

# How to Read Literature Like a Professor



A Lively and Entertaining Guide  
to Reading Between the Lines

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## **Appendix**

### **Reading List**

I'VE TOSSED BOOK AND POEM TITLES at you, sometimes at a dizzying pace. I remember that sense of disorientation from my very early undergraduate days (it took me years to figure out "Alain Robbe-Grillet" from the passing references one of my first professors was wont to make). The result can be intoxicating, in which case you go on to study more literature, or infuriating, in which case you blame the authors and works you never heard of for making you feel dumb. Never feel dumb. Not knowing who or what is ignorance, which is no sin; ignorance is simply the measure of what you haven't got to yet. I find more works and writers every day that I haven't got to, haven't even heard of.

What I offer here is a list of items mentioned throughout the

book, plus some others I probably should have mentioned, or would have if I had more essays to write. In any event, what all these works have in common is that a reader can learn a lot from them. I have learned a lot from them. As with the rest of this book, there is very little order or method to them. You won't, if you read these, magically acquire *culture* or *education* or any of those scary abstractions; nor do I claim for them (in general) that they are better than works I have not chosen, that *The Iliad* is better than *Metamorphoses* or that Charles Dickens is better than George Eliot. In fact, I have strong opinions about literary merit, but that's not what we're about here. All I would claim for these works is that if you read them, you will become more learned. That's the deal. We're in the learning business. I am, and if you've read this far, so are you. Education is mostly about institutions and getting tickets stamped; learning is what we do for ourselves. When we're lucky, they go together. If I had to choose, I'd take learning.

Oh, there's another thing that will happen if you read the works on this list: you will have a good time, mostly. I promise. Hey, I can't guarantee that everyone will like everything or that my taste is your taste. What I can guarantee is that these works are entertaining. Classics aren't classic because they're old, they're classic because they're great stories or great poems, because they're beautiful or entertaining or exciting or funny or all of the above. And the newer works, the ones that aren't classics? They may grow to that status or they may not. But for now they're engaging, thought-provoking, maddening, fun. We speak, as I've said before, of literary *works*, but in fact literature is chiefly play. If you read novels and plays and stories and poems and you're not having fun, somebody is doing something wrong. If a novel seems like an ordeal, quit; you're not getting paid to read it, are you? And you surely won't get fired if you don't read it. So enjoy.

## Primary Works

W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1940), “In Praise of Limestone” (1951). The first is a meditation on human suffering, based on a Pieter Brueghel painting. The second is a great poem extolling the virtues of gentle landscapes and those of us who live there. There’s a lot more great Auden where those came from.

James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” (1957). Heroin and jazz and sibling rivalry and promises to dead parents and grief and guilt and redemption. All in twenty pages.

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1954). What if there’s a road but characters don’t travel it? Would that mean something?

*Beowulf* (eighth century A.D.). I happen to like Seamus Heaney’s translation, which was published in 2000, but any translation will give you the thrill of this heroic epic.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, *Water Music* (1981), “The Overcoat II” (1985), *World’s End* (1987). Savage comedy, scorching satire, astonishing narrative riffs.

Anita Brookner, *Hotel du Lac* (1984). Don’t let the French title fool you; it’s really in English, a lovely little novel about growing older and heartbreak and painfully bought wisdom.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Carroll may have been a mathematician in real life, but he understood the imagination and the illogic of dreams as well as any writer we’ve ever had. Brilliant, loopy fun.

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *Nights at the Circus* (1984), *Wise Children* (1992). Subversiveness in narrative can be a good thing. Carter upends the expectations of patriarchal society.

Raymond Carver, “Cathedral” (1981). One of the most per-

fectly realized short stories ever, this is the tale of a guy who doesn't get it but learns to. This one has several of our favorite elements: blindness, communion, physical contact. Carver pretty much perfected the minimalist/realist short story, and most of his are worth a look.

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (1384). You'll have to read this one in a modern translation unless you've had training in Middle English, but it's wonderful in any language. Funny, heartbreaking, warm, ironic, everything a diverse group of people traveling together and telling stories are likely to be.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900). No one looked longer or harder into the human soul than Conrad, who found truth in extreme situations and alien landscapes.

Robert Coover, "The Gingerbread House" (1969). A short, ingenious reworking of "Hansel and Gretel."

Hart Crane, *The Bridge* (1930). A great American poem sequence, centered around the Brooklyn Bridge and the great national rivers.

Colin Dexter, *The Remorseful Day* (1999). Really, any of the Morse mysteries is a good choice. Dexter is great at representing loneliness and longing in his detective, and it culminates, naturally, in heart trouble.

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), *Great Expectations* (1861). Dickens is the most humane writer you'll ever read. He believes in people, even with all their faults, and he slings a great story, with the most memorable characters you'll meet anywhere.

E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1975). Race relations and the clash of historical forces, all in a deceptively simple, almost cartoonish narrative.

Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (*Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive*, *Clea*) (1957–60). A brilliant realization of passion, intrigue, friendship, espionage, comedy, and pathos, in some of

the most seductive prose in modern fiction. What happens when Europeans go to Egypt.

T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), *The Waste Land* (1922). Eliot more than any other person changed the face of modern poetry. Formal experimentation, spiritual searching, social commentary.

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (1986). The first of a number of novels set on a North Dakota Chippewa reservation, told as a series of linked short stories. Passion, pain, despair, hope, and courage run through all her books.

William Faulkner, *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Difficult but rewarding books that mix social history, modern psychology, and classical myths in narrative styles that can come from no one else.

Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1999). A comic tale of modern womanhood, replete with dieting, dating, angst, and self-help—and an intertextual companion to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1741). The original Fielding/Jones comic novel. Any book about growing up that can still be funny after more than 250 years is doing something right.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), "Babylon Revisited" (1931). If modern American literature consisted of only one novel, and if that novel were *Gatsby*, it might be enough. What does the green light mean? What does Gatsby's dream represent? And what about the ash heaps and the eyes on the billboard?

Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915). The greatest novel about heart trouble ever written.

E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *A Passage to India* (1924). Questions of geography, north and south, west and east, the caves of consciousness.

John Fowles, *The Magus* (1966), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Literature can be play, a game, and in Fowles it

often is. In the first of these, a young egoist seems to be the audience for a series of private performances aimed at improving him. In the second, a man must choose between two women, but really between two ways of living his life. That's Fowles: always multiple levels going on. He also writes the most wonderful, evocative, seductive prose anywhere.

Robert Frost, "After Apple Picking," "The Woodpile," "Out, Out—" "Mowing" (1913–16). Read all of him. I can't imagine poetry without him.

William H. Gass, "The Pedersen Kid," "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" (both 1968). These stories make clever use of landscape and weather and are wildly inventive—have you ever thought of high school basketball as a religious experience?

Henry Green, *Blindness* (1926), *Living* (1929), *Party Going* (1939), *Loving* (1945). The first of these really does deal with blindness in its metaphorical as well as literal meanings, and *Party Going* has travelers stranded in fog, so that's kind of like blindness. *Loving* is a kind of reworked fairy tale, beginning with "Once upon" and ending with "ever after"; who could resist. *Living*, aside from being a fabulous novel about all the classes involved with a British factory, is the only book I know in which "a," "an," and "the" hardly ever appear. It's a bizarre and wonderful stylistic experiment. Almost no one has read or even heard of Green, and that's too bad.

Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (1929). The first truly mythic American detective novel. And don't miss the film version.

Thomas Hardy, "The Three Strangers" (1883), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). You'll believe landscape and weather are characters after reading Hardy. You'll certainly believe that the universe is not indifferent to our suffering but takes an active hand in it.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown" (1835),



“The Man of Adamant” (1837), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Hawthorne is perhaps the best American writer at exploring our symbolic consciousness, at finding the ways we displace suspicion and loneliness and envy. He just happens to use the Puritans to do it, but it’s never really about Puritans.

Seamus Heaney, “Bogland” (1969), “Clearances” (1986), *North* (1975). One of our truly great poets, powerful on history and politics.

Ernest Hemingway, the stories from *In Our Time* (1925), especially “Big Two-Hearted River,” “Indian Camp,” and “The Battler,” *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

Homer, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* (ca. eighth century B.C.). The second of these is probably more accessible to modern readers, but they’re both great. Every time I teach *The Iliad* I have students say, I had no idea this was such a great story.

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Scary, scary. Is it demonic possession or madness, and if the latter, on whose part? In any case, it’s about the way humans consume each other, as is, in a very different way, his “Daisy Miller” (1878).

James Joyce, *Dubliners* (1914), *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916). First, the stories in *Dubliners*, of which I’ve made liberal use of two. “Araby” has so much going on in it in just a few pages: initiation, experience of the Fall, sight and blindness imagery, quest, sexual desire, generational hostility. “The Dead” is just about the most complete experience it’s possible to have with a short story. Small wonder Joyce left stories behind after he wrote it: what could he do after that? As for *Portrait*, it’s a great story of growth and development. Plus it has a child take a dunk in a cesspool (a “square ditch” in the parlance of the novel) and one of the most harrowing sermons ever committed to paper. Falls, rises, salvation and damnation,



Oedipal conflicts, the search for self, all the things that make novels of childhood and adolescence so rewarding.

Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis" (1915), "A Hunger Artist" (1924), *The Trial* (1925). In the strange world of Kafka, characters are subjected to unreal occurrences that come to define and ultimately destroy them. It's much funnier than that sounds, though.

Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). Her novels resonate with the strength of primal patterns. Taylor Greer takes one of the great road trips into a new life in the first of these novels.

D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *Women in Love* (1920), "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" (1922), "The Fox" (1923), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1930), "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1932). The king of symbolic thinking.

Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* (late fifteenth century). Very old language, but writers and filmmakers continue to borrow from him. A great story.

Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Unicorn* (1963), *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), *The Green Knight* (1992). Murdoch's novels follow familiar literary patterns, as the title of *The Green Knight* would suggest. Her imagination is symbolic, her logic ruthlessly rational (she was a trained philosopher, after all).

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1958). Yes, that one. No, it isn't a porn novel. But it is about things we might wish didn't exist, and it does have one of literature's creepier main characters. Who thinks he's normal.

Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Things They Carried* (1990). Besides being perhaps the two finest novels to come out of the Vietnam War, O'Brien's books give us lots of fodder for thought. A road trip of some eight thousand statute miles, to Paris no less, site of the peace talks. A beautiful native guide leading our white hero west. *Alice in Wonderland* parallels.

Hemingway parallels. Symbolic implications enough to keep you busy for a month at your in-laws’.

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), “The Mystery of the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842), “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), “The Raven” (1845), “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). Poe gives us one of the first really free plays of the subconscious in fiction. His stories (and poems, for that matter) have the logic of our nightmares, the terror of thoughts we can’t suppress or control, half a century and more before Sigmund Freud. He also gives us the first real detective story (“Rue Morgue”), becoming the model for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and all who came after.

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). My students sometimes struggle with this short novel, but they’re usually too serious. If you go into it knowing it’s cartoonish and very much from the sixties, you’ll have a great time.

Theodore Roethke, “In Praise of Prairie” (1941), *The Far Field* (1964).

William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Take your pick. Here’s mine: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Henry V*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Tempest*, *A Winter’s Tale*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*. And then there are the sonnets. Read all of them you can. Hey, they’re only fourteen lines long. I particularly like sonnet 73, but there are lots of wonderful sonnets in there.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818). The monster isn’t simply monstrous. He says something about his creator and about the society in which Victor Frankenstein lives.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century). Not for beginners, I think. At least it wasn’t for me when I was a beginner. Still, I learned to really enjoy young Gawain and his adventure. You might, too.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* (fifth

century B.C.). These plays constitute a trilogy dealing with a doomed family. The first (which is the first really great detective story in Western literature) is about blindness and vision, the second about traveling on the road and the place where all roads end, and the third a meditation on power, loyalty to the state, and personal morality. These plays, now over twenty-four hundred years old, never go out of style.

Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queen* (1596). Spenser may take some work and a fair bit of patience. But you'll come to love the Redcrosse Knight.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). Stevenson does fascinating things with the possibilities of the divided self (the one with a good and an evil side), which was a subject of fascination in the nineteenth century.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897). What, you need a reason?

Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill" (1946). A beautiful evocation of childhood/summer/life and everything that lives and dies.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Poor Huck has come under attack in recent decades, and yes, it does have that racist word in it (not surprising in a work depicting a racist society), but *Huck Finn* also has more sheer humanity than any three books I can think of. And it's one of the great road/buddy stories of all time, even if the road is soggy.

Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982). Tyler has a number of wonderful novels, including *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), but this one really works for my money.

John Updike, "A&P" (1962). I don't really use his story when I create my quest to the grocery, but his is a great little story.

Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (1990). The exploits of a Caribbean fishing community, paralleling events from Homer's two great epics. Fascinating stuff.

Fay Weldon, *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1988). A delightful

novel, comic and sad and magical, with just the right lightness of touch.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Explorations of consciousness, family dynamics, and modern life in luminous, subtle prose.

William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1892), "Easter 1916" (1916), "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1917). Or any of a hundred others. A medievalist professor of mine once said that he believed Yeats was the greatest poet in the English language. If we could only have one, he'd be my choice.

## Fairy Tales We Can't Live Without

"Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," "Hansel and Gretel," "Rapunzel," "Rumpelstiltskin." See also later uses of these tales in Angela Carter and Robert Coover.

## Movies to Read

*Citizen Kane* (1941). I'm not sure this is a film to watch, but you sure can read it.

*The Gold Rush* (1925), *Modern Times* (1936). Charlie Chaplin is the greatest film comedian ever. Accept no substitutes. His little tramp is a great invention.

*Notorious* (1946), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960). Somebody's always copying Hitchcock. Meet the original.

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) Not only a reworking of *The Odyssey* but an excellent road/buddy film with a great American sound track.

*Pale Rider* (1985). Clint Eastwood's fullest treatment of his mythic avenging-angel hero.

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). Great quest stories. You know when you're searching for the Lost

Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail that you're dealing with quests. Take away Indy's leather jacket, fedora, and whip and give him chain mail, helmet, and lance and see if he doesn't look considerably like Sir Gawain.

*Shane* (1953). Without which, no *Pale Rider*.

*Stagecoach* (1939). Its handling of Native Americans doesn't wear well, but this is a great story of sin and redemption and second chances. And chase scenes.

*Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1981), *Return of the Jedi* (1983). George Lucas is a great student of Joseph Campbell's theories of the hero (in, among other works, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*), and the trilogy does a great job of showing us types of heroes and villains. If you know the Arthurian legends, so much the better. Personally I don't care if you learn anything about all that from the films or not; they're so much fun you deserve to see them. Repeatedly.

*Tom Jones* (1963). The Tony Richardson film starring Albert Finney—accept no substitutes. This has the one and only eating scene I've ever seen that can make me blush. The film, and Henry Fielding's eighteenth-century novel, have much to recommend them beyond that one scene. The story of the Rake's Progress—the growth and development of the bad boy—is a classic, and this one is very funny.

## Secondary Sources

There are a great many books that will help you become a better reader and interpreter of literature. These suggestions are brief, arbitrary, and highly incomplete.

M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1957). As the name suggests, this is not a book to read but one to refer to. Abrams covers hundreds of literary terms, movements, and concepts, and the book has been a standard for decades.

John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (1961). Since it first appeared, Ciardi's book has taught tens of thousands of us how to think about the special way poems convey what they have to say. As a poet himself and a translator of Dante, he knew something about the subject.

E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*. Although it was published in 1927, this book remains a great discussion of the novel and its constituent elements by one of its outstanding practitioners.

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). You've been getting watered-down Frye throughout this book. You might find the original interesting. Frye is one of the first critics to conceive of literature as a single, organically related whole, with an overarching framework by which we can understand it. Even when you don't agree with him, he's a fascinating, humane thinker.

William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970). Another primarily theoretical work, this book discusses how we work on fiction and how it works on us. Gass introduces the term "metafiction" here.

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (1992). Lodge, an important postmodern British novelist and critic, wrote the essays in this collection in a newspaper column. They're fascinating, brief, easy to comprehend, and filled with really fine illustrative examples.

Robert Pinsky, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (2000). The former American poet laureate can make you want to fall in love with poetry even if you didn't know you wanted to. He also provides valuable insights into understanding poetry.

*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Another important reference book. If you want to know something about poetry, look in here.



## Master Class

If you want to put together the total reading experience, here you go. These works will give you a chance to use all your newfound skills and come up with inventive and insightful ways of seeing them. Once you learn what these four novels can teach you, you won't need more advice. There's nothing exclusive to these four, by the way. Any of perhaps a hundred novels, long poems, and plays could let you apply the whole panoply of newly acquired skills. I just happen to love these.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861). Life, death, love, hate, dashed hopes, revenge, bitterness, redemption, suffering, graveyards, fens, scary lawyers, criminals, crazy old women, cadaverous wedding cakes. This book has everything except spontaneous human combustion (that's in *Bleak House*—really). Now, how can you not read it?

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922). Don't get me started. First, the obvious: *Ulysses* is not for beginners. When you feel you've become a graduate reader, go there. My undergraduates get through it, but they struggle, even with a good deal of help. Hey, it's difficult. On the other hand, I feel, as do a lot of folks, that it's the most rewarding read there is.

Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970). This novel should have a label: "Warning: Symbolism spoken here." One character survives both the firing squad and a suicide attempt, and he fathers forty-seven sons by forty-seven women, all the sons bearing his name and all killed by his enemies on a single night. Do you think that means something?

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977). I've said so much throughout this book, there's really nothing left, except read it.