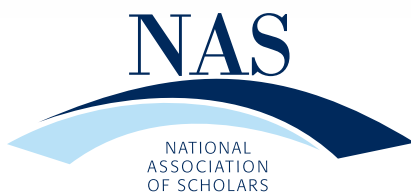


BEACH BOOKS: 2017–2018

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



Executive Summary of a report by
the National Association of Scholars
September 2018



The full 500-page report is available at
www.nas.org/beachbooks2018

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Cover image: Book at beach cliffs during
summer at Canal D Amour open for reading
by Toshe Ognjanov // Shutterstock

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FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Association of Scholars has examined college common reading programs since 2010. Year by year we have found that these programs, and the books they assign to students, tend to share certain characteristics.

By and large, common reading programs are:

Bureaucratic. Common reading programs are intended to satisfy accrediting organizations' requirements that institutions promote "student learning outcomes."

Run by Administrators. Common reading programs are usually run by "co-curricular" administrators, not professors.

Non-Academic Mission Statements. Program mission statements usually direct committees to fulfill non-academic goals, such as *building community or inclusivity*.

Integrated into Activism Programs. Common readings are often integrated with *service-learning* and *civic engagement* programs.

One-sided Political Messages. Common reading programs also advance progressive dogma through discussion guides, question prompts, and cooperation with "social justice" programs.

Replace Academics with the "Co-Curriculum." Common reading programs make new students' first experience in college "co-curricular," and so tell students that the heart of college is not the regular academic coursework but the "co-curriculum."

The common reading books are:

Progressive. Common readings usually have a progressive message—e.g., illegal immigrants

contribute positively to America.

Parochial. Most common readings were written since 2000 by Americans. Few colleges assigned classics or works in translation.

Mediocre. Common readings are usually banal and intellectually unchallenging.

Largely Nonfiction. Common readings' focus on mediocre nonfiction undermines the goal of fostering the pro-civic habit of literary reading.

Promote Activism. Many common readings are chosen to promote activism; they ignore the virtues of the disengaged life of the mind.

Narrow and Predictable. The genre is *parochial, contemporary, juvenile, and progressive*.

This year's books (2017/2018) remain:

Popular and Widespread. This report lists 481 colleges and universities located in 47 states. They include 68 of the top 100 universities and 32 of the top 100 liberal arts colleges in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings.

Recent. 67% of common reading assignments were published between 2011 and the present. Only 32 (6.5%) were published before 1991. Only 10 (2.0%) were published before 1900.

Nonfiction. 67% of assignments were memoirs, biographies, and other nonfiction.

Homogeneous. The five most widely assigned books—17% of all assignments—were all recent nonfiction or memoirs about African Americans suffering from American racism.

Predictable. NAS predicted that *Between the World and Me* would be one of the five most-frequently selected common readings for 2017-18. It was the second-most popular selection.

Our recommendations for improvement are:

Adopt External Oversight. External oversight committees, such as the Committee on Free Expression authorized by North Carolina’s Campus Free Speech Act, should inspect common reading programs and recommend ways to render them politically impartial.

Adopt Best Existing Practices. Some common reading programs already select classics and recently published intellectually challenging books. Their peers should adopt administrative processes that bring them up to the best existing practices of their peers.

Seek Out Books That Foster Good Academic Character. Seek books that inform students about the importance of intellectual humility, freedom of speech, individual dissent, and self-control; and that discourage self-righteous certitude, indulgence in outrage, collective activism, and rioting intolerance.

Seek Out Books That Encourage Bipartisan American Unity. We have predicted that college selection committees in the coming years will be tempted to choose books that channel progressive passions of anti-Trumpism. They should make an explicit effort to choose books that do not serve such political vendettas.

Seek Out Books That Encourage Debate. Selection committees should select books that challenge students precisely because they do not endorse “institutional values”—which all too often nowadays are statements of progressive dogma.

Seek Better Books. Common reading committees should seek out books that lift up the institution’s academic standards and contribute to its intellectual reputation.

Change Mission Statements. Common reading mission statements should pursue and assess academic outcomes only.

Put the Faculty in Charge. Common reading programs should be shifted from the “co-curricular” bureaucracy to the faculty. All committee members should have their teaching loads reduced by at least 1 course a year.

Add Writing Requirements. Common readings should be integrated with academic essays.

Divorce from Activism. Common readings should not promote activism of any kind, and should cut all ties to administrative subunits within the university that promote activism.

Reduce or Cap Speaker Fees. Use the savings to subsidize book purchases for students.

Promote Fiscal Transparency. Common reading programs should publicize speaker fees, staff costs, and administrative overhead.

Donors Should Conduct Due Diligence. Donors should only fund programs that adopt our recommended mission statements and administrative structures, and provide only time-limited, revocable funding.

Tighten College Admission Standards. Select a student body capable of reading a challenging book.

WHAT ARE COMMON READING PROGRAMS?

Hundreds of American colleges and universities assign a summer reading to incoming freshmen—usually one book, which the students are asked to read outside their courses. For many students, this is the only book they will read in common with their classmates.

Our study of common readings covers 732 colleges and universities between the academic years 2007/2008 and 2017/2018, including 481 colleges and universities for the academic year 2017-2018.

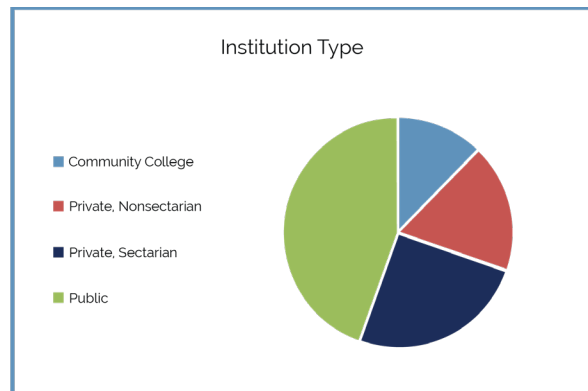
The National Association of Scholars believes that common reading programs are a good idea in principle. At a time when core curricula have largely disappeared, a common reading assignment can provide at least an abbreviated substitution that may introduce students to rigorous intellectual standards, inspire them to read further and better than they otherwise would, and foster intellectual friendship on campus. The choice of a classic work can also serve to introduce students to the tradition formed by the best works of Western civilization. We offer critiques of common readings as they actually are, so as to offer guidance for how they may reform themselves along this better model.

This year we are adding chronological depth to our analysis and critique. We are now able to present and analyze information on 4,754 assignments over the last eleven years, including 1,664 individual texts. Our new information allows us to modify our previous recommendations, as we can now pinpoint best practices among common reading programs and recommend them to their peers.

THE COLLEGES THAT ASSIGN COMMON READING

Every sort of college and university assigns common readings. The 481 institutions we tabulated in 2017-18 include 214 public four-year institutions, 121 private sectarian institutions, 87 private nonsectarian institutions, and 59 community colleges. They are located in 47 states and the District of Columbia—every part of the Union save Hawaii, Nevada, and Wyoming.

According to the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, these 481 institutions include 68 of the top 100 universities in the nation and 32 of the top 100 liberal arts colleges



THIS YEAR'S BOOKS (2017-2018)

We track common readings' genres, as well as their publication dates, main subjects, themes, and which books were most widely assigned.

Predominantly Nonfiction

We classify common reading by genre: biography, memoir, newspaper, nonfiction, novel, play, poetry, and so on. The vast majority of the 498 assignments were in the three allied genres of Nonfiction (174, 35% of the total), Memoir (142, 29% of the total), and Biography (20, 4% of the total). Together there were 336 selections from these three genres, 67% of the total number of assignments.

Novels were the most popular genre of imaginative literature: 119 selections, 24% of the total

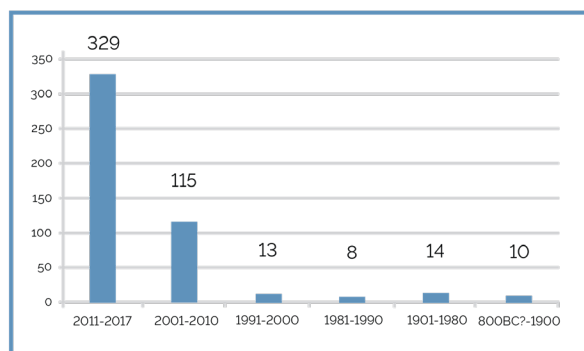
Genre	Number of Assignments
Biography	20
Epic Poem	1
Essay	5
Lecture	1
Memoir	142
Memoir Poems	1
Miscellaneous	8
Musical	2
Newspaper	3
Nonfiction	174
Novel	119
Play	3
Poetry	7
Short Stories	10
Skills Assessment	1
Total	497

Books Younger than the Students

Common reading committees continue to select almost nothing but books written in the lifetimes of incoming students—and very largely books written since 2010. Out of 489 datable texts selected for 2017-18 common readings, 329 (67%) were published between 2011 and 2017, and 444 (91%) have been published between 2001 and the present.

Thirteen selections were published in 2017, the very year they were assigned—more than the 10 (2%) that were published before 1900.

PUBLICATION DATES



Most Popular Subjects and Themes

In 2017-18, we gave the common readings 804 subject labels, divided into 30 subject categories. The most popular subject categories were Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery (107 readings), Crime and Punishment/Police (82 readings), Immigration (68 readings), Media/Science/Technology (57 readings), and Feminism/Sex Discrimination/Women (51 readings).

We also gave the common readings theme labels, divided into 23 theme categories. Most of these register the common reading committees' persisting interest in "diversity," defined by non-white ethnicity at home and abroad, but the remainder register other aspects of common readings worth noting. Many common readings discuss books

of which a film or television version exists, an increasing number are graphic novels or memoirs, many have a protagonist under 18 or are simply young-adult novels, and a significant number have an association with National Public Radio (NPR). The themes register most strongly the common reading genre's continuing obsession with race, as well as its infantilization of its students, its middlebrow taste, and its progressive politics.

In 2017-18, the most popular themes were African American (160), Latin American (54), Protagonist Under 18 (29), Film/Television version exists (24), and African (22).

Racism: The Most Popular Subject Four Years in a Row

Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery and Crime and Punishment/Police were the two most popular subject categories in 2014-15, 2015-16, and 2016-17—and they retained their popularity in 2017-18. African American themes were likewise the most popular theme in 2014-15, 2015-16, and 2016-17, and they too are even more popular in 2017-18. The shift this year has been exemplified and substantially driven by the five most frequently assigned books of 2017-18, Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy* (2014); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015); Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures* (2016); Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010); Wes Moore, *The Other Wes Moore* (2010). The persisting concentration of the common reading genre's preferred subject matters and themes registers a continuing lack of intellectual diversity.

Subject Categories	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Civil Rights/ Racism/ Slavery	41 (11%)	64 (18%)	74 (21%)	107 (21%)
Crime and Punishment	39 (10%)	53 (15%)	67 (19%)	82 (16%)

Theme	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
African American	61 (16%)	99 (27%)	103 (29%)	160 (32%)

The growing concentration of the common reading genre's preferred subject matters and themes registers an ever lessening intellectual diversity.

Most Widely-Assigned Books

The clustering of common reading selections within the subject categories of Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery and Crime and Punishment, and within the African-American theme, was driven largely by common reading selection committees choices of a very few books.

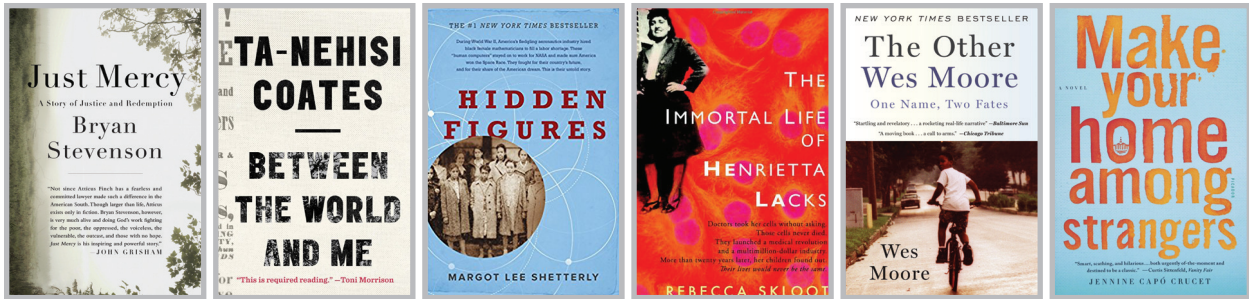
This clustering effect within a few select subject matters and themes reduces the intellectual diversity of the common reading genre as a whole. It also has the effect of reducing intellectual diversity *within* each subject category and theme. An astonishingly large number of the colleges and universities that wish to introduce students to the African-American experience have selected a homogenous handful of contemporary works—Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, and Wes Moore's *The Other Wes Moore*. None, however, assigned the poetry of Robert Hayden, Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series*, Ralph Ellison's

“The World and the Jug,” Albert Murray’s *The Hero and the Blues*, James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, or any other representatives of African-American writing and art that stray beyond the narrow preferences of the common reading genre.

Where common readings most pride themselves on diversity, they are most homogenous.

10 MOST WIDELY ASSIGNED COMMON READINGS, 2017/2018

Genre, Author, Book, Year	Subject Categories, Theme	Number of Times Assigned
Nonfiction: Bryan Stevenson, <i>Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption</i> (2014)	Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery Crime and Punishment/Police <i>African American theme</i>	29
Memoir: Ta-Nehisi Coates, <i>Between the World and Me</i> (2015)	Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery Crime and Punishment/Police <i>African American theme</i>	19
Nonfiction: Margot Lee Shetterly, <i>Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race</i> (2016)	Feminism/Sex Discrimination/Women Media/Science/Technology <i>African American theme</i> <i>Film/TV version exists</i>	14
Biography: Rebecca Skloot, <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i> (2010)	Media/Science/Technology Medicine/Mortality <i>African American theme</i>	12
Memoir: Wes Moore, <i>The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates</i> (2010)	Crime and Punishment/Police <i>African American theme</i>	12
Novel: Jennine Capó Crucet, <i>Make Your Home Among Strangers</i> (2015)	Coming of Age Immigration <i>Latin American theme</i>	10
Memoir: J. D. Vance, <i>Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis</i> (2016)	Drugs/Poverty Family Dysfunction/Separation <i>White Appalachian theme</i>	9
Nonfiction: Joshua Davis, <i>Spare Parts: Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream</i> (2014)	Immigration Media/Science/Technology <i>Latin American theme</i> <i>Protagonist Under 18</i>	8
Memoir: : Dave Isay, <i>Callings: The Purpose & Passion of Work</i> (2016)	America/Americans	7
Poetry: Claudia Rankine, <i>Citizen: An American Lyric</i> (2014)	Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery <i>African American theme</i>	7



The six most popular common readings of 2017/2018.

Cover images: Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015); Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (2016); Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010); Wes Moore, *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010); Jennine Capó Crucet, *Make Your Home Among Strangers* (2015)

ELEVEN YEARS OF BOOKS

Year	Individual Colleges and Universities	Assignments	Individual Texts	Miscellaneous Assignments
2007/2008	271	281	177	1
2008/2009	315	330	186	4
2009/2010	368	382	201	4
2010/2011	412	425	220	5
2011/2012	407	425	229	4
2012/2013	415	437	235	2
2013/2014	467	487	298	4
2014/2015	465	487	299	3
2015/2016	472	496	310	3
2016/2017	482	506	299	8
2017/2018	481	498	280	10
Total	732	4,754	1,655	48

Predictability

The ideologically-constrained common reading genre has become so homogenous that common reading selections have become predictable.

Last year we wagered “that Ta-Nehesi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* (published July 2015) will be one of the five most-frequently selected common readings for 2016-17, and will continue in the top ten for 2017-18.” **Our prediction was correct:** *Between the World and Me* was the second-most popular selection in 2016-2017 (19 selections), behind only Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (24 selections).

We predict again, with redoubled confidence, that *Between the World and Me* will be one of the five most-frequently selected common readings for 2017-2018.

ELEVEN YEARS OF BOOKS

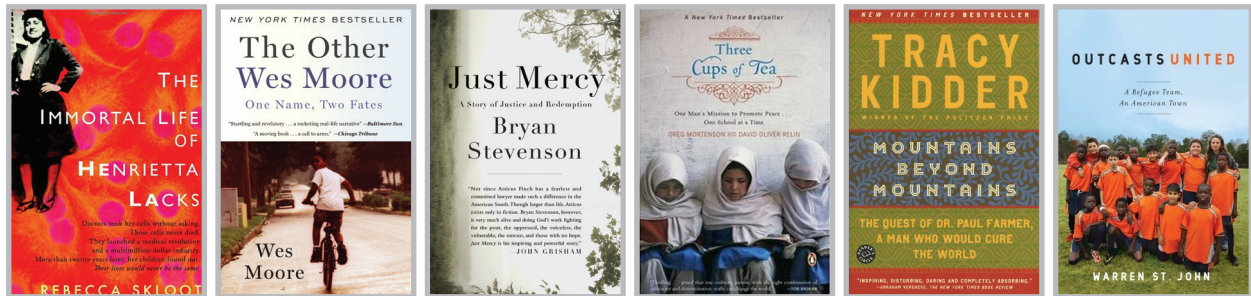
The National Association of Scholars has gathered and collated information on college common reading assignments for the last eleven years, from 2007/2008 through 2017/2018. We now have information on 732 individual colleges and universities, 4,754 assignments, and 1,655 individual texts.

The twenty-five most assigned texts in the last eleven years are shown in the table below:

Genre, Author, Book, Year	Subject Categories, Themes	Number of Times Assigned
Biography: Rebecca Skloot, <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i> (2010)	Media/Science/Technology Medicine/Mortality <i>African American theme</i>	201
Memoir: Wes Moore, <i>The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates</i> (2010)	Crime and Punishment/Police Poverty <i>African American theme</i>	109
Nonfiction: Bryan Stevenson, <i>Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption</i> (2014)	Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery Crime and Punishment/Police <i>African American theme</i>	76
Nonfiction: Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, <i>Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace ... One School at a Time</i> (2007)	Education Humanitarianism/Social Activism <i>Islamic World theme</i>	74
Biography: Tracy Kidder, <i>Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World</i> (2003)	Humanitarianism/Social Activism Medicine/Mortality	67
Biography: Warren St. John, <i>Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman’s Quest to Make a Difference</i> (2009)	Adventure/Sports Immigration <i>Muslim American theme</i>	58
Biography: Sonia Nazario, <i>Enrique’s Journey: The Story of a Boy’s Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother</i> (2006)	Family Dysfunction/Separation Immigration <i>Latin American theme</i> <i>Protagonist under 18</i>	52

Genre, Author, Book, Year	Subject Categories, Themes	Number of Times Assigned
Nonfiction: Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, <i>This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women</i> (2006)	Philosophy/Religion/Spirituality <i>NPR theme</i>	51
Memoir: Ishmael Beah, <i>A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier</i> (2007)	War Dispossession/Emigration/Exile <i>African theme</i> <i>Protagonist under 18</i>	45
Memoir: Ta-Nehisi Coates, <i>Between the World and Me</i> (2015)	Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery Crime and Punishment/Police <i>African American theme</i>	44
Memoir: Jeannette Walls, <i>The Glass Castle</i> (2005)	Drugs/Poverty Family Dysfunction/Separation	42
Novel: Mark Haddon, <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i> (2003)	Disability/Disease/Mental Health Family Dysfunction/Separation <i>Protagonist under 18</i>	41
Memoir: Marjane Satrapi, <i>Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood</i> (2003)	Dispossession/Emigration/Exile Ethnic Cleansing/Genocide/ Oppressive Regimes <i>Islamic World theme</i> <i>Graphic work</i>	39
Biography: Dave Eggers, <i>Zeitoun</i> (2009)	Crime and Punishment/Police Disasters <i>Hurricane Katrina theme</i> <i>Muslim American theme</i>	38
Memoir: Randy Pausch and Jeffrey Zaslow, <i>The Last Lecture</i> (2008)	Disability/Disease/Mental Health Medicine/Mortality	32
Novel: Julie Otsuka, <i>When the Emperor Was Divine</i> (2002)	Dispossession/Emigration/Exile Imprisonment/Internment <i>Asian American theme</i>	32
Nonfiction: Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, <i>This I Believe II: More Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women</i> (2008)	Philosophy/Religion/Spirituality <i>NPR theme</i>	31
Nonfiction: Michael Pollan, <i>The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals</i> (2006)	Food	29
Memoir: William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer, <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope</i> (2009)	Humanitarianism/Social Activism Media/Science/Technology <i>African theme</i>	28
Novel: Sherman Alexie, <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> (2007)	<i>Disability/Disease/Mental Health</i> Drugs/Poverty <i>Native American theme</i> <i>Young Adult</i>	27
Memoir: Colin Beavan, <i>No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process</i> (2009)	Animals/Environmentalism/Nature	25

Genre, Author, Book, Year	Subject Categories, Themes	Number of Times Assigned
Nonfiction: Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, <i>Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide</i> (2009)	Feminism/Sex Discrimination/Women Humanitarianism/Social Activism <i>African theme</i> <i>Asian theme</i>	24
Novel: Dave Eggers, <i>The Circle</i> (2013)	Apocalyptic/Dystopian/Science Fiction	24
Nonfiction: Barbara Ehrenreich, <i>Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America</i> (2001)	America/Americans Drugs/Poverty	23
Novel: Tim O'Brien, <i>The Things They Carried</i> (1990)	War <i>Southeast Asian theme</i> <i>Vietnam War theme</i>	23

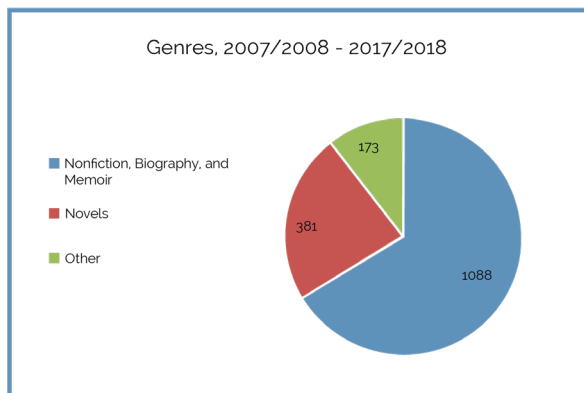


The six most popular common readings from 2007/2008 to 2017/2018.

Cover images: Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010); Wes Moore, *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010); Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014); Greg Mortenson and David Oliver, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace ... One School at a Time* (2007); Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* (2003); Warren St. John, *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference* (2009).

Genres

We classify common reading by genre: biography, memoir, newspaper, nonfiction, novel, play, poetry, and so on. The large majority of the 1,642 classifiable individual texts were in the three allied genres of Nonfiction (667, 41% of the total), Memoir (394, 24% of the total), and Biography (27, 2% of the total). Together there were 1,088 texts from these three genres, 66% of the total number of texts.



Novels were the most popular genre of imaginative literature: 381 texts, 23% of the total.

Genre	Number of Texts
Biography	27
Dance	1
DNA Testing Project	1
Epic Poem	2
Essay	23
Fairy Tale	1
Film	13
Game Booklet	1
Lecture	1
Memoir	394
Memoir Poems	1
Mixed Genre	2
Mural	1
Musical	1
Newspaper Articles	1
Nonfiction	667
Novel	381
Painting	2
Philosophical Dialogue	2
Play	34
Poetry	21
Short Stories	57
Skills Assessment	1
Speech	5
TV Program	1
Total	1,642

Subject Categories

We divided the common readings into 30 subject categories. Since each book could be assigned up to two categories, the total number of subject categories is greater than the number of assignments. In 2007-2018, there were 2,436 assigned subject categories for 1,642 classifiable individual texts. The most popular subject categories in 2007-2018 were Animals/Environmentalism/Nature (170 texts), Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery (149 texts), Philosophy/Religion/Spirituality (147 texts), Psychology/Pursuit of Happiness/Self-Help (135 texts), and Media/Science/Technology (131 texts).

For these five categories, the most frequently assigned selections were, respectively, Colin Beavan's *No Impact Man* (25 assignments), Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* (76 assignments), Jay Allison and Dan Gediman's *This I Believe* (51 assignments), Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* (18 assignments), and Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (201 assignments).

Themes

We have also recorded 23 further themes prominent among these assignments. Each book could be assigned up to two themes. In 2007-2018, there were 876 assigned themes for 1,642 classifiable individual texts.

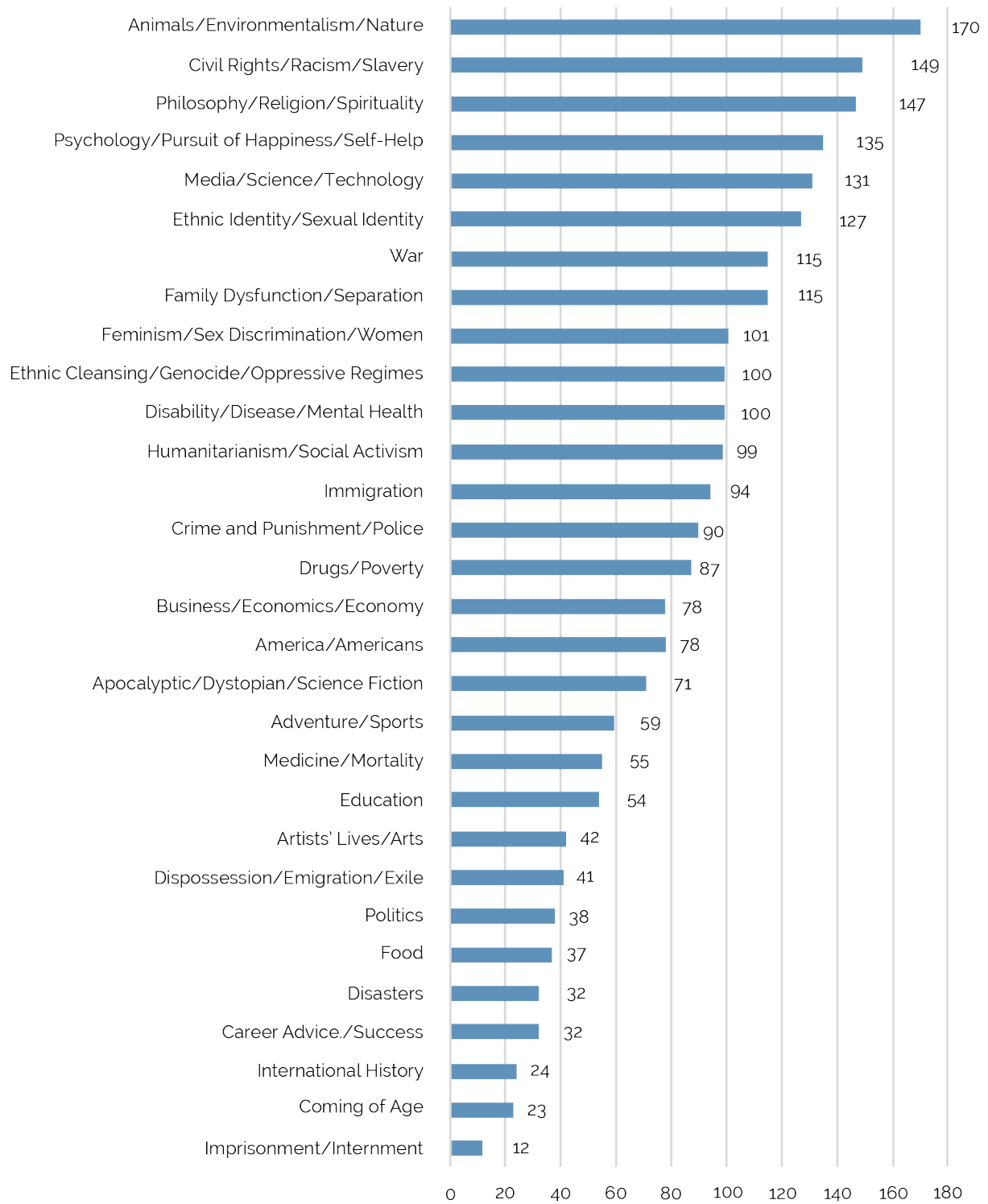
In 2007-08 through 2017-18, the most popular themes were African American (203), Latin American (79), European (78), African (65), and Islamic World (62).

For these five themes, the most frequently assigned selections were, respectively, Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (201 assignments), Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* (52 assignments), Steven Johnson's

The Ghost Map (12 assignments), Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (45 assignments), and *Three Cups of Tea* (74 assignments).

Theme	Number of Selections
Afghanistan War	6
African	65
African American	203
African Diaspora	12
Asian	41
Asian American	30
European	78
Film/TV version exists	38
Graphic work	27
Hurricane Katrina	16
Iraq War	22
Islamic World	62
Jewish World	6
Latin American	79
Muslim American	12
Native American	42
NPR	6
Pacific Islander	4
Protagonist Under 18	61
South Asian	18
Southeast Asian	14
Vietnam War	5
White Appalachian	8
Young Adult	21
Total	876
Total	1,642

Subject Categories, 2007-2018



Classic Assignments, 2007/2008 – 2017/2018

The possession of eleven years of data allows us to see new patterns and make new recommendations. In future reports we will add different analyses of our body of data. This first year, we have analyzed classic assignments.

The catalogue of all the common readings from 2007/2008 onward includes a fair number of classic texts—where a classic text is defined loosely as any book published before 1990. There have been 268 assignments of works published between 800 BC and 1989, including 177 individual texts. These range from the Book of Job to Margaret Atwood. The classic works are a small proportion of the total number of 4,754 common reading assignments since 2007—only 6 percent. But there are enough of them that we can say that common reading selectors *already* choose a large number of classic works.

Institutions That Choose Classic Texts

Many colleges, and many different sorts of colleges, have chosen classic books. Of the 732 colleges and universities that chose common readings between 2007 and 2018, 153 colleges—21% of the total—selected a work from before 1990. 34 colleges—5% of the total—chose a work from before 1900.

Some of these colleges focus on choosing classic texts. Columbia University always assigns the first six books of *The Iliad*. Utah Valley University's classic book selection focuses institutionally on the classics. Florida College and The King's College both typically choose classic works—The King's College's selections include *Antigone*, *King Lear*, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *Hard Times*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. A significant minority of assignments come

from a relatively small number of colleges. Of the 268 total assignments, five schools selected 37 assignments—14% of the total. These schools demonstrate that college students are capable of reading classic works as a matter of course.

INSTITUTIONS ASSIGNING 5+ CLASSIC TEXTS

Institution	Number of Classic Assignments
The King's College (NY)	14
Columbia University (NY)	11
Florida College (FL)	11
Utah Valley University (UT)	9
Le Moyne College (NY)	6
Delaware Valley University (PA)	5
Saint Michael's College (VT)	5

A large number of other colleges selected older works as part of a mixture that included more standard modern works. Loyola University Maryland chose a work by Quintus Tullius Cicero; Augustana College a work by Machiavelli; Indiana University South Bend a work by Darwin. Of the 153 colleges that chose classic texts, 105—69%—chose only one. 26, 17%, chose just two. Most colleges that chose classic works chose them without a dedicated institutional focus. Colleges can incorporate classic works into their common reading rotation easily enough.

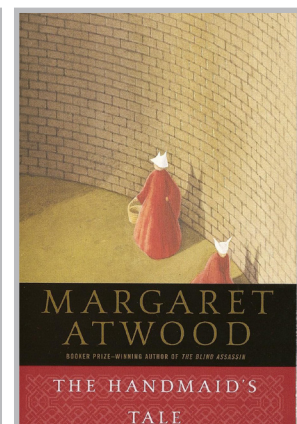
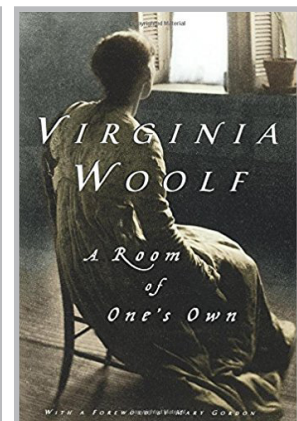
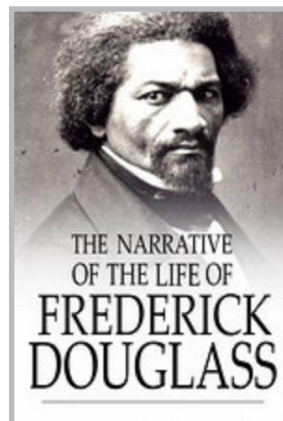
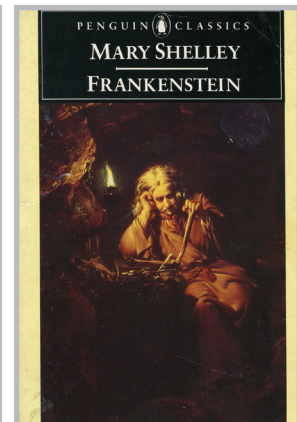
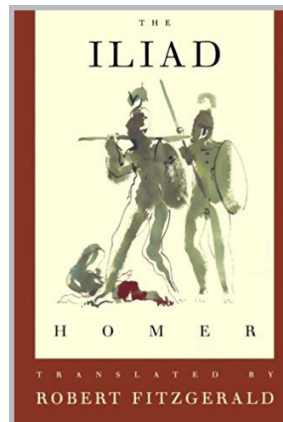
What Classics Get Chosen?

The books range from Homer and the Bible to Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)—but committees distinctly prefer more modern works. Books from the twentieth century are 131 of the 177 classic texts, 74% of the total. 108 selections, or 61%, were published since 1945. Common reading committees should choose more pre-1900 works: works that have stood the test of time tend to be better on average, and students should be acquainted with the long conversation of Western civilization. Nevertheless, committees may be glad to know how many classics were published between 1900 and 1989. Common readings committees have chosen a large number of accessible and relevant modern classics.

Classics Recommendations

We make the following specific suggestions for informal or formal shifts to the way common reading committees make their selections, to encourage the choice of classic texts.

- Common reading committees should choose a classic at least once every four years.
- Common reading committees should include at least one classic in every common reading shortlist.
- Common reading committees should ask publishers to increase the number of classics in their catalogues.
- The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition should form a committee to come up with a list of 100 classics that would work well as common readings.



Six classic common readings

Cover images: Homer, *The Iliad* (ca. 800 BC); Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818); *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845); Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929); Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953); Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Each year we include recommendations for precise administrative changes to the structure of common reading programs. These are intended for a variety of interested audiences, but particularly for faculty, university administrators, and university donors.

New Recommendations: 2018

1. External oversight committees should recommend ways to remove political bias from common reading programs.
2. Adopt the best existing practices of common reading programs that select classics and challenging books.
3. Seek books that showcase intellectual humility, freedom of speech, individual dissent, and self-control.
4. Seek books that encourage bipartisan American unity.
5. Seek books that encourage debate.

General Selection Principles

1. Seek books that convey intellectual diversity.
2. Seek books that stretch students' minds.
3. Seek books that see man in his moral complexity.
4. Seek fiction that is beautiful, complex, and morally serious.
5. Seek nonfiction that is elegant, lucid, and persuades rather than preaches.
6. Seek challenging books rather than inoffensive ones.
7. Seek out important books from earlier eras.
8. Consult peers who read widely and are intimately acquainted with good books.

9. Consult outside sources, such as our list of Recommended Books.
10. Avoid books chosen to be inspirational.
11. Avoid books that appear in publishers' First-Year Experience catalogs.
12. Seek out books that will lift up the institution's academic standards.

Mission Statements

Common reading programs' mission statements should include some or all of the following:

1. Focus exclusively on preparing students for college-level academic work.
2. Focus exclusively on assessing success at preparing students for college-level academic work.
3. Select at least one full-length book, with at least 50,000 words of college-level prose or 5,000 words of prosodically sophisticated poetry.
4. Seek out: a) public-domain books written before 1923; b) books written by dead authors; and/or c) books published at least 20 years in the past.
5. Select an intellectually complex book, appropriate for college-level discussion.
6. Seek books that exemplify beautiful writing.
7. Seek out fiction, so as to develop students' imaginative empathy.
8. Seek out works in translation.
9. Seek out works by alumni and works about the institution's locality or state.
10. Seek out books that emphasize what Americans share in common.

Faculty Management

We recommend shifting the management of common reading programs from the “co-curricular” bureaucracy to the faculty.

1. Only professors and librarians should serve on common reading committees.
2. A majority of common reading committee members should be professors in regular disciplinary departments that specialize in teaching students how to read books.
3. Common reading committees should be chaired by tenured professors.
4. Common reading selection committees should have no more than 5 members.
5. Composition instructors should be consulted during book selection.
6. Committee members should choose student discussion leaders from Literature majors or graduate students.
7. Common reading committees should select figures whose interests are primarily intellectual to speak at events linked to the common reading.
8. Common reading committees should compose their own discussion guides, essay prompts, and other materials.
9. Common reading committees should select books that professors will voluntarily integrate into their syllabi.
10. All committee members should have their teaching load (or equivalent library duties) reduced by 1-2 courses.

Program Structure

We recommend further reforms not directly related to establishing faculty management.

1. Common readings should alternate disciplinary focus.
2. Common reading programs should adopt more advanced books as voluntary common readings.
3. Common reading student discussions should have lively disagreement.
4. Common readings should be integrated with academic writing assignments—ideally graded, as part of a regular class.
5. Common readings should not promote pledges, service-learning, civic engagement, or activism of any kind.
6. Common reading programs should cut ties to Offices of Diversity, Sustainability, or Civic Engagement.
7. Speaker fees should be reduced and all savings used to subsidize common reading book purchases for students.
8. Common reading programs should publicize all costs on their websites, including speaker fees and staff costs.

Donors

Donors to common reading programs should fund prudently.

1. Donors should make funding dependent upon colleges adopting NAS reforms.
2. Donors should inspect ancillary materials such as teaching guides.
3. Donors should provide only temporary funding for common reading programs.
4. Donors should fund common readings linked to enduring themes such as Classical Learning or American Liberty

Institutions of Higher Education

Colleges and universities as a whole must also change their policies.

1. Only admit students who can read challenging books.

130 RECOMMENDED BOOKS

95 Recommended Books Appropriate for Any College Common Reading Program

Edwin Abbott Abbott – *Flatland* (1884)

Chinua Achebe – *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

James Agee – *A Death in the Family* (1957)

Kingsley Amis – *Lucky Jim* (1954)

Roy Chapman Andrews – *Under A Lucky Star* (1943)

Jean Anouilh – *Antigone* (1944)

S. Ansky – *The Dybbuk* (1920)

Aristophanes – *The Clouds* (423 B.C.)

Louis Auchincloss – *The Rector of Justin* (1964)

Augustine – *Confessions* (398 A.D.)

Jane Austen – *Persuasion* (1817)

Mariano Azuela – *The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution* (1915)

The Book of Ecclesiastes (C. 970-930 B.C.)

The Book of Job (C. 1000 B.C.)

F. Bordewijk – *Character: A Novel of Father and Son* (1938)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning – *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)

John Bunyan – *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)

Pedro Calderon De La Barca – *Life is a Dream* (1635)

Albert Camus – *The Plague* (1947)

Willa Cather – *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)

John Chadwick – *The Decipherment of Linear B* (1958)

Joseph Conrad – *Under Western Eyes* (1911)

James Fenimore Cooper – *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826)

Charles Darwin – *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839)

Charles Dickens – *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842)

Annie Dillard – *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974)

John Donne – *Divine Poems* (1633)

Fyodor Dostoevsky – *The House of the Dead* (1862)

Ralph Ellison – *Invisible Man* (1952)

Shusaku Endo – *Silence* (1966)

Desiderius Erasmus – *The Praise of Folly* (1509)
Everyman (C. 1500)

David Hackett Fischer – *Washington's Crossing* (2004)

M. F. K. Fisher – *How to Cook a Wolf* (1942)

Gustave Flaubert – *A Simple Heart* (1877)

Benjamin Franklin – *Autobiography* (1791)

Robert Frost – *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (1923)

Nathaniel Hawthorne – *The Blithedale Romance* (1852)

William Least Heat-Moon – *Blue Highways* (1982)

Andrew Hudgins – *After the Lost War* (1988)

Zora Neale Hurston – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Henrik Ibsen – *An Enemy of the People* (1882)

Jane Jacobs – *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

Henry James – *What Maisie Knew* (1897)

Jerome K. Jerome – *Three Men in a Boat* (1889)

Ryszard Kapuscinski – *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat* (1978)

William Kennedy – *Ironweed* (1983)

Richard Kim – *The Martyred* (1964)

Rudyard Kipling – *Kim* (1901)

Arthur Koestler – *Darkness at Noon* (1940)

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing – *Nathan the Wise* (1783)

Carlo Levi – *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945)

Primo Levi – *The Periodic Table* (1975)

Sinclair Lewis – *Babbitt* (1922)

A. J. Liebling – *The Earl of Louisiana* (1961)

Abraham Lincoln – *Selected Speeches and Writings* (1832-1865, Published in this volume in 2009) (Selections)

Federico Garcia Lorca – *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936)

John Stuart Mill – *On Liberty* (1869)

Molière – *Tartuffe* (1664)

Michel De Montaigne – *An Apology for Raymond Sebond* (1580-1595)

Thomas More – *Utopia* (1516)

John Muir – *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911)

Reinhold Niebuhr – *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944)

Sean O'Casey – *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923)

George Orwell – *Homage to Catalonia* (1938)

Francis Parkman – *The Oregon Trail* (1847)

Plato – *Apology of Socrates and Crito* (C. 399-387 B.C.)

Plutarch – *Parallel Lives* (C. 100) (Selections)

Alexander Pope – *Essay on Criticism* (1711)

Dorothy Sayers – *Gaudy Night* (1935)

Seneca – *Letters from a Stoic* (C. 65) [Penguin Classics Edition, Selected Letters]

William Shakespeare – *Henry V* (C. 1598)
William Shakespeare – *Richard III* (C. 1592)
George Bernard Shaw – *Major Barbara* (1905)
Isaac Bashevis Singer – *Satan in Goray* (1933)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (C. 1350-1400)
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962)
Thomas Sowell – *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (1987)
Wallace Stegner – *Angle of Repose* (1971)
Robert Louis Stevenson – *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892)
J. M. Synge – *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)
Leo Tolstoy – *Hadji Murad* (1912)
Anthony Trollope – *The Warden* (1855)
Ivan Turgenev – *Fathers and Sons* (1862)
Mark Twain – *Life on the Mississippi* (1883)
Miguel de Unamuno – *Saint Manuel the Good, Martyr* (1931)
Voltaire – *Candide* (1759)
Robert Penn Warren – *All the King's Men* (1946)
James D. Watson – *The Double Helix* (1968)
H. G. Wells – *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)
Walt Whitman – *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892)
Oscar Wilde – *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)
Thornton Wilder – *Heaven's My Destination* (1934)
Tom Wolfe – *The Right Stuff* (1979)
John Woolman – *The Journal of John Woolman* (1774)

35 Recommended Books for More Ambitious College Common Reading Programs

Matthew Arnold – *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)
William Bartram – *Travels of William Bartram* (1791)
Jacques Barzun – *Berlioz and His Century* (1950)
Brendan Behan – *Borstal Boy* (1958)
Benvenuto Cellini – *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* (1558-1563)
Miguel De Cervantes – *Don Quixote* (1605)
Whittaker Chambers – *Witness* (1952)
Pierre Corneille – *The Cid* (1637)
James Gould Cozzens – *Guard of Honor* (1948)
Daniel Defoe – *Roxana* (1724)
Fyodor Dostoevsky – *Crime and Punishment* (1866)
George Eliot – *Middlemarch* (1871-1872)
Mouloud Feraoun – *Journal, 1955-1962* (1962)
Patrick Leigh Fermor – *A Time of Gifts* (1977)
Ronald Fraser – *Blood of Spain* (1979)
Hamlin Garland – *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891)
George Gissing – *The Odd Women* (1893)
Jaroslav Hasek – *The Good Soldier Svejk and his Fortunes in the World War* (1923)
William Dean Howells – *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)
Johan Huizinga – *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919)

Herman Melville – *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), excerpts

Herman Melville – *The Confidence-Man* (1857)

Vladimir Nabokov – *Speak, Memory* (1951, 1966)

V. S. Naipaul – *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969)

John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852)

Eugene O'Neill – *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941-1942)

Gary Rose, Ed. – *Shaping a Nation: 25 Supreme Court Cases* (2010)

Robert Skidelsky – *John Maynard Keynes 1883-1946: Economist, Philosopher, Statesman* (2005)

Eugene B. Sledge – *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981)

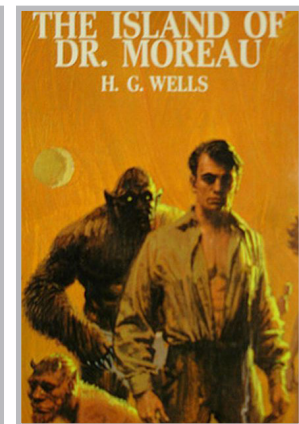
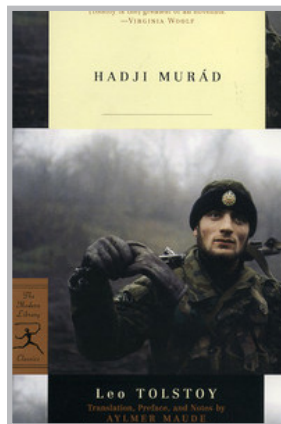
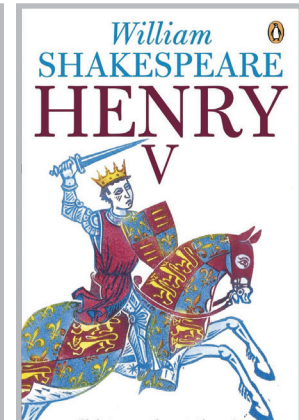
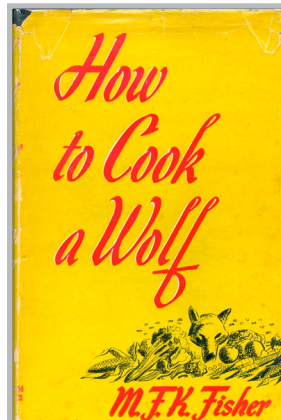
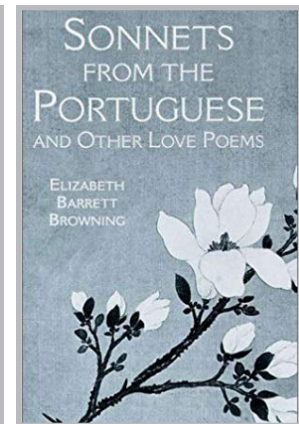
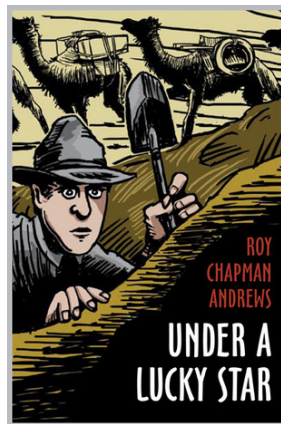
Stendahl, *The Red and the Black* (1830)

Alexis de Tocqueville – *Democracy in America* (1838)

Virgil – *The Aeneid* (19 B.C., Fagles' Translation, 2006)

Edith Wharton – *The House of Mirth* (1905)

Edmund Wilson – *To the Finland Station* (1940)



Six recommended books.

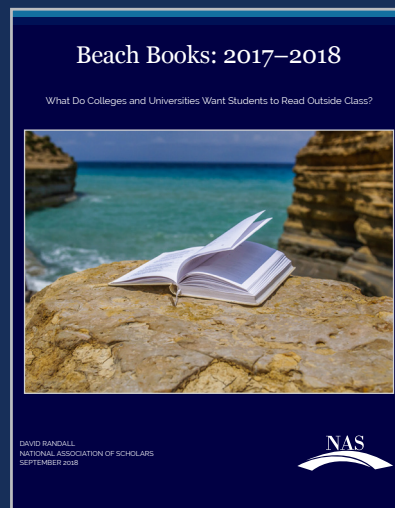
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MORE RESEARCH AND COMMENTARY FROM THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS

The full text of *Beach Books: 2017-18*, the seventh report in NAS's annual series (2010-) tracking the hundreds of college and university "common reading" programs across the United States, is available at www.nas.org/beachbooks2018, along with previous editions of the Beach Books report. It is also available in print.

The NAS regularly publishes commentary and research on higher education. Our previous reports include

- *The Irreproducibility Crisis* (2018), a study of the improper use of statistics, arbitrary research techniques, and groupthink that afflict a wide range of scientific disciplines
- *Outsourced to China* (2017), a study of China's exercise of soft power through Confucius Institutes on American college campuses.
- *Making Citizens* (2017), an examination of the progressive diversion of civics education.
- *The Disappearing Continent* (2016), a critique of the AP European History examination.
- *Inside Divestment* (2015), a study of the fossil-fuel divestment movement on campus.
- *Sustainability* (2015), an examination of the sustainability movement on campus.
- *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* (2013), the first top-to-bottom examination of a contemporary liberal arts college.



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