success
Collin College	Community	My Dyslexia
Colorado Mountain College	Private, nonsectarian	Ludlow
Community College of Baltimore County	Community	No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process
Concordia College	Private, sectarian	Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur
Cosumnes River College	Community	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Cornell College	Private, nonsectarian	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Ω Cornell University	Private, nonsectarian	The Life Before Us
Cuesta College	Community	The Language of Flowers: A Novel
Cumberland University	Private, nonsectarian	Our Patchwork Nation

Gawande, Atul	2009	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	N	
Timmerman, Kelsey	2008	Economics	M	
Grennan, Conor	2011	Orphans	M	
Norris, Michele	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	▲
Jones, LeAlan, Dave Isay, & Lloyd Newman	1997	Poverty in America	M	▲
Walls, Jeannette	2006	Coming of Age	M	
Galloway, Steven	2008	War	F	
Story, Rosalyn	2010	Disaster	F	☉
Pollan, Michael	2008	Animal Rights/Food	N	🌐
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Foer, Jonathan Safran	2010	Animal Rights/Food	M	🌐
Gladwell, Malcolm	2008	Sociology	N	
Schultz, Philip	2011	Disability/Disease	M	
Mason, David	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	P	
Beavan, Colin	2010	Environmentalism	M	🌐 ★
Bashir, Halima & Damien Lewis	2008	Genocide/Holocaust	M	☀️
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Gary, Romain	1975	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	+ ★
Diffenbaugh, Vanessa	2012	Orphans	F	
Chinni, Dante & James Gimpel	2011	American Identity/Regionalism	N	

Ω Dartmouth College	Private, nonsectarian	Strange As This Weather Has Been
§ Davidson College	Private, nonsectarian	Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey
Delaware County Community College	Community	Girl in Translation
Delaware State University	Public (HBCU)	Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd
DePaul University	Private, sectarian	The Book Thief
Drexel University	Private, nonsectarian	Pig Candy: Taking My Father South, Taking My Father Home
Ω Duke University	Private, nonsectarian	State of Wonder: A Novel
§ Earlham College	Private, sectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
East Carolina University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Eastern Illinois University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Eastern Kentucky University	Public	Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals
Eastfield College	Community	Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal
Edgewood College	Private, nonsectarian	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Elizabethtown College	Private, nonsectarian	The End of Country: Dispatched from the Frack Zone
Elon University	Private, nonsectarian	Zeitoun
Emmanuel College (Massachusetts)	Private, sectarian	Zeitoun
Evergreen State College	Public	Listening Is an Act of Love
Fairmont State University	Public	Frankenstein
Fayetteville State University	Public (HBCU)	The Wealth Cure: Putting Money in Its Place
Florida Gulf Coast University	Public	The Things They Carried
Florida International University	Public	I'm Down: A Memoir

Pancake, Ann	2007	Animal Rights/Food	F	🌐
Tran, GB	2011	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	🏠 ⊕
Kwok, Jean	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	⊕
Williams, Thomas Chatterton	2011	Coming of Age	M	▲
Zusak, Markus	2006	Orphans	F	
Funderburg, Lise	2008	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	▲
Patchett, Ann	2012	Philosophy/Spirituality	F	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Herzog, Hal	2011	Animal Rights/Food	N	🌐
Schlosser, Eric	2005	Animal Rights/Food	N	🌐
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
McGraw, Seamus	2011	Environmentalism	N	🌐
Eggers, Dave	2009	Disaster	B	🌀
Eggers, Dave	2009	Disaster	B	🌀
Isay, Dave	2008	American Identity/Regionalism	N	
Shelley, Mary	1818	Classics	F	★
Harper, Hill	2011	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	N	
O'Brien, Tim	1990	War	F	
Wolff, Mishna	2009	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	▲



Florida Southern College	Private, nonsectarian	Hungry Planet: What the World Eats
Florida State University	Public	Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World
Fort Lewis College	Public	The Heart and the Fist: The Education of a Humanitarian, the Making of a Navy SEAL
Framingham State College	Public	The Good Soldiers
Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering	Private, nonsectarian	The Toaster Project: Or a Heroic Attempt to Build a Simple Electric Appliance from Scratch
Ω George Washington University	Private, nonsectarian	War
Ω Georgetown University	Private, sectarian	The Tiger's Wife: A Novel
Georgia College & State University	Public	The Complete Persepolis
Ω Georgia Institute of Technology	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Georgia State University	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Goucher College	Private, nonsectarian	An Enemy of the People
Grace College	Private, sectarian	Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery
Grand Valley State University	Public	The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything
Guildford Technical Community College	Community	A School for My Village: A Promise to the Orphans of Nyaka
§ Gustavus Adolphus College	Private, sectarian	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
§ Hamilton College (New York)	Private, nonsectarian	Evocative Objects
Hamline University	Private, nonsectarian	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
Hampshire College	Private, nonsectarian	Sweet Heaven When I Die: Faith, Faithlessness, and the Country in Between
Hawaii Pacific University	Private, nonsectarian	The Value of Hawaii: Knowing the Past, Shaping the Future
Henderson State University	Public	Half Broke Horses: A True-Life Novel
Hiram College	Private, nonsectarian	Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal

Menzel, Peter & Faith D'Aluisio	2005	Animal Rights/Food	N	
Hendley, Doc	2012	Political and Social Activism	M	
Greitens, Eric	2011	Political and Social Activism	M	
Finkel, David	2009	War	M	
Thwaites, Thomas	2011	Economics	N	
Junger, Sebastian	2010	War	M	
Obreht, Téa	2011	Coming of Age	F	
Satrapi, Marjane	2007	Coming of Age	M	  
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	 
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	
Ibsen, Henrik	1882	Classics	D	 
Metaxas, Eric	2007	Slavery	B	
Robinson, Ken	2009	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	N	
Kaguri, Twesigye Jackson	2011	Orphans	M	
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	
Turkle, Sherry	2011	Sociology	N	
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	 
Sharlet, Jeff	2012	Philosophy/Spirituality	N	
Howes, Craig & Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwoole Osorio	2010	American Identity/Regionalism	B	
Walls, Jeannette	2010	American Identity/Regionalism	F	
Schlosser, Eric	2005	Animal Rights/Food	N	

Hollins University (Virginia)	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	State of Wonder: A Novel
Hood College	Private, nonsectarian	Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China
Humboldt State University	Public	Outliers: The Story of Success
Illinois College	Private, nonsectarian	Listening Is an Act of Love
§ Illinois Wesleyan University	Private, nonsectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Indiana State University	Public	The Glass Castle: A Memoir
Indiana University East	Public	Listening Is an Act of Love
Indiana University Purdue University of Indianapolis	Public	Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide
Indiana University, South Bend	Public	Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America
Indiana University, Southeast	Public	Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared
Indiana University, Southeast	Public	The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope
Indiana University, Southeast	Public	The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything
Ithaca College	Private, nonsectarian	Ten Thousand Saints
Jacksonville State University	Public	Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World
Jacksonville University	Private, nonsectarian	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Johnson State College	Public	420 Characters
Juniata College	Private, nonsectarian	Never Let Me Go
§ Kalamazoo College	Private, nonsectarian	Once Upon a River
Kansas State University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Kennesaw State University	Public	Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?
Kent State University	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates

Patchett, Ann	2012	Philosophy/Spirituality	F	
Chang, Leslie	2008	Sociology	N	⊕
Gladwell, Malcolm	2008	Sociology	N	
Isay, Dave	2008	American Identity/Regionalism	N	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Walls, Jeannette	2006	Coming of Age	M	
Isay, Dave	2008	American Identity/Regionalism	N	
Kristof, Nicholas & Sheryl WuDunn	2009	Women	B	★
Ehrenreich, Barbara	2001	Poverty in America	N	
Rose, Mike	2005	Poverty in America	N	
Kamkwamba, William & Bryan Mealer	2009	Science	M	☀
Robinson, Ken	2009	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	N	
Henderson, Eleanor	2011	Coming of Age	F	
Hendley, Doc	2012	Political and Social Activism	M	
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Beach, Lou	2011	Uncategorized	F	
Ishiguro, Kazuo	2005	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Campbell, Bonnie Jo	2011	Coming of Age	F	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Sandel, Michael	2009	Philosophy/Spirituality	N	
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲

Kingsborough Community College	Community	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
§ Lafayette College	Private, nonsectarian	Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture
Laguardia Community College	Community	Zeitoun
Le Moyne College	Private, sectarian	Bartleby, the Scrivener
Ω Lehigh University	Private, nonsectarian	The Reluctant Fundamentalist
Lincoln University	Public (HBCU)	The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream
Linfield College	Private, nonsectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Longwood University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Loras College	Private, sectarian	"Only Connect..." The Goals of a Liberal Education
Loras College	Private, sectarian	On the Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education
Loras College	Private, sectarian	They Knew Calculus When They Left: The Thinking Disconnect Between High School and University
Louisburg College	Private, sectarian	My Orange Duffel Bag
Louisiana Tech University	Public	The Last Lecture
§ Macalester College	Private, nonsectarian	The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World
Marian University	Private, sectarian	Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals
Marietta College	Private, nonsectarian	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Marquette University	Private, sectarian	Half a Life: A Memoir
Mars Hill College	Private, sectarian	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
Massbay Community College	Community	Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness after the Digital Explosion
Meredith College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	The Glass Castle: A Memoir
Methodist University	Private, sectarian	Kite Runner

Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Shell, Ellen Ruppel	2009	Economics	N	
Eggers, Dave	2009	Disaster	B	©
Melville, Herman	1853	Classics	F	★
Hamid, Mohsin	2007	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	✦
Davis, Sampson, George Jenkins, & Rameck Hunt	2003	Poverty in America	M	▲
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Cronon, William	1998	Education Philosophy	E	
Harris, Robert	1991	Education Philosophy	E	
St. Jarre, Kevin	2008	Education Philosophy	E	
Bracken, Sam	2010	Poverty in America	M	
Pausch, Randy	2008	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	M	
Johnson, Steven	2006	Disability/Disease	N	
Herzog, Hal	2010	Animal Rights/Food	N	🌐
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Strauss, Darin	2011	Coming of Age	M	
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☀
Abelson, Hal, Ken Ledeen, & Harry Lewis	2008	Information Technology	N	
Walls, Jeannette	2006	Coming of Age	M	
Hosseini, Khaled	2004	Coming of Age	F	✦ ★

Methodist University	Private, sectarian	The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures
Methodist University	Private, sectarian	An Invisible Thread: The True Story of an 11-Year-Old Panhandler, a Busy Sales Executive, and an Unlikely Meeting with Destiny
Miami University	Public	Shade It Black: Death and After in Iraq
Michigan State University	Public	Behind the Beautiful Forevers
Michigan Technological University	Public	Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal
Middle Tennessee State University	Public	A Pearl in the Storm: How I Found My Heart in the Middle of the Ocean
§ Middlebury College	Private, nonsectarian	Never Let Me Go
Midlands Technical College	Public	Saints at the River: A Novel
Millersville University	Public	The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media
Mississippi State University	Public	Unbowed: A Memoir
Missouri State University	Public	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
Molloy College	Private, sectarian	Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World
Montana State University	Public	Extraordinary, Ordinary People
Montcalm Community College	Community	Major Pettigrew's Last Stand
Moraine Valley Community College	Community	Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War
§ Mount Holyoke College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	The Namesake
Mountain View College	Community	Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America
Murray State University	Public	Never Let Me Go
§ New College of Florida	Public	Clybourne Park
Ω New York University (College of Arts and Science)	Private, nonsectarian	The Tiger's Wife: A Novel
North Carolina A&T State University	Public (HBCU)	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates

Fadiman, Anne	1998	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	B	⊕
Tresniowski, Alex, Laura Schroff, & Valerie Salembier	2011	Poverty in America	M	
Goodell, Jess & John Hearn	2011	War	M	
Boo, Katherine	2012	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	⊕
Grennan, Conor	2011	Orphans	M	
McClure, Tori Murden	2009	Women	M	
Ishiguro, Kazou	2005	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Rash, Ron	2004	Environmentalism	F	🌐
Gladstone, Brooke	2011	Information Technology	N	📊
Maathai, Wangari	2006	Political and Social Activism	M	☀️
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☀️
Kidder, Tracy	2003	Disability/Disease	B	
Rice, Condoleezza	2010	Women	M	▲
Simonson, Helen	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	✦
Horwitz, Tony	1999	War	B	
Lahiri, Jhumpa	2004	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	⊕
Ehrenreich, Barbara	2001	Poverty in America	N	
Ishiguro, Kazou	2005	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Norris, Bruce	2011	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	D	
Obreht, Téa	2011	Coming of Age	F	⊕
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲



North Carolina State University	Public	It Happened on the Way to War: A Marine's Path to Peace
North Central College	Private, nonsectarian	The Good Food Revolution
Northern Arizona University	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Northern Kentucky University	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Ω Northwestern University	Private, nonsectarian	Never a City So Real: A Walk in Chicago
§ Occidental College	Private, nonsectarian	The Barbarian Nurseries: A Novel
Ω Ohio State University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Oklahoma City University	Private, nonsectarian	Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer
Otterbein College	Private, nonsectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Owensboro Community and Technical College	Community	The Most They Ever Had
Pace University	Private, nonsectarian	Little Bee
Paine College	Private, nonsectarian (HBCU)	The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration
Parkland College	Community	Into the Beautiful North
Peace College (William Peace University)	Private, nonsectarian	Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World
Pennsylvania State University, Berks	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg	Public	Two Boys, Divided by Fortune, United by Tragedy: A True Story of the Pursuit of Justice
Pennsylvania State University, New Kensington	Public	Round Ireland with a Fridge
Philadelphia University	Private, nonsectarian	Start Something That Matters
Purdue University	Public	The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope
Queens University of Charlotte	Private, nonsectarian	In the Time of the Butterflies
Ramapo College	Public	American Nerd: The Story of My People

Barcott, Rye	2011	Political and Social Activism	M	
Allen, Will	2012	Animal Rights/Food	N	
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Kotlowitz, Alex	2004	American Identity/Regionalism	B	
Tobar, Hector	2011	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	✳
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Carpenter, Novella	2009	Animal Rights/Food	M	🌐
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Bragg, Rick	2009	American Identity/Regionalism	B	
Cleave, Chris	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	☀
Wilkerson, Isabel	2010	American Identity/Regionalism	N	▲
Urrea, Luis Alberta	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	✳
Hendley, Doc	2012	Political and Social Activism	M	
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Zausner, Robert	2008	Coming of Age	B	
Hawks, Tony	2001	Coming of Age	F	
Mycoskie, Blake	2011	Political and Social Activism	M	
Kamkwamba, William & Bryan Mealer	2009	Science	M	☀
Alvarez, Julia	1987	Women	F	★
Nugent, Benjamin	2008	Sociology	M	

Rhode Island College	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Rhode Island School of Design	Private, nonsectarian	The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
Rice University	Private, nonsectarian	Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do
Roberts Wesleyan College	Private, sectarian	The Cellist of Sarajevo
Rockhurst University	Private, sectarian	Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World
Rollins College	Private, nonsectarian	Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide
Rutgers, School of Arts and Sciences (honors program)	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Sacred Heart University	Private, sectarian	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Ω Saint Louis University	Private, sectarian	Enrique's Journey
§ Saint Michael's College	Private, sectarian	The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains
Salem College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	Salvage the Bones
Salem State College	Public	The Leftovers
Salisbury University	Public	Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption
Sam Houston State University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
San Jose State University	Public	Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal
San Juan College	Community	Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII
Santa Barbara City College	Community	Moby Duck: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea and of the Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists, and Fools, Including the Author, Who Went in Search of Them
Shepherd University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Sierra Nevada College	Private, nonsectarian	The Things They Carried
§ Skidmore College	Private, nonsectarian	Behind the Beautiful Forevers
Smith College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis

Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Diaz, Junot	2007	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	★
Steele, Claude M.	2011	Sociology	N	
Galloway, Steven	2008	War	F	
Hendley, Doc	2012	Political and Social Activism	M	
Kristof, Nicholas & Sheryl WuDunn	2009	Women	B	★
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Nazario, Sonia	2006	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	B	✱
Carr, Nicholas	2010	Information Technology	N	
Ward, Jesmyn	2011	Poverty in America	F	
Perrotta, Tom	2011	Disaster	F	
Thompson, Jennifer & Ronald Cotton	2009	Crime and Punishment	M	▲
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Grennan, Conor	2011	Orphans	M	
Nez, Chester & Judith Schiess Avila	2012	War	M	
Hohn, Donovan	2011	Animal Rights/Food	M	🌐
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
O'Brien, Tim	1990	War	F	
Boo, Katherine	2012	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	⊕
Kaplan, Alice	2012	Coming of Age	B	

South Dakota State University (honors college)	Public	The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
Southern Methodist University	Private, nonsectarian	The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine
Southern New Hampshire University	Private, nonsectarian	Water for Elephants
Spokane Falls Community College	Community	Saints at the River: A Novel
St. Bonaventure University	Private, sectarian	In the Sanctuary of Outcasts
St. Edwards University	Private, sectarian	World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War
St. John's University (New York)	Private, sectarian	Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide
§ St. Mary's College of Maryland	Private, nonsectarian	When the Emperor Was Divine
State University of New York, Brockport	Public	A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge
State University of New York, Oswego	Public	City of Thieves: A Novel
Sweet Briar College	Private, nonsectarian (women's college)	The History of Money: From Sandstone to Cyberspace
Texas Christian University	Private, sectarian	The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains
Texas State University, San Marcos	Public	Where Am I Wearing?: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes
Texas Tech University	Public	The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl
The College of New Jersey	Public	Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People Is Greater Than the People in Power
§ The College of Wooster	Private, nonsectarian	In the Country of Men
The King's College	Private, sectarian	Antigone
The King's College	Private, sectarian	King Lear
Thomas College	Private, nonsectarian	Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson
Trinity University	Private, nonsectarian	Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History
Troy University	Public	The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World

Alexie, Sherman	2009	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	■
Lewis, Michael	2010	Economics	N	
Gruen, Sara	2006	Orphans	F	
Rash, Ron	2004	Environmentalism	F	🌐
White, Neil	2009	Crime and Punishment	M	
Brooks, Max	2007	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Kristof, Nicholas & Sheryl WuDunn	2009	Women	B	★
Otsuka, Julie	2003	War	F	⊕
Neufeld, Josh	2009	Disaster	N	🏠🌀
Benioff, David	2008	War	F	
Weatherford, Jack	1997	Economics	N	
Carr, Nicholas	2010	Information Technology	N	
Timmerman, Kelsey	2008	Economics	N	
Egan, Timothy	2005	Disaster	B	
Ghonim, Wael	2012	Political and Social Activism	M	
Matar, Hisham	2007	Coming of Age	F	☀️
Sophocles	441 BC	Classics	D	✚ ★
Shakespeare, William	1608	Classics	D	★
Albom, Mitch	2002	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	B	★
Gwynne, S.C.	2011	American Identity/Regionalism	F	■
Johnson, Steven	2006	Disability/Disease	N	

Ω Tufts University	Private, nonsectarian	The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—and a Vision for Change
Ω Tulane University	Private, nonsectarian	Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, and Life in New Orleans
University at Buffalo, SUNY	Public	Start Something That Matters
University of Akron	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
University of Alabama, Birmingham	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
University of Alaska, Anchorage	Public	The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine
University of Alaska, Anchorage	Public	The Working Poor: Invisible in America
University of Arizona (honors college)	Public	The Tortilla Curtain
Ω University of Arkansas	Public	The Working Poor: Invisible in America
Ω University of California, Davis	Public	The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration
Ω University of California, Los Angeles	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
University of California, Santa Barbara	Public	Moonlighting with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything
University of Dayton	Private, sectarian	This I Believe II: More Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women
University of Delaware	Public	Behind the Beautiful Forevers
University of Florida	Public	The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe
University of Houston, Victoria	Public	The Hunger Games
University of Idaho	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Ω University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign	Public	This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women
University of Kansas	Public	Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays
University of Kentucky	Public	The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education
University of Louisville	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates

Leonard, Annie	2010	Environmentalism	N	
Baum, Dan	2009	Disaster	B	⊙
Mycoskie, Blake	2011	Political and Social Activism	M	
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Lewis, Michael	2010	Economics	N	
Shipler, David K.	2005	Poverty in America	N	
Boyle, T.C.	2008	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	✱
Shipler, David K.	2005	Poverty in America	N	
Wilkerson, Isabel	2010	American Identity/Regionalism	N	▲
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Foer, Joshua	2011	Science	M	
Allison, Jay & Dan Gediman	2010	Philosophy/Spirituality	N	
Boo, Katherine	2012	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	⊕
Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach	2011	Women	B	✦
Collins, Suzanne	2008	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Allison, Jay & Dan Gediman	2006	Philosophy/Spirituality	N	
Biss, Eula	2009	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	N	
Mullaney, Craig	2009	War	M	
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲



University of Louisiana, Monroe	Public	The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream
University of Maine (honors college)	Public	What Is the What
University of Maryland, Baltimore County	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Ω University of Maryland, College Park	Public	The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media
University of Massachusetts, Amherst	Public	Ready Player One
University of Michigan, Flint	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development	Public	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts	Public	Never Let Me Go
University of Mississippi	Public	Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter
University of Missouri	Public	Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea
University of Montana, Missoula	Public	Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It
Ω University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill	Public	The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains
University of North Carolina, Charlotte	Public	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
University of North Carolina, Greensboro	Public	Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World
University of North Carolina, Wilmington	Public	Ten Letters: The Stories Americans Tell Their President
University of Northern Florida	Public	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
University of Northern Iowa	Public	The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration
University of Pittsburgh	Public	Pittsburgh: A New Portrait
University of Rhode Island	Public	Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World
§ University of Richmond	Private, nonsectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
University of South Carolina	Public	Motherless Brooklyn

Davis, Sampson, George Jenkins, & Rameck Hunt	2003	Poverty in America	M	▲
Eggers, Dave	2006	Genocide/Holocaust	B	☼
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Gladstone, Brooke	2011	Information Technology	N	☐
Cline, Ernest	2012	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Ishiguro, Kazuo	2005	Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic	F	★
Franklin, Tom	2010	Crime and Punishment	F	
Demick, Barbara	2009	Genocide/Holocaust	B	⊕
Meloy, Maile	2009	American Identity/Regionalism	F	
Carr, Nicholas	2010	Information Technology	N	
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☼
Hendley, Doc	2012	Political and Social Activism	M	
Saslow, Eli	2011	Political and Social Activism	B	
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☼
Wilkerson, Isabel	2010	American Identity/Regionalism	N	▲
Toker, Franklin	2009	American Identity/Regionalism	N	
Kidder, Tracy	2003	Disability/Disease	B	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Lethem, Jonathan	2000	Orphans	F	

University of South Carolina, Aiken	Public	The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope
University of Tennessee, Chattanooga	Public	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
University of Tennessee, Knoxville	Public	The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker
University of Texas, San Antonio	Public	The Devil's Highway: A True Story
University of Texas, Tyler	Public	Dreaming in Chinese: Mandarin Lessons in Life, Love, and Language
University of Toledo	Public	Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States
University of Vermont	Public	This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women
Ω University of Virginia (School of Engineering & Applied Science)	Public	To Engineer Is Human
Ω University of Washington	Public	Respect: An Exploration
University of West Florida	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
University of Wisconsin, Fond du Lac	Public	Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life
Ω University of Wisconsin, Madison	Public	Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, A Tale of Love and Fallout
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee	Public	The Complete Persepolis
University of Wisconsin, Parkside	Public	Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town
Utah State University	Public	The Beast in the Garden
Ω Vanderbilt University	Private, nonsectarian	Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide
§ Vassar College	Private, nonsectarian	Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food
Ventura College	Community	Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void
Villanova University	Private, sectarian	Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal
Virginia Commonwealth University	Public	Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University	Public	This I Believe II: More Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women

Kamkwamba, William & Bryan Mealer	2009	Science	M	☀
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☀
Liu, Eric	1998	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	⊕
Urrea, Luis Alberta	2005	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	B	✧
Fallows, Deborah	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	M	▲
Prejean, Helen	2003	Crime and Punishment	M	★
Allison, Jay & Dan Gediman	2006	Philosophy/Spirituality	N	
Petroski, Henry	1985	Science	N	
Lawrence-Lightfoot, Sara	1999	Philosophy/Spirituality	B	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Lamott, Anne	1995	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	M	
Redniss, Lauren	2010	Science	B	
Satrapi, Marjane	2007	Coming of Age	M	📊 ✦ ★
St. John, Warren	2009	Orphans	B	✦ ☀
Baron, David	2003	Animal Rights/Food	B	🌐
Kristof, Nicholas & Sheryl WuDunn	2009	Women	B	★
Greenberg, Paul	2011	Animal Rights/Food	N	🌐
Roach, Mary	2009	Science	N	
Grennan, Conor	2011	Orphans	M	
Iversen, Kristen	2012	Environmentalism	M	🌐
Allison, Jay & Dan Gediman	2006	Philosophy/Spirituality	N	

Wagner College	Private, nonsectarian	Strength in What Remains
Wartburg College	Private, sectarian	An Ordinary Man
Wartburg College	Private, sectarian	The Things They Carried
Washburn University	Public	Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen
§ Washington and Lee University	Private, nonsectarian	Stumbling on Happiness
Washington State University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Ω Washington University in St. Louis	Private, nonsectarian	The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
Wentworth Institute of Technology	Private, nonsectarian	Love and Obstacles
Wesley College	Private, nonsectarian	The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time
West Liberty University (honors college)	Public	Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer
West Texas A&M University	Public	The Heart and the Fist: The Education of a Humanitarian, the Making of a Navy SEAL
Western Illinois University	Public	And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture
Western Michigan University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Western New England College	Private, nonsectarian	Zeitoun
Western Washington University	Public	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Westfield State University	Public	Gang Leader for a Day
Westminster College (Pennsylvania)	Private, nonsectarian	The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World
§ Wheaton College (Illinois)	Private, sectarian	The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
§ Whitman College	Private, nonsectarian	The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration
William Paterson University	Public	Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us
William Woods University	Private, nonsectarian	The Tiger's Wife: A Novel

Kidder, Tracy	2009	Genocide/Holocaust	M	☀
Rusesabagina, Paul & Tom Zoellner	2007	Genocide/Holocaust	M	☀
O'Brien, Tim	2009	War	F	
Drape, Joe	2010	American Identity/Regionalism	M	
Gilbert, Daniel	2006	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	N	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Moore, Wes	2010	Poverty in America	M	▲
Hemon, Aleksandar	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	
Haddon, Mark	2003	Coming of Age	F	
Carpenter, Novella	2009	Animal Rights/Food	M	🌐
Greitens, Eric	2011	Political and Social Activism	M	
Wasik, Bill	2009	Information Technology	M	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Eggers, Dave	2009	Disaster	B	☉
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Venkatesh, Sudhir	2008	Poverty in America	M	▲
Johnson, Steven	2006	Disability/Disease	N	
Skloot, Rebecca	2010	Science	B	★ ▲
Wilkerson, Isabel	2010	American Identity/Regionalism	N	▲
Pink, Daniel	2009	Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness	N	
Obreht, Téa	2011	Coming of Age	F	⊕

Wingate University	Private, nonsectarian	Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal
Winona State University	Public	Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men
Winthrop University	Public	Where Am I Wearing?: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes
Wright State University	Public	Girl in Translation
Xavier University	Private, sectarian	The Dew Breaker

WHAT DO COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES WANT STUDENTS TO READ OUTSIDE CLASS? | 71

Grennan, Conor	2011	Orphans	M	
Kimmel, Michael	2009	Sociology	N	
Timmerman, Kelsey	2008	Economics	N	
Kwok, Jean	2010	Multiculturalism/Immigration/ Racism	F	⊕
Danticat, Edwidge	2004	War	F	



## **APPENDIX III: TITLES BY SUBJECT CATEGORY**

### **American Identity/Regionalism**

*Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It*

*Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History*

*Half Broke Horses: A True-Life Novel*

*Listening Is an Act of Love*

*Never a City So Real: A Walk in Chicago*

*Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen*

*Our Patchwork Nation*

*Pittsburgh: A New Portrait*

*The Last American Man*

*The Most They Ever Had*

*The Value of Hawaii: Knowing the Past, Shaping the Future*

*The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*

### **Animal Rights/Food**

*Eating Animals*

*Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer*

*Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*

*Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food*

*Hungry Planet: What the World Eats*

*In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*

*Moby Duck: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea and of the Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists, and Fools, Including the Author, Who Went in Search of Them*

*Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals*

*Strange As This Weather Has Been*

*The Beast in the Garden*

*The Good Food Revolution*

*The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird*

*The Omnivore's Dilemma*

## **Classics**

*An Enemy of the People*

*Antigone*

"Bartleby, the Scrivener"

*Frankenstein*

*King Lear*

## **Coming of Age**

*Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis*

*Half a Life: A Memoir*

*In the Country of Men*

*In the Sea There Are Crocodiles*

*Kite Runner*

*Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd*

*Once Upon a River*

*Round Ireland with a Fridge*

*Ten Thousand Saints*

*The Complete Persepolis*

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

*The Glass Castle: A Memoir*

*The House on Mango Street*

*The Tiger's Wife: A Novel*

*Two Boys, Divided by Fortune, United by Tragedy: A True Story of the Pursuit of Justice*

## **Crime and Punishment**

*Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*

*Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*

*In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*

*Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption*

### **Disability/Disease**

*Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*

*My Dyslexia*

*The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World*

### **Disaster**

*A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*

*Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, and Life in New Orleans*

*One Amazing Thing*

*The Leftovers*

*The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*

*Wading Home: A Novel of New Orleans*

*Zeitoun*

### **Dystopian/Post-Apocalyptic**

*A Canticle for Leibowitz*

*Arctic Rising*

*Matched*

*Never Let Me Go*

*Ready Player One*

*The Hunger Games*

*World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*

### **Economics**

*Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*

*Outliers: The Story of Success*

*The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine*

*The History of Money: From Sandstone to Cyberspace*

*The Toaster Project: Or a Heroic Attempt to Build a Simple Electric Appliance from Scratch*

*Where Am I Wearing?: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes*

## **Education Philosophy**

"On the Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education"

"'Only Connect...': The Goals of a Liberal Education"

"They Knew Calculus When They Left: The Thinking Disconnect Between High School and University"

## **Environmentalism**

*Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*

*Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats*

*No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process*

*Saints at the River: A Novel*

*The End of Country: Dispatched from the Frack Zone*

*The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—and a Vision for Change*

*Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What to Do About It*

## **Genocide/Holocaust**

*An Ordinary Man*

*Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*

*Strength in What Remains*

*Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur*

*What Is the What*

## **Information Technology**

*And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture*

*Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty and Happiness after the Digital Explosion*

*The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media*

*The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*

**Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism**

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

*Brooklyn: A Novel*

*Clybourne Park*

*Dreaming in Chinese: Mandarin Lessons in Life, Love, and Language*

*Enrique's Journey*

*Girl in Translation*

*I'm Down: A Memoir*

*Into the Beautiful North*

*Little Bee*

*Love and Obstacles*

*Ludlow*

*Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*

*Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*

*Pig Candy: Taking My Father South, Taking My Father Home*

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

*The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*

*The Barbarian Nurseries: A Novel*

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

*The Devil's Highway: A True Story*

*The Grace of Silence: A Memoir*

*The Life Before Us*

*The Namesake*

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*

*The Tortilla Curtain*

*Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey*

*War Dances*

## **Orphans**

*A School for My Village: A Promise to the Orphans of Nyaka*

*Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*

*Motherless Brooklyn*

*Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town*

*The Book Thief*

*The Language of Flowers: A Novel*

*Water for Elephants*

## **Philosophy/Spirituality**

*Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*

*Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*

*Respect: An Exploration*

*State of Wonder: A Novel*

*Sweet Heaven When I Die: Faith, Faithlessness, and the Country in Between*

*This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*

*This I Believe II: More Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*

## **Political and Social Activism**

*It Happened on the Way to War: A Marine's Path to Peace*

*Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People Is Greater Than the People in Power*

*Start Something That Matters*

*Ten Letters: The Stories Americans Tell Their President*

*The Heart and the Fist: The Education of a Humanitarian, the Making of a Navy SEAL*

*The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It*

*Unbowed: A Memoir*

*Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World*

## **Poverty in America**

*An Invisible Thread: The True Story of an 11-Year-Old Panhandler, a Busy Sales Executive, and an Unlikely Meeting with Destiny*

*Gang Leader for a Day*

*Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*

*My Orange Duffel Bag*

*Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*

*Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*

*Salvage the Bones*

*The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*

*The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream*

*The Working Poor: Invisible in America*

## **Science**

*Moonlighting with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*

*Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void*

*Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, A Tale of Love and Fallout*

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope*

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

*To Engineer Is Human*

## **Self-Help/Pursuit of Happiness**

*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

*Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*

*Stumbling on Happiness*

*The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*

*The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*

*The Last Lecture*

*The Wealth Cure: Putting Money in Its Place*

*Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*

## **Slavery**

*Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*

*Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*



## **Sociology**

*American Nerd: The Story of My People*

*Evocative Objects*

*Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*

*Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*

*Outliers: The Story of Success*

*Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*

## **Uncategorized**

*420 Characters*

## **War**

*City of Thieves: A Novel*

*Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*

*Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*

*Shade It Black: Death and After in Iraq*

*The Cellist of Sarajevo*

*The Dew Breaker*

*The Good Soldiers*

*The Things They Carried*

*The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education*

*War*

*When the Emperor Was Divine*

## **Women**

*A Pearl in the Storm: How I Found My Heart in the Middle of the Ocean*

*Extraordinary, Ordinary People*

*Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*

*In the Time of the Butterflies*

*Left Neglected*

*The Buddha in the Attic*

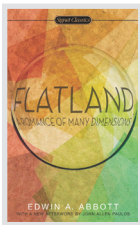
*The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe*



## APPENDIX IV: RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR COLLEGE COMMON READING PROGRAMS

Here are 50 books the NAS recommends for colleges and universities with common reading programs. The first list contains 40 books appropriate in level of difficulty and length for any college freshman. The second list contains ten more ambitious choices.

To learn more about the NAS's criteria for these choices, see "Recommended Books for College Common Reading Programs: Criteria" at [http://www.nas.org/resources/recommended\\_books#Criteria](http://www.nas.org/resources/recommended_books#Criteria).



### ***Flatland***

Edwin Abbott Abbott (1884)

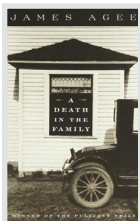
This short book is a mathematician's foray into fiction with a story about two-dimensional creatures—squares, triangles, and such—living on a plane. Their conceptual horizons are challenged when a three-dimensional creature, a sphere, drops in. We picked it because (a) it is a deft analogy for us three-dimensional 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.



### ***Things Fall Apart***

Chinua Achebe (1958)

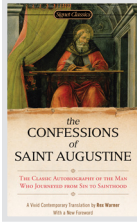
Among the first African novels written in English, *Things Fall Apart* depicts the Igbo of southern Nigeria during the period of initial Western colonization. The protagonist is an ambitious young man in a traditional village who gains fame through a feat of wrestling and goes on to become a powerful leader, only to see his world collapse. We picked it because (a) it is a classic of 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.



### ***A Death in the Family***

James Agee (1957)

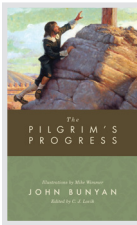
A posthumous autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family* is based on the death of his father in an automobile accident when Agee was only six. The novel richly depicts life in Knoxville, Tennessee, around 1915. We picked it because of (a) the sheer beauty of Agee's writing and its emotional depth,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



### ***Confessions***

Augustine (398 A.D.)

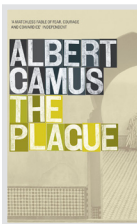
The *Confessions* is perhaps the very first autobiography, at least in the modern sense of someone examining the interior side of his life as well as the external events. We picked it because (a) it shows a smart, ambitious student who thirsts for knowledge and who makes the most of his academic studies, (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.



### ***The Pilgrim's Progress***

John Bunyan (1678)

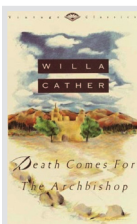
Once the most widely read book in English besides the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an astonishingly successful allegory. We picked it because it is (a) a key influence on English fiction, (b) a tour-de-force of metaphor and analogy, and (c) a vivid introduction to Christianity that secular students 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.



### ***The Plague***

Albert Camus (1947)

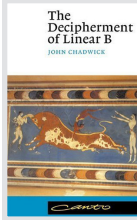
The novel depicts a city in French colonial Algeria that is quarantined during an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Camus describes the divergent ways those trapped in the city cope with the situation. We picked it because it is a compelling depiction of some of the great themes of 20th-century existential 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.



### ***Death Comes for the Archbishop***

Willa Cather (1927)

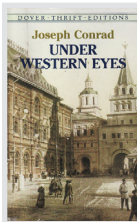
This episodic novel, based on the life of Jean-Baptiste Lamy, depicts the work of a devout French priest sent to reorganize the Catholic mission in New Mexico after the territory has been annexed by the United States. We picked it because (a) Cather's quietly expansive vision of the American landscape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



### ***The Decipherment of Linear B***

John Chadwick (1958)

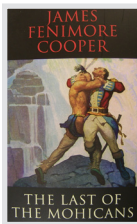
This is the story of how Michael Ventris solved a 50-year mystery by deciphering the language of an ancient Cretan script known as Linear B. Chadwick was Ventris's friend and close collaborator and wrote that "even when [Ventris's] success was assured, when others heaped lavish praise on him, he remained simple and unassuming, always ready to listen, to help and to understand." We picked this book because (a) it is a true story of the heroism of scholarship: tenacious curiosity and earnest study bring order out of confusion; (b) it provides students with an example of a moment when the facts proved academic consensus wrong; and (c) it unlocks a door to the Hellenic world at the time of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.



### ***Under Western Eyes***

Joseph Conrad (1911)

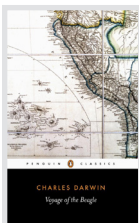
This novel, set in St. Petersburg and Geneva, is Conrad's answer to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. We chose it because (a) the narrator observes a non-Western mindset through "Western eyes"—a skill Western students should learn; (b) it depicts both the allure and the repugnance of terrorism (to which Conrad in his introduction to the book referred as "senseless desperation provoked by senseless tyranny"); and (c) it shows the truth as being worth defending despite the cost.



### ***The Last of the Mohicans***

James Fenimore Cooper (1826)

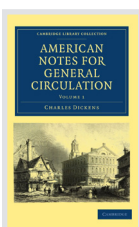
By the time Cooper wrote this novel, the French and Indian War was as distant a memory as World War II is today. The story is a complicated account of the sharp-shooting white orphan Hawkeye, raised by Indians to protect the daughters of a British colonel from the perils of war and the unwanted attentions 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.



### ***The Voyage of the Beagle***

Charles Darwin (1839)

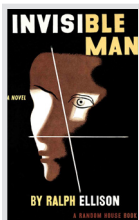
This is Darwin's classic account of his expedition from 1831 to 1836 around coastal South America to the Galapagos Islands, Tahiti, Australia, across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius, and back to England, on which he made most of the observations that led eventually to his theory of evolution by natural 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.



### ***American Notes for General Circulation***

Charles Dickens (1842)

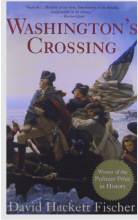
Dickens published this account of his travels just after his six-month visit to the United States. It is an unflattering portrait of a country that effusively welcomed him—far too effusively in his judgment. We picked it because (a) Dickens' account of American character still resonates, (b) the book 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.



### ***Invisible Man***

Ralph Ellison (1952)

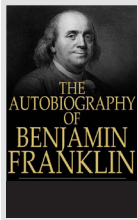
This novel presents the memory of an unnamed African American character who is currently living as a hermit in the basement of a New York City apartment building. In his youth in a small Southern town he was school valedictorian and went on to college but was expelled. As he struggles to make a life 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.



### ***Washington's Crossing***

David Hackett Fischer (2004)

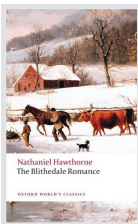
We wanted to include a book about George Washington and had hundreds to pick from. We chose Fischer's account of a pivotal moment, when General Washington, faced with the imminent collapse of the whole Revolution, seized the initiative by crossing the Delaware River on Christmas night and mounting a 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.



### ***Autobiography***

Benjamin Franklin (1791)

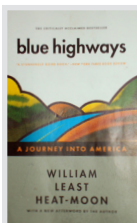
This unfinished autobiography, written as a letter to Franklin's son, opens a window into the life and mind of one of our nation's most beloved founding fathers. We picked it because (a) it captures Franklin's unique genius as an equally accomplished scientist, inventor, entrepreneur, publisher, creative 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, and (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.



### ***The Blithedale Romance***

Nathaniel Hawthorne (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 the longing for social justice needs to be grounded in a real understanding of human nature.



### ***Blue Highways***

William Least Heat-Moon (1982)

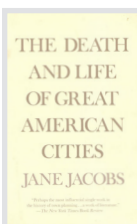
Heat-Moon heads out to see America from the vantage point of the back roads—the ones colored blue on highway maps. The book is largely built on the conversations he has with the people he meets: saloon keepers, fishermen, farmers, a prostitute, a Christian hitchhiker, a Hopi medical student and more. 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.



### ***Their Eyes Were Watching God***

Zora Neale Hurston (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 the 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) it is a consummate work of artistry by a writer who defied the conventions of her time.



### ***The Death and Life of Great American Cities***

Jane Jacobs (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. Jacobs 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 and our sense of community depend on our use of space.



### ***Kim***

Rudyard Kipling (1901)

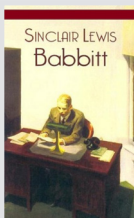
This is a book that vividly portrays British colonial India through a homeless white orphan's eyes. We picked it because it (a) raises provocative questions about contemporary American views of personal identity, multiculturalism, and colonialism, and (b) is an extraordinarily artful tale of political 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?



### ***Darkness at Noon***

Arthur Koestler (1940)

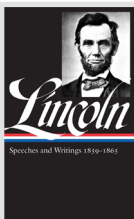
In this novel, Koestler, a former Communist, depicts the world of Stalin's show trials. The protagonist, Rubashov, is a true believer in the Communist system, but is arrested, interrogated, and struggles with the meaning of his life and loyalties as he awaits his certain execution. One of the classics 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.



### ***Babbitt***

Sinclair Lewis (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 vapidity 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 nonconformity? How true is this picture?

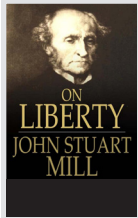


### ***Selected Speeches and Writings***

Abraham Lincoln (1832-1865)

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

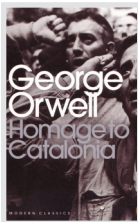
are these three: the speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria (October 16, 1854); the address to the Washington Temperance Society of Springfield, Illinois (February 22, 1842); and the second inaugural address (March 4, 1865). And one of the best ways to learn the power of persuasive argument is to read some of the Lincoln-Douglas debates on slavery.



### ***On Liberty***

John Stuart Mill (1869)

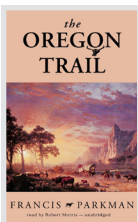
This is a short book on the limits of political power. Mill argues, most importantly, for freedom of thought and speech, and points out that partisans who suppress criticism ultimately weaken the views they are trying to protect. We picked *On Liberty* because (a) the substance of the essay bears directly 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.



### ***Homage to Catalonia***

George Orwell (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.

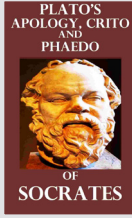


### ***The Oregon Trail***

Francis Parkman (1847)

A classic of frontier literature, *The Oregon Trail* is American historian Francis Parkman’s detailed and sometimes graphic account of life in the pre-Civil War West. He writes of buffalo hunting on the prairie, the hardships faced by westward-bound travelers, and the day-to-day lives of American Indians. Though Parkman’s personal narrative is colored by the prejudices of his time, his book remains a fascinating window into an era of American history whose influence continues to this day. We picked it because (a) it exemplifies history written on a grand scale, an attempt to encompass a large topic and a large idea; and (b) Parkman conveys an unapologetic sense of the energy, courage, and sheer enterprise of America’s western pioneers.

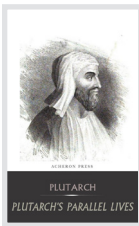




### ***Apology of Socrates and Crito***

Plato (C. 399-387 B.C.)

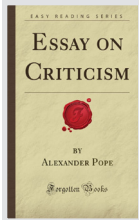
These are key works of philosophy that students who sign up for a philosophy course will probably read. But they are a common inheritance that everyone should know, and they can be read easily without a teacher's assistance. The *Apology* is Socrates' self-defense when he is charged with corrupting the 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.



### ***Parallel Lives***

Plutarch (Second Century A.D.) (Selections)

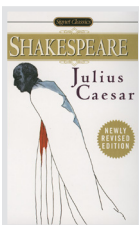
Plutarch pairs biographies of famous men, one Greek, one Roman, to illuminate their character. We picked this book because (a) it gives students a vibrant narrative view of ancient Greek and Roman culture, (b) it examines what it means to be "good," and (c) as a commentary on leadership, it influenced the writers of *The Federalist Papers*.



### ***Essay on Criticism***

Alexander Pope (1711)

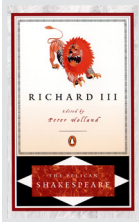
This is the only English verse on our list. Pope's poem begins with a warning that incompetent criticism poses a greater danger than poor creative writing. The latter "tries our patience," but poor judgment offered up authoritatively can "mis-lead our Sense." The *Essay on Criticism* can be read hurriedly 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.



### ***Julius Caesar***

William Shakespeare (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.



### **Richard III**

William Shakespeare (C. 1592)

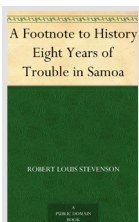
This play offers one of Shakespeare's great villains, who despite his awful deeds somehow wins a share of our sympathy. We picked it because it is English literature's best portrayal of political manipulation and cunning self-advancement, which are qualities that students need to be on guard against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



### **Henry V**

William Shakespeare (C. 1598)

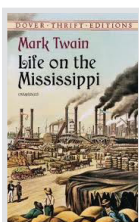
This play is about the maturation of a king and his extraordinary success on the battlefield. The St. Crispin's Day speech is one that every student should know. We picked *Henry V* because it is the richest of Shakespeare's history plays and it has profound things to say about the responsibilities of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



### **A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa**

Robert Louis Stevenson (1892)

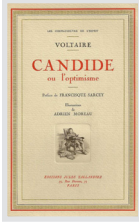
The author of *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and other popular works moved to Samoa in 1890 in search of a place to recover his health. This book is his account of the colonial struggle to possess the island, as the United States, Germany, and Britain squabbled with 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.



### **Life on the Mississippi**

Mark Twain (1883)

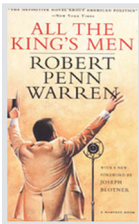
Twain is remembering his life before the Civil War as an apprentice steamboat pilot. The book is as broad and digressive as the river itself, but we have a charming companion to keep it interesting. We picked it because (a) Twain is one of the great native talents of American literature and *Life on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



### ***Candide***

Voltaire (1759)

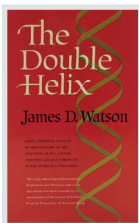
This eighteenth century satire of a young man under the spell of a philosophy that glibly treats the order of the world as “all for the best,” would seem to be superfluous counsel in an age where students are more likely to be surrounded by dire warnings that things are bad and about to get much worse. 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.



### ***All the King's Men***

Robert Penn Warren (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.



### ***The Double Helix***

James D. Watson (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.



### ***The Right Stuff***

Tom Wolfe (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.



**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.

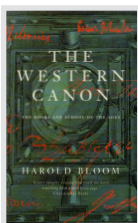


**Ecclesiastes**

(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.

**Recommended books for more ambitious college common reading programs:**



**The Western Canon**

Harold Bloom (1994)

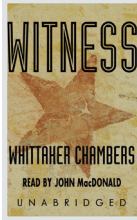
Bloom’s enthusiasm for great books is infectious. Students won’t have read many of the books he discusses but will want to.



**Don Quixote**

Miguel De Cervantes (1605)

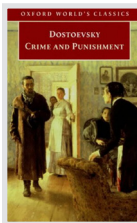
Is Don Quixote a hero, a fool, a madman—or all three? *Don Quixote* is a rich, gargantuan saga of the adventures of the iconic windmill-tilting knight-errant Don Quixote and his faithful squire Sancho Panza. The book has been called the “first modern novel,” and Harold Bloom writes that the tale of Don Quixote’s impossible quest “contains within itself all the novels that have followed in its sublime wake.” The book might be the longest work a college student will ever read, but it will also be the most memorable.



***Witness***

Whittaker Chambers (1952)

A former Communist and Soviet spy, Chambers repented and exposed former State Department official Alger Hiss as a fellow Communist and spy. Hiss denied the allegation but evidence emerged that Chambers was right. Though the statute of limitations on espionage had run out, Hiss went to prison on a perjury conviction. In *Witness* Chambers goes beyond the details of this case to offer a broad reflection on the course of twentieth-century history and the fate of Western civilization as it faced the challenge of totalitarian Communism.



***Crime and Punishment***

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1866)

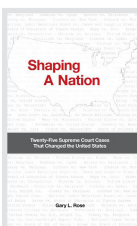
A psychological masterpiece. No one regrets reading it, though it is a long journey.



***The Confidence-Man***

Herman Melville (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?



***Shaping a Nation: 25 Supreme Court Cases***

Gary Rose, Ed. (2010)

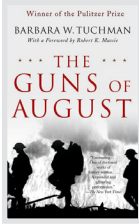
We are a nation of laws—and of Supreme Court opinions. It is a good idea for students to start college having read some of the most important ones.



***Democracy in America***

Alexis de Tocqueville (1838)

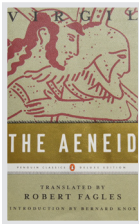
Tocqueville remains the best observer of the American social and political experiment. A long read but not inherently difficult.



### ***The Guns of August***

Barbara Tuchman (1962)

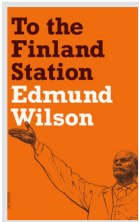
Winston Churchill called the first month of World War I a “drama never surpassed.” Renowned historian Barbara Tuchman’s classic chronicle of the first month of World War I and the events leading up to it is “more dramatic than fiction.” We chose this book because of its stellar writing, sweeping historical insight, and the story’s intimate bearing on the rest of the twentieth century: for, in many ways, the beginning of World War I was the beginning of the modern world.



### ***The Aeneid***

Virgil (19 B.C., Fagle’s Translation, 2006)

An epic in every sense, the *Aeneid* is one of the masterpieces of Western civilization.



### ***To the Finland Station***

Edmund Wilson (1940)

In *To the Finland Station*, Edmund Wilson traces historical, political, and ideological threads from the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution of 1917. The title refers to the St. Petersburg train from which Lenin emerged to take charge of the burgeoning Bolshevik revolt. Wilson’s narrative is an intellectual and cultural history that reveals the connections between the revolutionary era and the rise of socialism.

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