

APPENDIX III: RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR COLLEGE COMMON READING PROGRAMS

This appendix contains two sections. The first section contains 95 books appropriate in level of difficulty and length for any college freshman. The second section contains 35 more ambitious choices either because of length (i.e. *The Aeneid*) or intrinsic difficulty (i.e. *The Confidence Man*). For each book, we give several reasons why it would be a good choice for college common reading.

In compiling the books in these two sections, we had several considerations.¹⁹ We sought to follow our own recommendations listed above, and we also aimed to accommodate colleges that approach common reading assignments at different levels of difficulty, which is why we divided our list into two parts. Our goal is to offer constructive help.

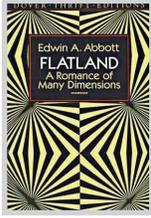
We invite colleges and universities that have common reading programs, and those that are considering the idea, to use these two sections as a resource. We believe an educationally worthy program could be built around any one of these books. Of course, our list is not intended to be exhaustive. It is, instead, a prompt to stimulate scholars who are convinced that their institutions can and should aim higher. We recognize that every college is different, and that there is no one book that would be a suitable common reading choice for all. Our list is not a list only of classics, though it includes some.

We have increased the number of our recommended books. We previously recommended 80 books appropriate for any college common reading program, we now recommend 95; we previously recommended 30 books appropriate for more ambitious college common reading programs, we now recommend 35.

We have deleted several older recommendations—not because we think less of them, but because we wish to vary our recommendations each year.

¹⁹ The first version of this list was published in Peter Wood and Ashley Thorne, “Read These Instead: Better Books for Next Year’s Beaches,” National Association of Scholars, September 17, 2010, http://www.nas.org/articles/Read_These_Instead_Better_Books_for_Next_Years_Beaches.

95 Recommended Books Appropriate For Any College Common Reading Program



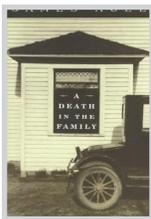
EDWIN ABBOTT ABBOTT – *FLATLAND* (1884)

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



CHINUA ACHEBE – *THINGS FALL APART* (1958)

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



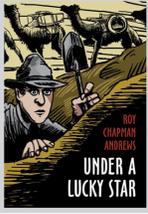
JAMES AGEE – *A DEATH IN THE FAMILY* (1957)

A posthumous autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family* is based on the death of his father in an automobile accident when Agee was only six. The novel richly depicts life in Knoxville, Tennessee, around 1915. We picked it because of (a) the sheer beauty of Agee's writing and its emotional depth, (b) its capacity to become a lasting presence in the lives of its readers, 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.



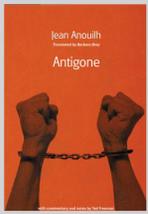
KINGSLEY AMIS – *LUCKY JIM* (1954)

Jim Dixon is a medieval history lecturer (and first-generation college student) who does not like academia, does not like academics, and is faced with the horrible prospect of spending the rest of his life in the pompous, affected world of the university. The funniest campus novel ever written, *Lucky Jim* will inoculate students against the self-importance of college life.



ROY CHAPMAN ANDREWS – *UNDER A LUCKY STAR* (1943)

Andrews' autobiography brings to life the age of scientific discovery—exploration into the heart of the Gobi Desert, the unearthing of new species of dinosaurs, and the first discovery of dinosaur eggs. Students will learn what a real-life Indiana Jones was like—a heroic adventurer more than a touch dismissive of the Natives he traveled among, a rueful contemplative aware that the Age of Discovery was dwindling to close, an explorer in full.



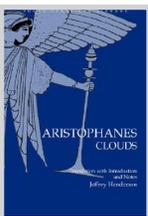
JEAN ANOUILH – *ANTIGONE* (1944)

Anouilh retold Sophocles' examination of what we owe to God and what to the State in Vichy France, where the state collaborated with Nazi overlords. This could have been a simpleminded morality tale, but Anouilh made Antigone a rebel from youthful impulse, who later regrets her noble stand when she must suffer for it. He also gave the tyrant Creon wise, persuasive lines in favor of realism and compromise. If Anouilh is ultimately on the side of the Resistance, he knows its flaws, and gives Power its due. *Antigone* will lead students inclined to join a latter-day Resistance to think—and to know they can call on a tradition going back to Sophocles to help them in their meditations.



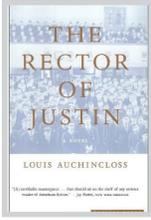
S. ANSKY – *THE DYBBUK* (1920)

Poor yeshiva student Khanan and rich Leah love each other, yet cannot marry; Khanan dies, but his spirit (dybbuk) possesses Leah. Ansky's classic reworking of Hasidic legend into a tale of faith, law, and love beyond death will teach students that some matters of the heart cannot be exorcised by any worldly impediments.



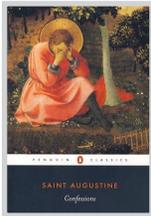
ARISTOPHANES – *THE CLOUDS* (423 B.C.)

Old Strepsiades is worried about the family's debts, so he decides to go to the Thinkery to learn from Socrates how to win an argument with bad ideas. He learns from Socrates how to deny the existence of justice and welsh on his debts—and then is outraged to learn that Socrates has taught his son Pheidippides to defy his parents. Students will learn that mockery of higher education goes a long way back. They can consider how much of the mockery is funny because it's true—and also consider that Socrates was killed in part because the citizens of Athens mistook the caricature in Aristophanes for the real man.



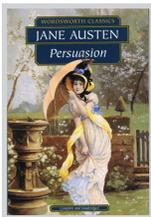
LOUIS AUCHINCLOSS – *THE RECTOR OF JUSTIN* (1964)

Auchincloss narrates from different points of view the life of Frank Prescott, founding headmaster of the fictional New England prep school Justin Martyr. Auchincloss brings us into the WASP world at the heart of American higher education, and shows us, in Frank Prescott’s life, how the WASPs ultimately decided to open up their aristocratic world to the broader America. At a time when much is said in ignorance about the exclusions of the old American system of education, *The Rector of Justin* will allow students to begin to make an informed judgment.



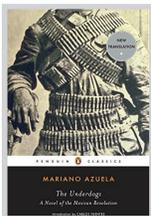
AUGUSTINE – *CONFESSIONS* (398 A.D.)

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



JANE AUSTEN – *PERSUASION* (1817)

Anne Elliott prudently ended her engagement with Frederick Wentworth at the persuasion of her friend Lady Russell; years later, she meets Wentworth again and is given another opportunity to choose love. The last and finest of Austen’s novels, *Persuasion* tells us that there are second chances in life and love—which students ought to know.



MARIANO AZUELA – *THE UNDERDOGS: A NOVEL OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION* (1915)

Azuela’s classic novel of the Mexican Revolution tells about the motivations of revolutionary violence—and how the men who make a revolution are corrupted by the temptations that new power brings to them, and ultimately destroyed by revolution’s cruel chaos. This work provides a classic insight into revolution’s effect on human souls. It also will also be an antidote to shallow, solipsistic multiculturalism, as it reminds students that Mexico is a country with its own history and its own concerns, and not simply a reservoir for emigration to the United States.



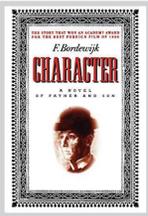
THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES (C. 970-930 B.C.)

A king searches for meaning in life by successively seeking wisdom, pleasure, wealth, sex, and power. Having achieved them, he finds that they fail to fulfill his longings and are ultimately meaningless. We picked this book because it asks many of life's deepest questions: why work so hard if it doesn't bring real happiness and death is inevitable? What is there to live for, really? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why are some people wealthy while others are poor? In this way it also speaks to the rising concern on college campuses for social justice.



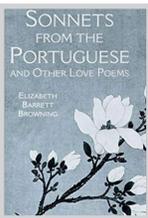
THE BOOK OF JOB (C. 1000 B.C.)

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



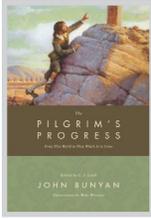
F. BORDEWIJK – *CHARACTER: A NOVEL OF FATHER AND SON* (1938)

The bastard Jacob Katadreuffe's character is formed and malformed by the implacable austerities of his Calvinist mother and ogreish father; by his own endeavors he repays all his debts, financial and spiritual. Students who complain of indebtedness from high tuition bills will benefit from reading about a young man who devotes his life to making good the debts he has assumed.



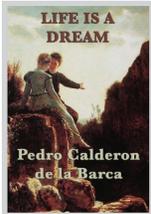
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING – *SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE* (1850)

The best modern sequence of love poems in English. They will inspire students to express their own passions with grace and beauty—and to recognize if any of their peers are trying to palm off Browning as their own invention.



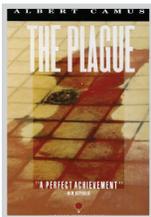
JOHN BUNYAN – *THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS* (1678)

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



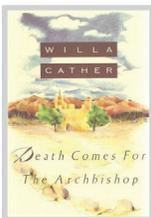
PEDRO CALDERON DE LA BARCA – *LIFE IS A DREAM* (1635)

Segismundo, Prince of Poland, is raised as a savage in a prison, commits murder when he is brought at last to court—and is returned to his prison as he sleeps, to think that he only dreamed he left his jail. Segismundo resolves to act virtuously thenceforth, for we must be good even in our dreams. The greatest and most beautiful of the plays of Spain's Golden Age, Calderon's drama shows how the most profound of doubts can lead us to virtue and to grace.



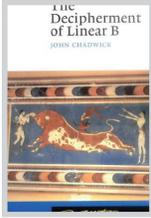
ALBERT CAMUS – *THE PLAGUE* (1947)

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



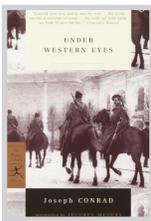
WILLA CATHER – *DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP* (1927)

This episodic novel, based on the life of Jean-Baptiste Lamy, depicts the work of a devout French priest sent to reorganize the Catholic mission in New Mexico after the territory has been annexed by the United States. We picked it because (a) Cather's quietly expansive vision of the American landscape is an unsurpassed literary accomplishment, (b) students can gain something vital from this account of steady purpose in the pursuit of an ideal, and (c) the book offers a perspective on the mingling of cultures that strongly contrasts to the currently fashionable accounts of ethnic antagonism.



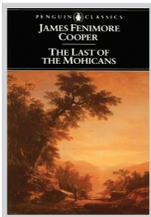
JOHN CHADWICK – *THE DECIPHERMENT OF LINEAR B* (1958)

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*.



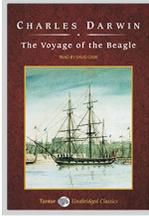
JOSEPH CONRAD – *UNDER WESTERN EYES* (1911)

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.



JAMES FENIMORE COOPER – *THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS* (1826)

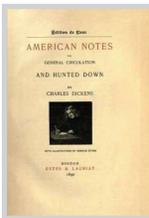
By the time Cooper wrote this novel, the French and Indian War was as distant a memory as World War II is today. The story is a complicated account of the sharp-shooting white orphan Hawkeye, raised by Indians to protect the daughters of a British colonel from the perils of war and the unwanted attentions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



CHARLES DARWIN – *THE VOYAGE OF THE BEAGLE* (1839)

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

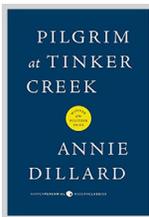
(*The Voyage* went through several editions and one of the augmented later ones might be a better choice.) We picked it because (a) it is a dazzling display of young Darwin’s curiosity and his powers of observation of people and places as well as the natural world, (b) students can benefit from a robust example of careful observation and collection of facts as worthy pursuits in their own right, and (c) *The Voyage* offers a fresh point of entry into the intellectual adventure of scientific inquiry.



CHARLES DICKENS – *AMERICAN NOTES FOR GENERAL CIRCULATION* (1842)

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

Americans continue to take pride, and (c) it raises important questions about celebrity, status, travel, crime, law, and a host of other themes that still preoccupy us.



ANNIE DILLARD – *PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK* (1974)

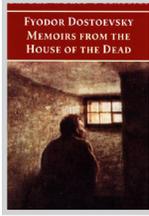
Dillard’s quasi-religious meditation on the natural world around her Appalachian home is an extraordinarily beautiful, lyric example of American nonfiction. We do not think it will challenge the environmentalist catechism prevalent on modern college campuses—but it will let students know that to be an environmentalist is something more than to engage in a career as an environmental activist. It may

also woo them toward both fine writing and an educated study of God, in himself and in the world, as worthy goals in themselves.



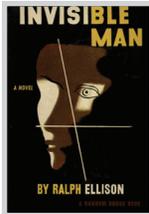
JOHN DONNE – *DIVINE POEMS* (1633)

Donne’s sonnets are, arguably, the finest amalgam in English of faith, self-revelation, and poetic virtuosity. This brief collection will introduce students to the heart of the Western tradition—and give them a model for personal meditation that integrates personal devotion, deep knowledge, and the desire to produce beauty.



FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY – *THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD* (1862)

Dostoevsky’s semi-autobiographical novel about his exile to a Siberian prison camp, and the spiritual awakening it provoked in him. Dostoevsky describes the brutality of guards and prisoners alike—and the shafts of humanity that they could suddenly display. Dostoevsky shows the reader how one can comprehend the sinfulness of criminals, know them as moral beings responsible for their crimes, and still feel sympathy and compassion for them.



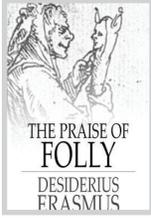
RALPH ELLISON – *INVISIBLE MAN* (1952)

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



SHUSAKU ENDO – *SILENCE* (1966)

Endo’s historical novel tells the story of a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Sebastião Rodrigues, sent to join the persecuted Christian community in seventeenth-century Japan. Rodrigues is threatened with torture, apostasizes, but inwardly keeps his faith. We picked this novel to illustrate the effects of demanding that people give up their faith—useful both for those students enduring such demands and those students imposing them.



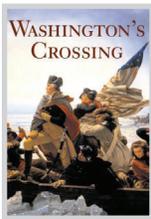
DESIDERIUS ERASMUS – *THE PRAISE OF FOLLY* (1509)

Erasmus’ satirical praise of folly lambasts corrupt churchmen and foolish pedants in equal measure. Erasmus’ *Praise* is witty, a good example of Renaissance erudition, and a useful reminder for students that folly, self-deception, and learning go hand in hand.



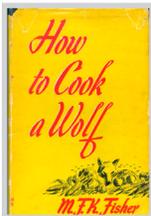
EVERYMAN (C. 1500)

Everyman must die. Friendship, Kindred, Goods, Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and the Five Wits all abandon him on his journey, but Good Deeds and Confession at last bring him to heaven. The play introduces students to late medieval Christian thought, but more importantly gives them a standard by which to judge the vanities of the world. It also provides a hint that education is as much to prepare them to die as it is to live.



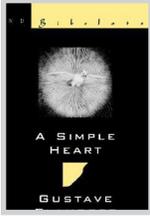
DAVID HACKETT FISCHER – *WASHINGTON'S CROSSING* (2004)

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



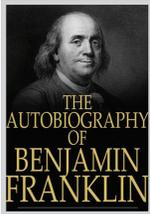
M. F. K. FISHER – *HOW TO COOK A WOLF* (1942)

One of the first great American evocations of the love of food—written during World War II food rationing, when the absence of food increased the love for it. We select this book as an alternate to the growing number of contemporary books on food selected for common readings, for 1) its literary quality; 2) its evocation of the American home front during World War II; 3) its important role in the birth of the food writing genre; 4) because Fisher turns love of food into something more than the hedonism of the well-fed; and 5) because her chapter “How to Keep Alive” gives very practical advice to a college student trying to feed himself on a tight budget.



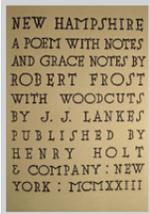
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT – *A SIMPLE HEART* (1877)

The housemaid Felicité lives a quiet life. She loves her mistress’ children, cleverer people take advantage of her simplicity, and she loves without apparent reward. At her death, she sees her one companion—her parrot—take on the appearance of the Holy Ghost. We chose this because 1) it is a short masterpiece of realistic fiction; and 2) because students will learn from it that “service” is not a euphemism for political campaigning or other forms of “community organization,” but a private devotion that should expect no worldly reward.



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN – *AUTOBIOGRAPHY* (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.



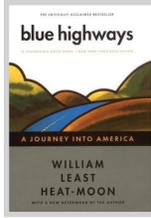
ROBERT FROST – *NEW HAMPSHIRE: A POEM WITH NOTES AND GRACE NOTES* (1923)

Perhaps Robert Frost’s best collection of poetry—*New Hampshire* blends loving evocation of the older America, gorgeous descriptions of nature, psychological acuity, and all in quietly stunning modern English verse. Students will learn the range of poetic ambition, articulated in American idiom.



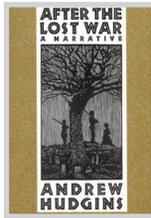
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE – *THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE* (1852)

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



WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON – *BLUE HIGHWAYS* (1982)

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



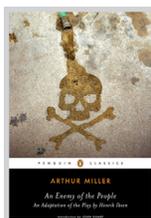
ANDREW HUDGINS – *AFTER THE LOST WAR* (1988)

Hudgins gives us the life of Sidney Lanier—Confederate soldier, poet, lover of nature, and dead untimely young of tuberculosis. Hudgins' book is a fine work of modern poetry that incidentally will teach students to expand their empathy even to those ritually denounced exemplars of evil, the Confederate soldiery.



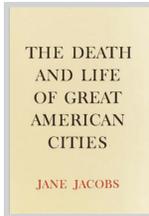
ZORA NEALE HURSTON – *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* (1937)

This novel by African American folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston depicts the life of a thrice-married Florida woman who kills her last husband in self-defense. Much of the dialogue is in black dialect and 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.



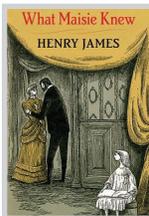
HENRIK IBSEN – *AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE* (1882)

Dr. Stockmann discovers that the health baths that are the basis of his town's prosperity are poisoned. He determines to tell all—and discovers the self-interested corruption of the entire town, including the avowedly liberal press, which determines to suppress his research. Stockmann will persevere in working to reveal the truth—but he has now embraced a cankered contempt for the democratic majority. Students will learn from Stockmann's ambiguous example how righteous confidence in your cause can spill into near-deranged derision toward those who disagree with you.



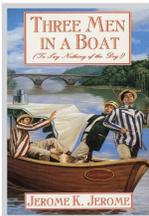
JANE JACOBS – *THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES* (1961)

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



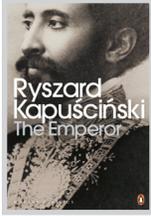
HENRY JAMES – *WHAT MAISIE KNEW* (1897)

Maisie’s irresponsible, divorced parents allow their daughter to be raised among a circle of decadent friends who assume that Maisie is already corrupt. Maisie struggles to keep her innocence intact by mouthing foul words while keeping herself from knowing what they mean—and by finally arranging to remove herself from her parents so as to save herself from inevitable degradation. James’ harrowing narrative makes a psychological thriller out of the struggle to maintain one’s virtue in a world that assumes you are already corrupt. We picked this book because it shows how and why innocence should be fought for, and why its casual destruction is unspeakably cruel.



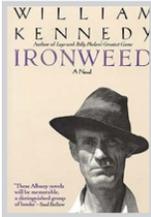
JEROME K. JEROME – *THREE MEN IN A BOAT* (1889)

Three men and a dog take a boating holiday on the Thames; comic chaos ensues. Students will learn how to relax properly on their weekends and vacations; also to laugh at hypochondria and to contemplate the wisdom of smuggling pets into their dorm rooms. Jerome’s work also provides self-knowledge through gems such as *I like work: it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours*. Gentle discussion of the applicability of this sentiment should help improve students’ study habits.



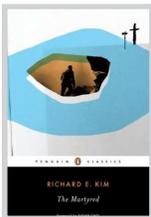
RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI – *THE EMPEROR: DOWNFALL OF AN AUTOCRAT* (1978)

Kapuscinski's account of the last years of Haile Selassie is a marvelous report on the politics and society of the last great kingdom of Africa. It is also a penetrating account of a state subjugated to despotism and a cult of personality. Kapuscinski, writing in Communist-suppressed Poland, also intended the portrait as a coded insight into the despotism that ruled his native land. Students should benefit from knowing that foreigners from one land can be interested in foreigners of another land, and that it can provide a cross-cultural message that has nothing to do with America and its politics.



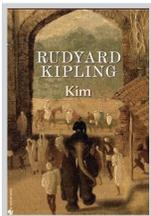
WILLIAM KENNEDY – *IRONWEED* (1983)

Francis Phelan returns to Albany in 1938, a drunken bum who has been running from his ghosts for more than twenty years. Phelan has failed at a great deal in life, but he has an honesty and inner strength that have allowed him to survive, and give him in the end a dollop of redemption. Too many common readings offer shallow, glib tales of poverty and redemption; *Ironweed*, a classic of modern American fiction, offers a mature and moving variation on the theme.



RICHARD KIM – *THE MARTYRED* (1964)

Kim's novel about the persecutions of North Korean Christians during the Korean War is a classic of taut English prose. It is also an extraordinary study of the rival calls of God and the state, of what Christianity offers to its people in times of persecution, and of how they should and actually do behave. Kim's novel is also a valuable corrective to the *M*A*S*H* view of foreign wars, which takes the natives as mere backdrops for the ethical quandaries of Americans.



RUDYARD KIPLING – *KIM* (1901)

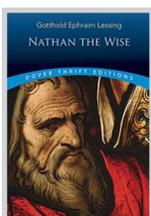
This is a book that vividly portrays British colonial India through a homeless white orphan's eyes. We picked it because it (a) raises provocative questions about contemporary American views of personal identity, multiculturalism and colonialism, and (b) is an extraordinarily artful tale of political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



ARTHUR KOESTLER – *DARKNESS AT NOON* (1940)

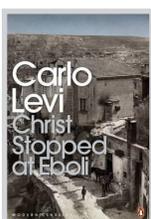
In this novel, Koestler, a former Communist, depicts the world of Stalin’s show trials. The protagonist, Rubashov, is a true believer in the Communist system, but is arrested, interrogated, and struggles with the meaning of his life and loyalties as he awaits his certain execution. One of the classics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



GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING – *NATHAN THE WISE* (1783)

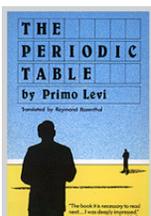
Mutual religious hatred is the norm in Saladin’s Jerusalem at the time of the Third Crusade, but somehow Nathan the Jew, Saladin the Muslim, and Conrad the Christian learn tolerance of one another. One of the first and greatest pleas for tolerance; *Nathan the Wise* should teach students to appreciate the deep roots of tolerance in Western civilization, and help to inculcate in them the virtue of tolerance.



CARLO LEVI – *CHRIST STOPPED AT EBOLI* (1945)

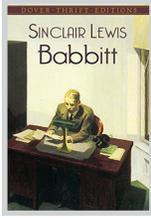
Anti-Fascist Levi was exiled by Mussolini’s government to remotest southern Italy; there he lived for a year in villages poverty-stricken, primitive, and still halfway between paganism and Christianity. Levi’s beautiful account of a people ‘outside of time’ is stark description, nuanced empathy, and condemnation of a state that had done so little for so long to improve the lives of its people. Levi’s work did contribute

to postwar social reform aimed at improving the lot of the south Italian peasantry; students will learn how fine intellectual work can contribute to political change.



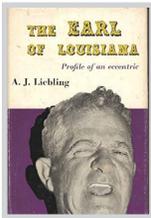
PRIMO LEVI – *THE PERIODIC TABLE* (1975)

Levi’s linked short stories recount much of his life, both before and after his internment in Auschwitz, through the eyes of a chemist. Levi’s integration of scientific viewpoint and personal memoir is especially recommended for colleges seeking a reading that will appeal to both science and humanities majors.



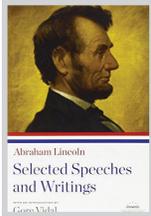
SINCLAIR LEWIS – *BABBITT* (1922)

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



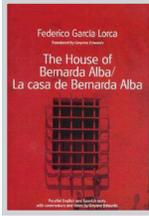
A. J. LIEBLING – *THE EARL OF LOUISIANA* (1961)

In 1959, Louisiana Governor Earl Long was sent to a mental institution, got himself sprung, and came back for a last year of politicking before his untimely death in 1960. New Yorker writer A. J. Liebling came down to Louisiana to write up the show. Liebling’s book is a bravura piece of *New Yorker* reportage, and a love letter to Earl Long’s brand of Louisiana politicking—populism and corn-pone, eccentricity and corruption, and Long’s unwillingness to play the diehard opponent of the Civil Rights movement a crucial part of the story. We chose this book for its style, its historical interest, and because it will remind students that politics isn’t just about serious struggle, but can also be sheerly entertaining.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN – *SELECTED SPEECHES AND WRITINGS* (1832-1865, PUBLISHED IN THIS VOLUME IN 2009) (SELECTIONS)

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



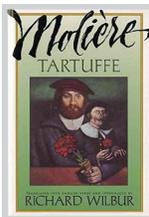
**FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA – *THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA*
(1936)**

Bernarda Alba’s five daughters are trapped in their house by their tyrannical mother. They desire to escape and to live; the daughter who almost does get away commits suicide when she fails. A stark, elemental tragedy of sexual desire, honor, and sterilizing power, Lorca’s play will remind students that there are no easy solutions to the conflict of human passions.



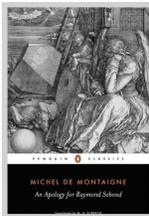
JOHN STUART MILL – *ON LIBERTY* (1869)

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



MOLIÈRE – *TARTUFFE* (1664)

Tartuffe pretends to be a holy man and imposes himself on the credulous Orgon; Orgon’s folly almost results in the loss of all his wealth to the grasping Tartuffe. *Tartuffe* condemns religious hypocrisy in the first instance, but it is a useful warning in general both against frauds who clothe themselves in ideals and against credulous and excessive enthusiasm for ideals. There are Tartuffes enough on college nowadays, and students will benefit from reading about the archetype.



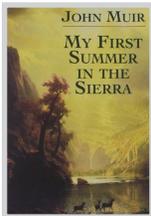
**MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE – *AN APOLOGY FOR RAYMOND SEBOND*
(1580-1595)**

Montaigne’s essay is the greatest single statement of Renaissance skepticism—written by a believing Catholic, who took skepticism to justify his tolerant faith. Aside from illustrating a skepticism that was not dogmatic, Montaigne founded the essay genre, and his enormous learning shows what Renaissance humanism was capable of producing. Montaigne is the heart of the Western tradition: students who start with his *Apology* will be better fitted to approach any part of it, from Homer and the Bible to the present moment.



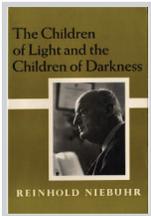
THOMAS MORE – *UTOPIA* (1516)

Thomas More spends an afternoon in a garden while a traveler he’s just met, Raphael Nonsenso, tells him about his journey to the other side of the world. He found a perfect kingdom, called No-Place—Utopia. There’s no poverty in No-Place, everyone’s equal, and it’s just about perfect if you don’t mind the lack of private property, state euthanasia, and the regular colonization and slaughter of No-Place’s neighbors whenever No-Place gets a little crowded. More invented the idea of *Utopia*—some part genuine yearning, some part satire, and mostly a way to make people think and talk about what the best set up for a country is, and how it should be achieved. We chose this because 1) that sort of discussion is what you should be doing in college; and 2) More showed right at the beginning of the Utopian tradition that you should think carefully before trying to turn your country into No-Place.



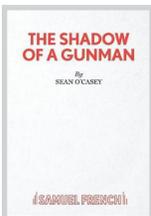
JOHN MUIR – *MY FIRST SUMMER IN THE SIERRA* (1911)

Muir spent the summer of 1869 herding sheep in the heart of the Sierra Nevadas and fell in love with the land around him—especially the Yosemite Valley. Muir’s journal is excellent literature, and also an insightful record of the thoughts and observations of the man who created the modern American environmentalist movement. Especially recommended for colleges seeking a reading on an environmental theme.



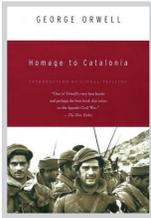
REINHOLD NIEBUHR – *THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT AND THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS* (1944)

Niebuhr grounds democracy on both man’s capacity to do good and on his ineradicable sinfulness. Modern political theory and modern college politics characteristically ground their activism on a facile belief in human goodness; Niebuhr encourages action in the world that squarely addresses human evil. Students will benefit from grounding their civic engagements on Niebuhr’s sober estimate of the nature of the human soul.



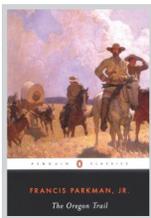
SEAN O’CASEY – *THE SHADOW OF A GUNMAN* (1923)

When he takes a room in a Dublin tenement, Donal Devoren is mistaken for an IRA gunman on the run. He enjoys being mistaken for a romantic terrorist—but his playacting leads to the death of Minnie Powell, a young woman who has fallen in love with the terrorist he isn’t really. Students will learn that the glamor of playacting violence can lead to real, unexpected deaths.



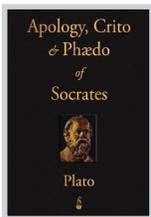
GEORGE ORWELL – *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA* (1938)

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



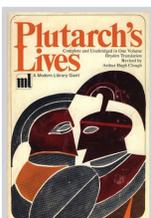
FRANCIS PARKMAN – *THE OREGON TRAIL* (1847)

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.



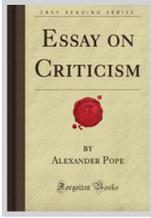
PLATO – *APOLOGY OF SOCRATES AND CRITO* (C. 399-387 B.C.)

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



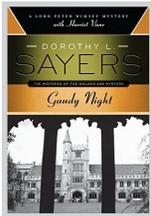
PLUTARCH – *PARALLEL LIVES* (SECOND CENTURY A.D.) (SELECTIONS)

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



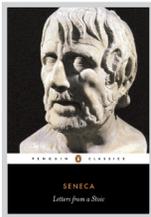
ALEXANDER POPE – *ESSAY ON CRITICISM* (1711)

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.



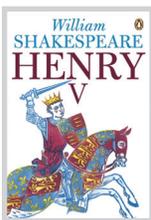
DOROTHY SAYERS – *GAUDY NIGHT* (1935)

Sayers’ mystery-romance is lovely meditation on the nature of female friendship and the proper character of companionate marriage. It’s also an extraordinary tribute to the value of college education—because what is in danger in the novel ultimately is the community of Shrewsbury College itself. This is not an easy book for a freshman—it is not an easy book for anyone—but there is no better one to make a student understand how one can fall in love with a college, and why it is worth loving.



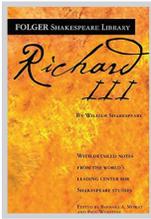
SENECA – *LETTERS FROM A STOIC* (C. 65) [Penguin Classics Edition, Selected Letters]

Seneca wrote these letters to his young friend Lucilius, to help him in his education to wisdom. We chose these letters for three reasons: 1) they convey Roman Stoic philosophy with lucid elegance; 2) they introduce students to a basic ethical text of Western civilization; and 3) most importantly, they state the basic truth that the point of education is to become wise.



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE – *HENRY V* (C. 1598)

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



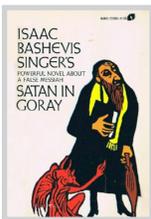
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE – *RICHARD III* (C. 1592)

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



GEORGE BERNARD SHAW – *MAJOR BARBARA* (1905)

Major Barbara Undershaft of the Salvation Army wishes to do well in the world, with a pure heart—and finds that her good deeds end up financed by millionaires who make their profit from drink and guns. College students will benefit from reading Shaw’s wicked commentary on the compromises young idealists must make with the world.



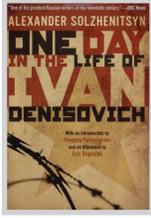
ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER – *SATAN IN GORAY* (1933)

In the aftermath of the Chmelnicki massacres, the Jews of Goray turn with increasingly hysterical fervor to the false messiah Shabbatai Zvi. Students will learn that millennial cults and predictions of the end of the world have come before, and that one should not get too caught up in the expectation that the end is nigh. Especially recommended for colleges seeking a reading on the excesses of climate change agitation.



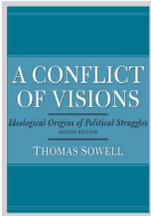
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT (C. 1350-1400)

Sir Gawain goes on a heroic quest to the castle of the Green Knight—and discovers that he is not as heroic as he thought he was. Fourteenth-century men were quite aware that the self-confidently virtuous could be tempted from honor and virtue, and students can learn that their much-vilified medieval forefathers had wisdom still apposite today.



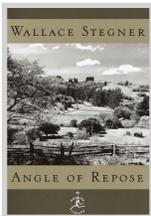
ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN – *ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH* (1962)

The great novel about the Soviet Gulag. Students should know about what Communism inflicted upon the Russian people, and remember that the children of the Gulag guards still rule in Putin’s Russia. The novel, beyond that, tells of the survival of some human decency and compassion within one of the most brutal prisons ever devised by man. We picked this book to allow students to consider that man’s inhumanity to man is very great—but not the entire story.



THOMAS SOWELL – *A CONFLICT OF VISIONS: IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF POLITICAL STRUGGLES* (1987)

Sowell analyzes the enduring split between those thinkers who envision man as imperfectible, constrained by ineradicable selfishness, and those who envision man as malleable, perfectible, and capable of rising to his natural state of quasi-saintly virtue. Sowell prefers the constrained vision, but we recommend his book because 1) he offers a convincing portrait of the deep intellectual divide that underpins our political divide; and 2) he provides an even-handed portrait of each intellectual camp, which should help members of either camp to understand the other. Students seeking to understand the intellectual underpinnings of modern political debates will find this book a fine introduction.



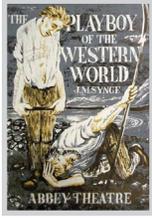
WALLACE STEGNER – *ANGLE OF REPOSE* (1971)

Stegner’s novel tells of the American frontier, Victorian culture in America, and the struggle to make both life and art from the harsh materials of the American West—and Stegner’s use of the actual letters of Mary Hallock Foote within his novel can introduce students to the idea that literary appropriation of documentary materials is often truer to the novelist’s vision than to history. This is also an environmentalist novel as it should be done—not mawkish hagiography of nature, but an exact study of how the characters’ actions and souls are shaped by the land of the West.



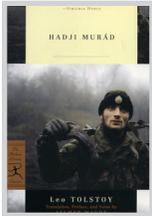
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON – *A FOOTNOTE TO HISTORY: EIGHT YEARS OF TROUBLE IN SAMOA* (1892)

The author of *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and other popular works moved to Samoa in 1890 in search of a place to recover his health. This book is his account of the colonial struggle to possess the island, as the United States, Germany, and Britain squabbled with each other and a hopelessly outgunned Samoan king. Stevenson is on the side of the Samoans. The *New York Times* hailed the book on its first publication as “an entertaining and brilliant piece of narrative.” We picked it because (a) it is a superbly written work that makes an otherwise forgotten episode in colonial history into a lens for the vanities of politics and power, and (b) it is a good benchmark for students to think about American military ventures in faraway places.



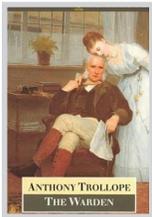
J. M. SYNGE – *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD* (1907)

Christy Mahon is a miserable nothing at home—but he’s a popular hero when he travels to County Mayo and reveals that he’s a brave, daring lad who’s killed his own father. Or has he? Synge’s play is a wonderful exploration about what makes for popularity—and how quickly it can vanish. Incoming freshmen will benefit from thinking about what it’s like to reinvent yourself as a brand new person in your first venture away from home.



LEO TOLSTOY – *HADJI MURAD* (1912)

Hadji Murad is a whole Russian novel in miniature, and Tolstoy gives you all of Chechnya and Russia, and their war with one another, in a brief 150 pages. Russia, the Islamic world, and foreign wars are today’s headlines—and nothing can tell a student more about them than Tolstoy’s slim, dazzling window on those worlds.



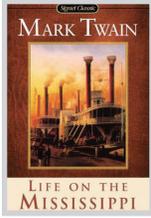
ANTHONY TROLLOPE – *THE WARDEN* (1855)

Young John Bold decides to reform the almshouse of Hiram’s Hospital—too much money goes to the warden, not enough to the bedesmen (the people who are supposed to receive the charity). He starts up a campaign to make change, supported ignorantly by the professional reformers of the London media and self-interestedly by the bedesmen. The Warden, touched by conscience, resigns his position—but none of the rest of John Bold’s reforms actually happen. We chose this novel 1) because it is vigorous, deft Victorian satire; 2) because it shows that reformers can be ignorant, shallow publicists more interested in letting people know how good they are than in getting results; and 3) it exposes the flaws of defenders of the status quo as well.



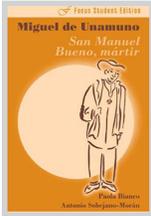
IVAN TURGENEV – *FATHERS AND SONS* (1862)

Young Arkady Kirsanoff comes home to the family estate after graduating from the University of St. Petersburg, accompanied by his new friend Bazarov. Bazarov is a nihilist, a cynic, a representative of the new intelligentsia (an *intelligent*) that rejects all traditional beliefs about family, state, and God—one of the first great representatives of the type. Students will benefit 1) from seeing how the *intelligent* appeared to others when he first appeared; 2) from learning that the *intelligent* is already a type 150 years old, whose virtues and failings have been anatomized long since; and 3) from learning that children didn’t just begin rebelling against their parents yesterday.



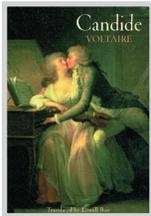
MARK TWAIN – *LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI* (1883)

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



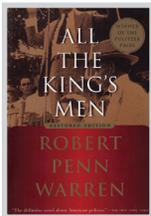
MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO – *SAINT MANUEL THE GOOD, MARTYR* (1931)

The parish priest Don Manuel has lost his faith; he nevertheless preaches and lives a life of Christian charity, as the best thing he can do for the villagers entrusted to his spiritual care. Unamuno’s ironic tale is a moving exploration of faith and doubt, and of the imperatives to speak a noble lie.



VOLTAIRE – *CANDIDE* (1759)

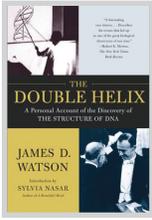
This eighteenth century satire of a young man under the spell of a philosophy that glibly treats the order of the world as “all for the best,” would seem to be superfluous counsel in an age where students are more likely to be surrounded by dire warnings that things are bad and about to get much worse.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



ROBERT PENN WARREN – *ALL THE KING’S MEN* (1946)

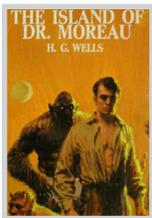
Warren’s novel about the rise of a populist politician in the South presents the interplay of cynical calculation and idealistic yearning in American life. Based loosely on the life and death of Louisiana governor and senator Huey P. Long, the book is a classic portrayal of one of the weaknesses of our system of governance.

We picked it because (a) it presents political corruption but is ultimately a counsel against viewing politics as mere manipulation, (b) it is a rich and vivid depiction of the insider’s view of political life, and (c) it provides students an occasion to come to terms with their own temptation to think of governance as a raw, anything-goes game.



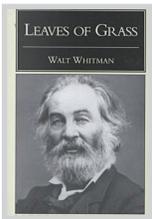
JAMES D. WATSON – *THE DOUBLE HELIX* (1968)

Watson’s first-person account of the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA continues to provoke controversy, especially over Watson’s cursory treatment of Rosalind Franklin, whose x-ray diffraction images of DNA were crucial to the hypothesis that he and his colleague Francis Crick developed. Nonetheless, the book is a classic insider account of one of the great scientific breakthroughs of the last century. We picked it because (a) it is a vivid portrayal of how scientific reasoning, personal ambition, and individual character come together in actual research, and (b) students need to know about some of the foundational discoveries that underlie contemporary medicine and technology.



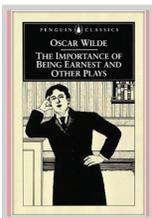
H. G. WELLS – *THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU* (1896)

Shipwrecked Edward Prendrick discovers that mad scientist Dr. Moreau has filled his island with beasts surgically altered to resemble men—but with their bestial instincts intact within. Wells’ fable about whether science can overcome the ingrained habits of beasts, and men, is more pertinent than ever in our age of scientific hubris. Especially recommended for colleges seeking a reading that will appeal to both science and humanities majors.



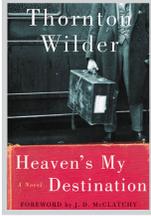
WALT WHITMAN – *LEAVES OF GRASS* (1855-1892)

Whitman’s poem is self-indulgent, sprawling, bizarre, radical, indecently sensual, the inspiration for one hundred fifty years of bad poetry, and the greatest love letter ever written to America and her people. Every American should know this eccentric masterpiece, which identifies America with every softheaded, openhearted ideal in the world. There is no better prophylactic to the anti-American cynicism that too many students will encounter in college.



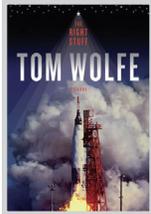
OSCAR WILDE – *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* (1895)

This is the funniest play ever written and about nothing at all. Students should know that we also read good books in order to laugh, and that a good education and sheer joy go hand in hand. They should also know that civic engagement isn’t everything, that you should always eat your guests’ cucumber sandwiches, and that it is important to spend some time not being earnest.



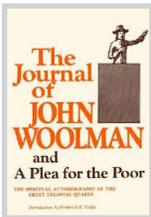
THORNTON WILDER – *HEAVEN'S MY DESTINATION* (1934)

George Marvin Brush is a young fundamentalist travelling salesman wandering through the Midwest of the Great Depression, half Pollyanna, half Don Quixote, and so full of energy that he's a third half Gandhi. Brush gets arrested, tempted, and brought to the brink of despair—but for better or worse is an idealist to the end. A witty study of the follies of American idealism, it brings home the old question of *Don Quixote*: if this is the world of sane people, isn't it better to be a little mad?



TOM WOLFE – *THE RIGHT STUFF* (1979)

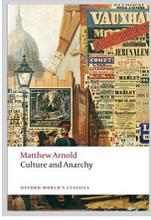
This book examines the lives of test pilots and astronauts, and chronicles the early years of the U.S.-manned space program. We picked it because (a) Wolfe's sympathetic engagement with the pilots brings to life the human side of this hugely complex scientific and technical accomplishment, (b) the book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



JOHN WOOLMAN – *THE JOURNAL OF JOHN WOOLMAN* (1774)

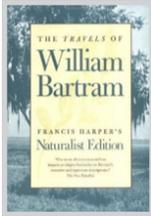
Quaker John Woolman's memoir tells of his life as a witness for pacifism and the abolition of slavery. Woolman's classic eighteenth-century account of the intertwining of faith and radical action is especially recommended for colleges seeking common readings to support student activism.

35 Recommended Books For More Ambitious College Common Reading Programs



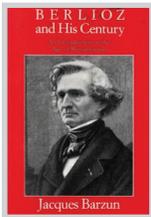
MATTHEW ARNOLD - *CULTURE AND ANARCHY* (1869)

The point of culture is the pursuit of perfection; the uncultured are mere Philistines. Arnold eloquently articulates the High Victorian ideal of culture as singular and normative—a valuable corrective to the modern view of culture as plural and descriptive. Students will learn to consider what they should do during college to acquire culture and leave off Philistinism.



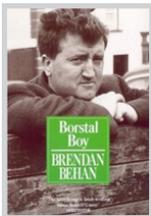
WILLIAM BARTRAM – *TRAVELS OF WILLIAM BARTRAM* (1791)

A classic description of the flora, fauna, and Indians of the American Southeast before European settlement that is also a classic of American literature. Students will learn how deeply embedded in the American tradition is the loving description of American nature and America's first peoples.



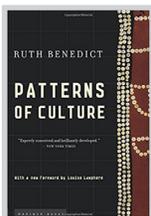
JACQUES BARZUN – *BERLIOZ AND HIS CENTURY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AGE OF ROMANTICISM* (1950)

An exemplar of intellectual history, which brings alive the great romantic French composer Hector Berlioz. Barzun shows how to conduct a sympathetic evocation of the past, and he lets us know both what was new and valuable about Romanticism, and how Romantic we still are.



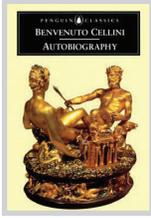
BRENDAN BEHAN – *BORSTAL BOY* (1958)

In 1939, the 17-year-old Behan was caught working as an IRA terrorist; underage, he was sent to an English juvenile prison—the borstal. His memoir of life among young men, halfway between boys and criminals, is beautiful and gripping—as is his account of how he himself changed in prison. Especially recommended to colleges looking for books about the criminal justice system.



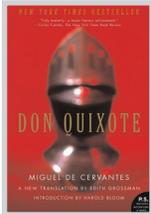
RUTH BENEDICT – *PATTERNS OF CULTURE* (1934)

Benedict's classic of anthropology beautifully describes the varying cultures of the Pueblo, the Kwakiutl, and the Dobu. Students will find an eloquent account of the concept of cultural relativism—and also discover how deeply rooted that concept is in the West's intellectual traditions and academic disciplines.



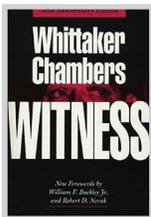
BENVENUTO CELLINI – *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENVENUTO CELLINI (1558-1563)*

Goldsmith, soldier, sculptor, and musician, Cellini’s life embodied the gusto and ambition of the Renaissance. Cellini’s autobiography is the standard by which to measure milk-and-water memoirs—as his life is the standard by which to measure milk-and-water lives. Especially recommended for colleges with concentrations in the fine arts.



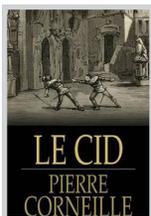
MIGUEL DE CERVANTES – *DON QUIXOTE (1605)*

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.



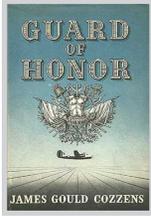
WHITTAKER CHAMBERS – *WITNESS (1952)*

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.



PIERRE CORNEILLE – *THE CID (1637)*

Le Cid and Chimène love each other—but Chimène swears revenge on Le Cid after he kills her father in a duel. A classic drama of love and honor, *The Cid* pioneeringly portrayed women and men as equal in their affections and their dignity. Students will learn how deeply intertwined the history of feminist thought is in the European tradition, and how it is rooted in the affirmation that women possess martial virtues. We recommend the Richard Wilbur translation.



JAMES GOULD COZZENS – *GUARD OF HONOR* (1948)

The heart of Cozzens' novel is the story of a racial conflict on an Army Air Force base in Florida in 1943; it expands to include the nature of modern warfare, the way military bureaucracy works, the tissue of American race relations built upon a thousand racial insults, the self-serving ruthlessness of the American left in its claim to care about American blacks, and the profound indifference by all other American whites to the sufferings of American blacks. Decidedly un-PC, triggering with a vengeance in its stenography of racial epithets, this is the great novel of America at war.



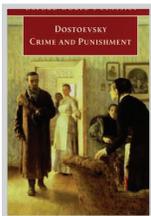
DANIEL DEFOE – *ROXANA: THE FORTUNATE MISTRESS* (1724)

Roxana is a bold, self-reliant woman—who must make her living as a courtesan, and who comes to commit an evil action of tragic consequence to preserve the good life she has finally achieved for herself. A gripping subject for freshman debate about what women owe to themselves when the world tilts the playing field against them, and what prices are worth paying in the search for a good life.



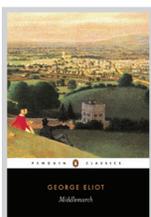
ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE – *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (1838)

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



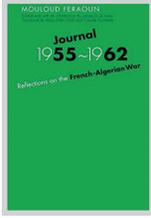
FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY – *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* (1866)

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



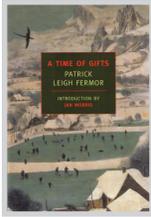
GEORGE ELIOT – *MIDDLEMARCH* (1871-1872)

The greatest realistic novel in English. Why not have students read the best?



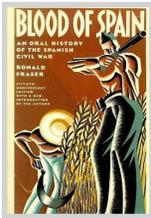
MOULOUD FERAOUN – *JOURNAL, 1955-1962: REFLECTIONS ON THE FRENCH-ALGERIAN WAR* (1962)

Feraoun was a Muslim Algerian in love with French civilization, sympathetic to the Algerian demand for independence, and a scrupulous observer of the horrors inflicted by both the Algerian nationalist rebels and the French Army during the savage terrorism and counter-terrorism of the Algerian independence struggle. Feraoun refused to simplify his account and he refused to simplify his own commitments; he was killed in the last year of the war precisely because he was a man who refused to embrace brutal simplicities. His journal is necessary reading during our long war against Islamist terror.



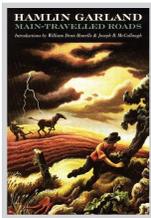
PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR – *A TIME OF GIFTS* (1977)

18-year-old Fermor had no idea what to do with himself—so late in 1933 he decided to walk across Europe, from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople. Half a century later he recorded the account in some of the most beautiful prose of the twentieth century. *A Time of Gifts* depicts Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia before the twin deluges of Nazism and Communism descended on them. Students will learn from Fermor to look at the world around them, seek out its beauty, and try to remember it. They will also learn that they can still do wonderful things if they decide to walk away from college.



RONALD FRASER – *BLOOD OF SPAIN: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR* (1979)

Fraser’s bricolage of first-person oral history and third-person narration is stylistically odd, but this is a riveting account of what it’s like to live through a civil war—the changes of heart, the mixtures of ideology and individual choice, and the brutal chaos that puts paid to virtually every revolutionary dream. Students who speak blithely of “revolution” and “civil war” should read this account of what a real ideological civil war was like.



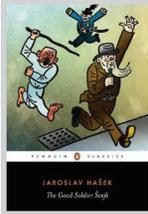
HAMLIN GARLAND – *MAIN-TRAVELLED ROADS* (1891)

Eleven tales of the grueling life endured by native and immigrant Midwestern farmers in the generation after the Civil War—above all, the hardships endured by farmwives. Garland’s stories bring to life the old America as more than just a plaster ideal, where flesh-and-blood humans worked, suffered, and challenged the pinching limitations on their lives. Students will learn that protest fiction is an enduring component of American literature.



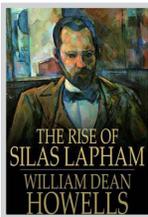
GEORGE GISSING – *THE ODD WOMEN* (1893)

Unmarried women, married women, and the new generation of feminists make their way in Victorian London—in a world where the lack of money condemns its inhabitants to loneliness and misery. Gissing explores above all whether men and women can have an equal marriage in a society that takes them as unequal. Gissing’s novel brings Victorian England to dramatic life, while illustrating the importance of equal dignity in the relations between men and women.



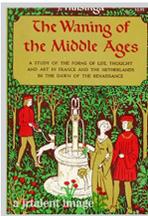
JAROSLAV HASEK – *THE GOOD SOLDIER SVEJK AND HIS FORTUNES IN THE WORLD WAR* (1923)

Svejk wants to be a good soldier; it’s just that he’s a bit slow, so it’s not his fault that he happens to spend much of World War One drinking in a bar or wandering around Bohemia trying to find his regiment. Hasek’s comic novel is an education for every student who wants to avoid the latest great cause without making a fuss.



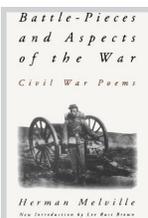
WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS – *THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM* (1885)

The first great realistic American novel about a businessman, as the business class began their rise in the American scene. Howells satirically dissected the American businessman from without—but also revealed him from within, with considerable sympathy. The world of American business and businessmen is terrifically important; Howell’s novel is an enduringly good introduction.



JOHAN HUIZINGA – *THE WANING OF THE MIDDLE AGES* (1919)

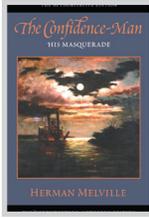
A great work of cultural history, bringing alive the world of late medieval Europe. Students will learn how different the world of the past was, what the discipline of history can do, and how well academics can write.



HERMAN MELVILLE – *BATTLE-PIECES AND ASPECTS OF THE WAR* (1866), EXCERPTS

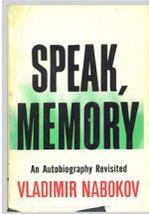
The Civil War was the shattering event of the day, and Melville wanted to make sense of it in poetry. He produced a strange medley—no easy poems, some weird and baffling, others with a power that continues to the present day and brings alive the Civil War—as military event, as historical sea-change, as spiritual thunderclap.

A classic of American poetry, it is also required reading for every student who wants to write poetry or fiction that speaks to contemporary events.



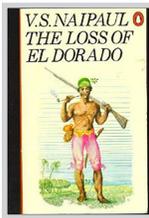
HERMAN MELVILLE – *THE CONFIDENCE-MAN* (1857)

Easy to read but baffling to some readers, since Melville refuses to say exactly who among the large cast of characters aboard the Mississippi steam ship *Fidèle* is the confidence man. Is America a confidence game?



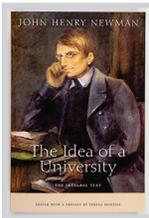
VLADIMIR NABOKOV – *SPEAK, MEMORY* (1951, 1966)

Nabokov recalls his youth, in Tsarist Russia and in exile. A staggeringly beautiful memoir. If students are going to read a memoir, why not one of the best?



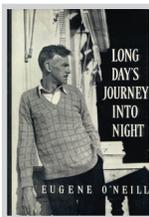
V. S. NAIPAUL – *THE LOSS OF EL DORADO: A COLONIAL HISTORY* (1969)

Naipaul's history of Trinidad narrates how the obsessive search by Spaniards and Englishmen for legendary gold eventually gave birth to revolutionary Venezuela and the slave plantations of Trinidad. Naipaul integrated literary style and psychological insight to bring alive colonialism and slavery; his book is a model for students seeking to understand the past and bring it alive.



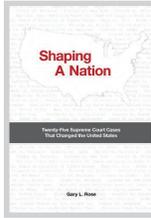
JOHN HENRY NEWMAN – *THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY* (1852)

Newman's articulation of the ideal of liberal education as an end in itself, embedded within a theological framework, is one of the most powerful and influential conceptions of the purpose of the university. This should be a starting point for any student's understanding of what precisely they are supposed to be doing in college.



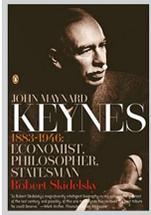
EUGENE O'NEILL – *LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT* (1941-1942)

Edmund Tyrone spends a day with his family—some alcoholic, some drug-addicted, all self-deluded. At the end of the play, all self-delusions are stripped away—but the knowledge gained is of no use to save them from themselves. This harrowing American tragedy is the ultimate refutation of the psychiatric delusion that we may be redeemed by self-knowledge.



GARY ROSE, ED. – *SHAPING A NATION: 25 SUPREME COURT CASES* (2010)

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



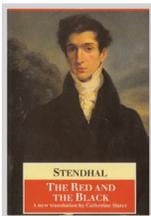
ROBERT SKIDELSKY – *JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES 1883-1946: ECONOMIST, PHILOSOPHER, STATESMAN* (2005)

Skidelsky's biography of Keynes (abridged, but still massive) tells us about the man whose theory still governs the global economy. His personal life ranged from gay affairs in Bloomsbury to marriage to a Russian ballerina; his instant analysis of the economic effects of the Treaty of Versailles predicted World War II twenty years in advance; his General Theory of Employment revolutionized economics and is still the basis of modern economic thought; his economic management carried England through World War II; and at Bretton Woods he helped lay the foundations for the postwar economic order. Skidelsky's biography is indispensable for understanding the architect of the modern economic world.



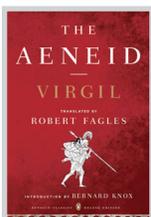
EUGENE B. SLEDGE – *WITH THE OLD BREED: AT PELELIU AND OKINAWA* (1981)

The classic memoir of what it was like to fight as a Marine during World War II—everyday courage in hell. Students should know what young Americans are capable of doing for one another and for their country.



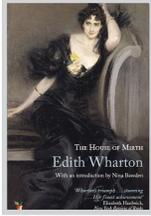
STENDAHL, *THE RED AND THE BLACK* (1830)

Julien Sorel is a young, poor man on the make, longing to conquer a world he considers inferior to him; he ends up dead for his pains. The best refutation to the thesis that French novels must be boring; a handy guide for ambitious students to the dos and don'ts of professional success.



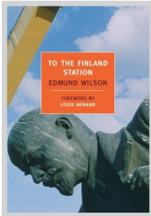
VIRGIL – *THE AENEID* (19 B.C., FAGLES TRANSLATION, 2006)

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



EDITH WHARTON – *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH* (1905)

Lily Bart struggles to live and keep her virtue in a New York society that is intensely moralistic, corrupt, and hypocritical—and where friends abandon you the moment your reputation is questioned. Lily’s insistence that sophistication does not mean acquiescence in degradation will provide a valuable lesson for students confronted with the same sophisticated equation. So too will the knowledge that the opinion of one’s peers is frequently unjust, and that friends are fair-weather more often than not.



EDMUND WILSON – *TO THE FINLAND STATION* (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.