

### Important and worthy “recent classics” of literature

(i.e., modernist works that are accepted into the canon and deservedly so; highly subjective, reflecting also Lee’s tastes and personal reading.)

<u>Author</u>	<u>Nation, century</u>	<u>Work</u>	<u>Why</u>
Albee, Edward	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</u> <u>A Delicate Balance</u>	Who indeed? Married couple George and Martha, ostensible stand-ins for American culture by virtue of their names, paper over the seams in their lives with verbal assaults and too much drinking. This harrowing investigation of shared unhappiness is most smart in the way it confounds expectations: a) it is a comedy, and b) it is a love story. A good production is required viewing. <u>A Delicate Balance</u> concerns the fine line between custom and dysfunction, as familial and friendly relationships fall apart when people make new and unexpected demands; once thrust into unknown territory, the characters are unsure how to properly act, and all decorum falls away, exposing their existential condition: naked and alone.
Beckett, Samuel	Ireland, France, 20th	<u>Waiting for Godot</u>	This play is better seen in a good production than read. That said, “Waiting for Godot” shows the psychological after-effect of World War II, with its mass devastation both nuclear and otherwise, as artists had a new sense of waiting for they knew not what, and that life was a charade played to pass the time. Done well, the play is a heart-wrenching comedy that leaves the audience shaken.
Blake, William	England, 18 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Songs of Experience</u>	The sequel to <u>Songs of Innocence</u> finds Blake scrutinizing all his earlier positions now that the French Revolution’s bloody denouement had dashed his faith in mankind’s goodness. Blake’s ecstatic visions were an important inspiration to Whitman, and later to hippies.

Borges, Jorge Luis	Argentina, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Ficciones</u> (story collection)	Borges is a metafictionist, which means that the fiction itself is often the subject. His influence is great. On some level all his work is consumed with one subject: the nature of reality. Two stories in particular have proved important: “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” about a fictional world that becomes real once it is incorporated into encyclopedias, and “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” which begs to ask what the difference is between creation and re-creation – and therefore, what is truly original.
Boswell, James	England, 18 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Life of Samuel Johnson</u>	The first true modern biography is also the best: the sycophantic Boswell nevertheless paints a detailed portrait of his subject and their times (18 <sup>th</sup> century London)
Bowles, Paul	U.S., Morocco, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Sheltering Sky</u>	An unforgiving Arab desert peels away the interior lives of three American travelers, reducing them to their essences. In an era of psychobabble, when for many survival means nothing more than a trip to the supermarket, Bowles reminds us of our fragility and unimportance.
Camus, Albert	France, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Stranger</u>	The affectlessness of the protagonist – who kills an Arab for what appears no reason, and then feels nothing about it – is a signal marker in the history of existentialism.
Carver, Raymond	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Cathedral</u> (story collection)	modern master of the short story; highly influential in delivering drama in small true ways, after the fashion of Chekov. Carver’s work has influenced most American short fiction writers since him.
Cervantes, Miguel de	Spain, 16 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Don Quixote</u>	first true novel; good use of irony; serves as a constant reference; exemplifies the picaresque form
Chaucer, Geoffrey	England, 14 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Canterbury Tales</u>	constant reference point; first known example of bringing vernacular speech into writing, and thereby giving ordinary people respectability and their own voice. For having written

so long ago, Chaucer is startlingly contemporary at some times (as with the Wife of Bath's lasciviousness, and the outlandishness of fashions, and the use of unreliable narration). At other times, he seems completely of his era, as his notions of "charity" and "pity" disagree with ours today. Reading Chaucer now is to see your own family from a distant cousin's perspective. "The Knight's Tale," "The Cook's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale" are most highly recommended.

Chekov, Anton                      Russia, 19<sup>th</sup>                      Complete Short Stories

No one has had a greater impact on future generations of short story writers than Chekov. Although little seems to happen in these stories, on the interior, his characters undergo the epiphanies both large and small that resonate within life. Most contemporary English-language fiction, especially American, would not exist without Chekov's influence. He has had a similar effect on modern drama. Chekov, who was a doctor, understood the dailiness of life and death.

Dante                                      Italy, 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>                      The Inferno

incredibly influential; riveting imagery, as Dante places human faults and foibles in their cosmic positions. Once you have read where suicides or traitors wind up in Hell, it is impossible to forget.

Dickinson, Emily                      U.S., 19<sup>th</sup>                      poems

A seemingly effortless poet whose poems are evocative, simple, and effective. "Because I could not stop for Death" is probably most key.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor                      Russia, 19<sup>th</sup>                      Crime and Punishment

Raskolnikov's crime, and pursuit of salvation through suffering, help make this one of the most influential novels of all time, as Dostoevsky weighs religion against existentialism, and the pursuit of nobility against the casualness of personal action. NOTE: Many consider The Brothers Karamazov, and not Crime and Punishment, to be Dostoevsky's greatest novel. I have not yet read Karamazov.

Eliot, T.S.	U.S., England, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Wasteland</u> (poetry collection)	“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” celebrates and castigates a mundane man, showing that even everydayness is a fit subject for literature (a bold lesson for the time), while forecasting the use of irony and disjunction, as when writing about the evening sky as “a patient [who] lay aetherized upon the table.” “The Hollow Men” shows the struggle for meaning in a post-God age.
Ellison, Ralph	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Invisible Man</u>	While ostensibly a book about race in America, <u>Invisible Man</u> (not the horror novel by H.G. Wells) is a highly personal contemplation of the nature of identity – how you are perceived, and who you are really, especially once all the niceties are set aside.
Fitzgerald, F. Scott	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Great Gatsby</u> <u>Tender is the Night</u>	<u>Gatsby</u> is perhaps the “perfect” American novel, every line like cut crystal. <u>Tender</u> is a flawed novel that Fitzgerald restructured several times in an attempt to “fix” it; it still has the power to shock, with its indelible portrait of a glowing couple leaving its prime.
Garcia Marquez, Gabriel	Colombia, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>One Hundred Years of Solitude</u>	While most noteworthy as the novel that introduced “magical realism” to the masses, this epic is justly esteemed for its meditation on time, isolation, and family folklore. Its resonance comes from a long and magical family story that will make anyone – with a family, or yearning for a family – yearn for more.
Goethe	Germany, 18 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Faust</u> (play)	A play that is probably better read than seen. <u>Faust</u> reminds us that when evil triumphs, it is because someone has invited it to come in. Goethe’s critical essays are invaluable reading as well.
Golding, William	England, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Lord of the Flies</u>	In which a stranded group of boys with no civilizing influence

			returns to savagery, putting the lie to what all the Romantic poets of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century were trying to sell us.
Hamsun, Knut	Norway, 19 <sup>th</sup> -20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Hunger</u>	Hamsun is credited with creating a new literary style and new sort of hero – the alienated loner – who is now a prominent feature of art, literature and of course the movies. In <u>Hunger</u> , a struggling writer is literally starving to death in his attempt to make himself whole. The ironies abound when occasional bits of good luck turn tragic.
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Twice-Told Tales</u>	Hawthorne’s stories – especially “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “Young Goodman Brown” – marry Puritanism with shockingly prescient psychological portraits, before Freud came onto the scene. The connection among Hawthorne, Kafka, Beckett, Pinter and Borges is profound.
Hemingway, Ernest	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Snows of Kilimanjaro</u>	Of all of Hemingway, I would recommend this story and the story collection it is in. Hemingway’s terse muscular prose continues to dominate a subset of American fiction, seventy years later.
Hesse, Hermann	Germany, 19 <sup>th</sup> -20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Narcissus and Goldmund</u>	Hesse’s interest in Eastern mysticism and Jungian psychology is combined with a criticism of bourgeois values. His work is usually about the struggle between the material and the spiritual, manifested best in the warring attitudes of Narcissus and Goldmund.
Ionesco, Eugene	Romania, France, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Rhinoceros</u>	Any good revival of an Ionesco play is worth seeing, but <u>Rhinoceros</u> is probably most accessible and most relevant, in which a layabout drunkard is wrenched into activism when everyone around him slowly turns into a rhinoceros, leaving him to struggle alone for the sake of humankind. As with all good theatre of the absurd, the exterior nonsense masks profound alarm at the human situation.

James, Henry	U.S., England, 19 <sup>th</sup>	“The Turn of the Screw”	Perhaps first great modern horror story, which features (invents?) unreliable narrator. James is a psychological portraitist, working here at the height of his powers.
Joyce, James	Ireland, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Dubliners</u>	Although others would wax overwrought about <u>Ulysses</u> or <u>Finnegans Wake</u> , this short-story collection is the one work by Joyce that people can truthfully attest they have read (and can read). The stories sketch the outward actions and interior deadness of a coterie of stunted Irish lives. The story “The Dead” alone makes the collection worth reading. In totality, these stories had an enormous effect upon 20 <sup>th</sup> century short-story writing from Hemingway through Carver.
Kafka, Franz	Czechoslovakia, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Complete Stories</u> <u>The Trial</u>	Franz Kafka is the most important writer of the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century. His work suffuses that of every other major writer since. His style – matching the grisly with the grimly funny – is endlessly duplicated. All of the short stories and novels are worth reading. The essentials are: “The Metamorphosis,” in which Gregor Samsa, newly reduced to his essence (a dung beetle) is revealed always to have been an object to his family (thus skewering the notion that family blood equates with unconditional love); “In the Penal Colony”; “The Hunger Artist”; and “The Burrow,” told from the point of view of an animal that seems all-too-human in its concerns. <u>The Trial</u> concerns Josef K., who for reasons he is never able to learn, is arrested and subjected to the langours of the judicial process; its hero, powerless in the face of an all-powerful bureaucracy, has become emblematic for our times. Kafka’s influence cannot be overstated, so much so that one (recommended) biography is entitled “Franz Kafka: Representative Man.” The degree to which Kafka’s obsessions seem predictive and chillingly fulfilled is alarming. Ironically, Kafka considered all his stories to be comedies and was said to laugh uproariously while reading them to friends.

Lardner, Ring	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	“Haircut”	Although his body of work is not extensive and his overall effect on literature limited, this story has had a large impact on short-story writing and is endlessly anthologized. This one story shows all one needs to know about unreliable narrator.
Melville, Herman	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	“Bartleby the Scrivener”	perhaps the greatest short story ever, revolving around simple acts delivered with clarity toward a greater purpose: the awakening of the human spirit. Also shows that in first-person narration, the narrator is always the subject whether it seems so or not
Orwell, George	England, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>1984</u> <u>Animal Farm</u>	While the harrowing <u>1984</u> threatens us with a fascist state, the social satire <u>Animal Farm</u> may be more chilling, as the Communist pigs make a reasonable case for their reign of terror.
Poe, Edgar Allan	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	Stories	Poe perfected one genre – the horror story – and invented another: the detective story. “The Fall of the House of Usher,” with its deep psychological dread, is a touchstone in modern literature, as are “The Cask of Amontillado,” and “The Masque of the Red Death.” “The Purloined Letter” is the most important of the three detective stories, and to this day lends the best advice on where to hide something.
Rilke, Rainer Maria	Czechoslovakia 19 <sup>th</sup> -20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Duino Elegies</u> (poems) <u>Letters to a Young Poet</u> (essays)	Rilke’s <u>Letters</u> advise belief and commitment, but his own poems are filled with yearning, disbelief, solitude, and anxiety. Rilke’s verses are profoundly beautiful because they so deeply mirror the human condition: searching, capable of wonder, and ultimately inexplicable.
Salinger, J.D.	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Catcher in the Rye</u>	Holden Caulfield is immature but sophisticated: He is an adolescent skewering all the phonies because their dishonesty is an affront. This complex psychological portrait has unfortunately provided far too much sustenance and

Selby, Hubert Jr.	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Requiem for a Dream</u>	reassurance for a generation of stalkers and serial killers – or perhaps not enough.
Shakespeare, William	England, 15 <sup>th</sup> -16 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Hamlet</u> <u>Othello</u> <u>Sonnets</u>	Although <u>Last Exit to Brooklyn</u> is possibly better-known, and perhaps more influential, <u>Requiem</u> 's portrayal of a middle-class mother's disastrous determination to rise above her station through the vehicle of a game show will resonate with anyone concerned about the unfortunate triumph of celebrity culture.
Steinbeck, John	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Grapes of Wrath</u>	<u>Hamlet</u> 's psychological complexity makes it a monumental work. For sheer action and sympathy, fueling a desire by audience members to clamber onto the stage and alert our hero, <u>Othello</u> is hard to beat. The sonnets, like the plays, are striking in their imagery – almost every line bears quoting – but have the added bonus of helping men in the know get laid.
Tolstoy, Leon	Russia, 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Anna Karenina</u>	Depicts the highs and lows of American society through the eyes of an itinerant family struggling through the great Depression, which Steinbeck makes every bit as bleak as Dante's vision of Hell.
			Although <u>War and Peace</u> is more widely referenced – often as a joke, because of its length – as a novel it has nowhere near the impact of the stunning achievement that is <u>Anna Karenina</u> . The novel's twin heroes fill the reader with ache. Landholder Levin struggles to find his position in the universe – somewhere between his desire to be seen by his serfs as one of the men, his hunger for the unattainable Kitty, and his deep need to understand God's plan for him. Meanwhile, socialite Anna pursues her heart's desire – as so many romantic Western novels would have us do – and loses everything in the process, up to and past her self-respect. To me, this is the finest novel ever written, every page a joy to read and an anguish to consider.



Twain, Mark	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Huckleberry Finn</u>	Although Twain's entire body of work is rich with wisdom and wit, in this instance alone Twain rose to the level of greatness. Confronted with a choice of what he's been taught by organized religion and the mores of society on one hand, and the innate decency required by the situation of escaping with a slave, Huck refutes his entire past, risking his soul in the bargain. A tremendously moving and important novel, up to the horribly flawed final chapters. Today this book is attacked by religious fundamentalists because of its rejection of blasé sanctimony, and by leftist radicals because they myopically believe it endorses slavery and demeans the self-sufficiency of blacks. Any book with such good enemies merits endorsement. Just for the novelty of introducing everyday American speech into a quintessentially American novel, Twain, like Chaucer, earns a place in our hearts.
Whitman, Walt	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Leaves of Grass</u>	Innovative in subject – exaltation of the body, sex, and self-love – and form (creating free verse). There is probably no more influential book of poetry in history. This volume has undergone numerous versions; the Malcolm Cowley-edited first edition is most recommended.
Yates, Richard	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Revolutionary Road</u>	With a surgeon's finesse, Yates peels the layers off the American suburban scene circa mid-1950's, revealing the truth beneath the ostensibly prosperous young couple at its center. The writing is funny, poignant, and altogether rings with truth, as the pursuit of material wealth and societal conformity reduces the characters to shells.

**If he could designate the classics, Lee would add:**

<u>Author</u>	<u>Nation, century</u>	<u>Work</u>	<u>Why</u>
Auster, Paul	U.S. 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Leviathan</u>	Auster writes in an almost affectless style, but his novels are deep with meaning. Although they are all good, this one is perhaps the most immediately involving and complex, but written in a style so simple that it seems more like breathing than work.
Barnes, Julian	England, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Talking it Over</u> <u>England, England</u>	A romantic triangle, told from all three points of view. The complications and misunderstandings are most distressing to us because as readers we can see the oncoming train, but there is nothing we can do to help the characters. The sequel, “Love, Etc.” may be even better. <u>England</u> is concerned with a present-day effort to turn the Isle of Wight into a Disneyfied version of England – raucously funny and cautionary.
Bukowski, Charles	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Ham on Rye</u> <u>Post Office</u>	Bukowski is often derided as a populist bum-writer, but these two books show his great power and unflinching honesty, as a man beaten and derided by his father for little or no reason ( <u>Rye</u> ) or subjected to a workplace he is too smart for ( <u>Post Office</u> ) struggles to endure. The writing is taut and funny. Bukowski’s power is attested to by the legions of adherents – and copycats.
Dick, Philip K.	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Confessions of a Crap Artist</u>	A wonderful mainstream novel that has never gotten its due because its author was ghettoized as a science-fiction writer. Shows the same story from three different interwoven points of view, leaving you wondering who is “right” – and whether any of it actually happened anyway, since the novel is, after all, told by a self-described “crap artist.” (Or bullshit artist.)

Franzen, Jonathan	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Corrections</u>	A comic-tragic history of one Midwestern family, and how what appear to be inexplicable events in family history finally come together when viewed later as a whole. The shifting point of view (either the brother's, or the sister's, or the father's) is deftly carried off and combines with an elaborate construction to make the book a rollicking read.
Lee, Stan Kirby, Jack	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Marvel Masterworks: Fantastic Four Volume 5</u>	With this volume, Marvel reprints what truly was “the world’s greatest comics magazine.” The Fantastic Four are too often misunderstood as a “superhero team.” In reality, they are entrepreneurial science adventurers in the best tradition of Verne and Wells. Their perseverance and optimism in the face of great personal risk and hardship puts them at the forefront of discovery and achievement. In the issues collected here, their hunger for adventure leads them to discover a lost race (the Inhumans), a monumental threat to humanity (Galactus, devourer of worlds), and the Silver Surfer, a tragic figure that, like a conquered nation, serves its master but never embraces it.
Kundera, Milan	Czechoslovakia, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</u>	A slim and inexplicable novel that binds seven discreet stories into a larger whole. Kundera here is working on the level of fable, and as with all fables, they seem impossible while seeming utterly true. <u>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</u> , about resistance during the Soviet era (among other things), is his more-famous novel, but this is the one that sticks to your subconscious.
Pinter, Harold	England, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Caretaker</u> (play)	While all of Pinter’s plays build upon the dread and anxiety laid down by Kafka, <u>The Caretaker</u> is perhaps the most effective. A good production matches jarring comedy with true unease, as audience members switch allegiances from an endangered bum, the addlewitted man who has taken him in, and a dangerous brother. For an excellent filmic introduction

			to the world of Pinter, I can recommend without reservation <u>Betrayal</u> , starring Jeremy Irons and Ben Kingsley.
Soyinka, Wole	Nigeria, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Madmen and Specialists</u> (play)	This play, which deals with inhumanity and corruption, was written by someone who should know: Soyinka was repeatedly imprisoned by the Nigerian government for his efforts on behalf of free speech, free elections, and independence. In its pessimism, <u>Madmen</u> cuts to the bone.
Toole, John Kennedy	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>A Confederacy of Dunces</u>	Published after the author's suicide, this comic masterpiece follows the travels and travails of a modern-day Falstaff, the fat, loud, self-centered blowhard Ignatius J. Reilly, a 30-year-old Medievalist still living at home with mother. Toole's only other novel, <u>The Neon Bible</u> , written when he was just 16 and concerning an adolescent's desire for escape from rural fundamentalism, is work of a high order – and seems written by an entirely different writer. Given the quality of these two novels, his early death is all the more tragic.
Vonnegut, Kurt Jr.	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Cat's Cradle</u> <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u>	In his comic end-of-the-world absurdity <u>Cat's Cradle</u> , Vonnegut introduces Bokonism, a simple little religion of futility perfectly suited to the end of the world. The novel has an odd sort of conviction, perhaps because it is written in almost Biblical short verses and seeming parables. The fake religion, of course, is by now growing into a real religion. While I haven't converted, I have read this book almost every year for 30 years. <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u> , which registers the horrors of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century from the vantagepoint of alien abductee Billy Pilgrim, who comes unstuck in time, is considered by most critics to be Vonnegut's masterpiece.

## Lee Wochner's personal desert island reading list

Author	Work	Why
Chaucer, Geoffrey	<u>The Canterbury Tales</u>	I find these endlessly enjoyable and Chaucer's viewpoint still unknowable. I wouldn't want to die having given up. Chaucer's wit and wisdom endure.
Dante	<u>The Inferno</u>	<u>The Inferno</u> , like <u>The Canterbury Tales</u> , warrants repeated investigation – on that desert island, I would never tire of reading these two books. Dante's imagination dwarfs my own (and almost anyone else's). His cosmology – that there is goodness and evil, and that the hereafter will rank you accordingly, is understandably attractive. The images are visceral and unforgettable.
Fitzgerald, F. Scott	<u>Tender is the Night</u>	One gauge of what you'd want on an island is what you already use so much that essentially it already is on your island. I've lost track of how many times I've read this novel, but each time I'm drawn to the exquisite depiction of the aptly named Dick Diver, who is descending in life. I also play in the intellectual headgame of reconstructing the novel to improve it – something Fitzgerald tried several times. <u>Gatsby</u> is more beautiful and more famous, but too much beauty is somewhat unreal – which redounds to the benefit of the attractive but flawed <u>Tender</u> .
Hamsun, Knut	<u>Hunger</u>	At times this novel has seemed so particular to me as to seem universal – which on the surface is ludicrous. That is a hallmark of great literature. I've read it probably 10 times and it has lost none of its power, and at the same time that the end of the book seems always to come too abruptly, it also seems to be exactly right, because our hero is left with no other option.
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	<u>Twice-Told Tales</u>	To me, Hawthorne is <u>the</u> quintessential American writer – as we are still balancing our ideals with our psychological barriers. This story collection provides all the gothic mystery one could need. At times Hawthorne is accused of being too “old” – too far removed from our times to be relevant. Quite the opposite: In these Jungian studies, he proves to be shockingly modern.
Kafka, Franz	<u>The Complete Stories</u>	He's the most important modernist, and the one I appreciate the most. The stories are

entertaining and horrifying, and betray a fantasist's gift for the truth.

Lee, Stan  
Kirby, Jack

Marvel Masterworks:  
Fantastic Four Volume 5

Comic books show us who we could be at the height of achievement. No comics do this better than this run of Fantastic Four.

Rilke, Rainer Maria

Duino Elegies (poems)

I can't imagine getting shipwrecked without Rilke. The advice found in the Letters would be worthless on an island, so I'd take the Elegies. With lots of reading time, maybe I'd even crack their mystery.

Tolstoy, Leon

Anna Karenina

Just thinking about it all again breaks my heart. Levin's quest in particular appeals to me, but I'm also still struck by Anna's tragic fall. As an added bonus, by the time I was finished with the book, I'd be rescued from the island.

Vonnegut, Kurt Jr.

Cat's Cradle

Cat's Cradle takes place at the end of the world (both human and environmental). Stranded on a deserted island without the certainty of rescue, it might be good to ponder the fate of others like myself. More than any other book, this is the one I have reread for 30 years. It is filled with wisdom and malarkey in equal doses.

### Lee Wochner's "hold your own at a dinner party" list

(i.e., the 11 most-discussed, most-influential works of modernist literature at this time; impress your friends, astound your enemies. Comprehensive? By no means. Will these 11 provide enough artillery to cover your weaknesses? Absolutely.)

<u>Author</u>	<u>Nation, century</u>	<u>Work</u>	<u>Why</u>
Beckett, Samuel	Ireland, France, 20th	<u>Waiting for Godot</u>	At least a basic understanding of this play and its "plot" is essential to most wine-and-cheese parties.
Camus, Albert	France, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Stranger</u>	Helped popularize existentialism. Everyone thinks they know what it's about. Read it (in an evening), and you can weigh in.
Cervantes, Miguel de Chaucer, Geoffrey Dante	Spain, 16 <sup>th</sup> England, 14 <sup>th</sup> Italy, 13 <sup>th</sup> -14 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Don Quixote</u> <u>The Canterbury Tales</u> <u>The Inferno</u>	These are the three most important post-Dark Age writings in English (other than Shakespeare), Italian, and Spanish. At least sampling all three and being able to reference them will gain you acceptance in higher realms, while leaving the less well-informed afraid to take you on.
Kafka, Franz	Czechoslovakia, 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Complete Stories</u>	After reading this, you'll understand why everything – everything! – from waiting in line at the DMV to the war in Iraq – is Kafkaesque.
Mamet, David	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Oleanna</u>	This play continues to confound and consternate people who debate the "rightness" of the haughty professor and the student who accuses him of harassment. No other recent work has so convulsed (and often repulsed) academics.
Plath, Sylvia	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Collected Poems</u>	She was a poet of startling ability, married to a poet of equal Talent (Ted Hughes, a future poet laureate). After his adultery and their separation, she stuck her head in an oven while leaving provisions for the two kids crying upstairs. Ever since, professors of women's studies have hated Hughes and exalted Plath, as have rail-thin college girls in black pullovers and sour expressions everywhere.

Shakespeare, William	England, 16 <sup>th</sup> -17 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Hamlet</u>	There is a reason this play has risen above his others (although it is not my favorite; that would be <u>Othello</u> ): Hamlet's psychological complexity mirrors our own, post-Apocalyptic concerns, and the form of the play (a play within a play) lends it an avant-garde sheen. Once you've read it – or seen a good production – you too can debate Hamlet's moods and methods.
Twain, Mark	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Huckleberry Finn</u>	This book is constantly under attack. Arm yourself.
Whitman, Walt	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Leaves of Grass</u>	One cannot discuss American literature without discussing Walt Whitman.



## Who's Missing

(They're big names or big works – and they're not on the lists. Here's why.)

Author	Nation, century	Work	Why
Amis, Martin	England, 20 <sup>th</sup>	various novels	I've read <u>about</u> him, but I haven't read him.
Bellow, Saul	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	various novels	I know how highly esteemed he is, but I was ruined by reading <u>The Dean's December</u> , which in my eyes chronicled the none-too-large problems of an aging college dean. Other Bellow works I've sampled have similarly failed to rouse me.
Dickens, Charles	England, 19 <sup>th</sup>	various novels	I've never read Dickens. Any of it. Believe it or not.
Hardy, Thomas	England, 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</u>	A girl I met and flirted with once at a conference was passionate on the subject of this novel, as are many people. Twenty years later, I still haven't read it – so I can't put it on the list.
King, Stephen	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	various novels	I don't hold Stephen King's fantastic commercial success against him, nor his genre status. Many of the writers on the list were great commercial successes (including Albee, Beckett, and Garcia Marquez, to name just three), and many worked in genre (including Poe). So it's not a snob thing. I also recognize his essential gift: He can be a riveting storyteller. That said, the characters are often comically two-dimensional (as with John Raintree, the shoe-collecting Indian assassin in <u>Firestarter</u> ), the obsession with "seeming real" descends into lists of contemporary kitsch that carry no weight, the turns in action revolve around coincidence or surprise twists, and the sentimental scenes are cloying. Overall, a little restraint would go a long way toward quality (if not toward the bank). King's recent reception at <i>The New Yorker</i> , which has in recent years seen fit to publish a few of

			his mainstream stories, is puzzling, given that the writing has in no way improved.
Malamud, Bernard	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Assistant</u>	Malamud is a fine writer, and this is a wrenching novel. But somehow it just doesn't make it to the level of great. Neither does anything else of his that I've read, although it all sparkles.
Melville, Herman	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Moby-Dick</u>	I haven't read it. Shame on me. And I revere "Bartleby the Scrivener," too.
Miller, Arthur	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Death of a Salesman</u>	I am almost alone in my profoundly unmoved reaction to this "important" play. Supposedly, Miller was able to introduce the idea that true tragedy could strike even the most mundane of lives. To me, Willy Loman is simply in the wrong line of work, giving rise to my poem:  <u>Willy Loman, Get a Grip</u>  Attention must be paid That's what your wife said But I want to know why.  With a new line of work You can stop being a jerk And then you don't have to die.
Oates, Joyce Carol	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	countless books	Seemingly it takes me longer to read these books than it takes Ms. Oates to write them. She has written dozens of novels, seven just in the past four years, as well as short stories, plays, and for all I know the Chinatown phone book. I have read five of her books at this point and like to think that if she confined herself to, say, one book a year, or perhaps one every two years, the overall effect might improve. As it is, she is

			singlehandedly stripping the Pacific Northwest forest, and not for good cause.
Shelley, Mary	U.S., 19 <sup>th</sup>	<u>Frankenstein</u>	Because it's terrible.
Updike, John	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	various novels and stories	Wake me up when he says something.
Vidal, Gore	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	various novels	I've read certainly 10 of his novels, so why isn't he on the recommended list? I eat potato chips, too, but they aren't a meal. If you're going to read one of the "American history" novels, read <u>Lincoln</u> . If you want to read one of his quasi-satiric novels in which he thinks he's making a statement, read <u>Kalki</u> , about a new false prophet who brings about the end of humankind. If you want to read his best novel, one which actually performs a service to mankind in explicating the 5 <sup>th</sup> century BC and all the competing philosophies and religions of the era, read <u>Creation</u> .
Williams, Tennessee	U.S., 20 <sup>th</sup>	<u>The Glass Menagerie</u> , etc.	Although his plays are quotable and often feature terrific characters, this sort of high melodrama is more appropriately found elsewhere – and is. If we can blame Wagner for the Nazis, we can blame Williams for "As the World Turns."
The Romantic Poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats)			In general, they nauseate me.