

## **Books, Authors from our Contemporary**

Books in this section were selected from among winners of prestigious literary awards (listed below). Contemporary literature is generally thought to include works published after WWII and often embrace society's challenges in race relations, education, women's rights, technology, and the environment.

### **To Kill a Mockingbird**

**Harper Lee**

In 2021, the *New York Times' Book Review*, celebrating its 125 years of publication, ask readers to vote on the best book over that period. The winner was this unforgettable novel of a childhood in a sleepy Southern town and the crisis of conscience that rocked it. *To Kill a Mockingbird* became both an instant bestseller and a critical success when it was first published in 1960. It went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and was later made into an Academy Award-winning film, also a classic.

Compassionate, dramatic, and deeply moving, *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes readers to the roots of human behavior – to innocence and experience, kindness and cruelty, love and hatred, humor and pathos. Now with over 18 million copies in print and translated into forty languages, this regional story by a young Alabama woman claims universal appeal. Harper Lee always considered her book to be a simple love story. Today it is regarded as a masterpiece of American literature.

**Nelle Harper Lee** (1926-2016) was born in 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama, a small Southern town very similar to Maycomb, Alabama, where her two novels, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, are set. Like Atticus Finch, the father of Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, the narrator and protagonist of both novels, Lee's father was a lawyer. Among Lee's childhood friends was the future novelist and essayist Truman Capote, from whom she drew inspiration for the character Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *Go Set a Watchman*, published in 2015, was initially promoted as a sequel by its publisher, but is now generally thought to have been a first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

"Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

## **Between the World and Me**

**By Ta-Nehesi Coates**

Written as a letter to his teenage son about what it feels to be Black in today's United States, Coates draws on American history to show how "racist violence is woven into the American culture." He uses incidents from his youth in Baltimore to describe how schools, police and "street life" disempower black people. "The Case for Reparations," a 16,000-word essay that appeared in "The Atlantic" 2014 led him to write "Between the World and Me." It received critical acclaim and is credited for triggering an interest among politicians and policy makers to pursue reparations.

**Ta-Nehesi Coates (1975 --)** Coates grew up in a close-knit family of seven siblings in Baltimore, Maryland where his parents emphasized the importance of writing and literature, respect for elders, and contributing to the community. Coates recalls his mother, a librarian, requiring him to write essays because of his bad behavior. His father, a Vietnam War vet, former "Black Panther" publisher and founder of Black Classic Press, provided a library of books Coates read while growing up.

"I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was the jail of other people's interests. The library was open, unending, free."

## **Silent Spring**

**By Rachel Carson**

Published in 1962, *Silent Spring* is credited with having inspired the modern environmental movement, which began in earnest a decade later. The book is often credited with changing the course of history by launching a grassroots environmental movement that led to the formation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Her studies on the effects of DDT resulted in tighter controls of pesticide use worldwide. *The Sea Around Us* in 1952 won the National Book Award for nonfiction.

**Rachel Carson** – (1907 -1964) spent most of her professional life as a marine biologist with the US. Fish and Wildlife Service. By the late 50's she had become the most respected science writer in America. For many, *Silent Spring* revolutionized how people understand their relationship with the natural environment. Specifically, *Silent Spring* explained how indiscriminate application of agricultural chemicals, pesticides, and other modern chemicals polluted our streams, damaged bird and animal populations, and caused severe medical problems for humans. Her studies on the effects of DDT resulted in tighter controls of pesticide use worldwide.

"Some of nature's most exquisite handiwork is on a miniature scale, as anyone knows who has applied a magnifying glass to a snowflake."

## **A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes**

**By Stephen Hawking**

In *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking writes in largely non-technical terms about the structure, origin, and eventual fate of the Universe. First published in 1988, the book is an introduction for readers who have no specialized knowledge of physics but are interested in knowing more about the universe and its beginnings. He analyzes concepts such as space and time and the basic building blocks that make up the Universe (such as quarks) and the fundamental forces that govern it (such as gravity). He writes about cosmological phenomena such as the Big Bang and Black Holes. He discusses two major theories, general relativity and quantum mechanics, that modern scientists use to describe the Universe.

**Stephen Hawking** (1942-2018) was an English theoretical physicist perhaps best known for his research into and exposition of Black Holes which, in turn, drew upon his work in relativity theory and quantum mechanics. He also was known for his work in space-time singularities. For many, he is also known as the scientist who spent much of his life with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), an incurable degenerative neuromuscular disease. He continued to work despite the disease's progressively disabling effects. A successful lecturer and author, from 1986 Hawking made use of an adaptive communication system including a speech synthesizer known as the Equalizer. Using the Equalizer, he authored books, scientific papers, and lectures, and was capable of communicating at the modest rate of about 15 words per minute.

"I don't think the human race will survive the next thousand years, unless we spread into space. There are too many accidents that can befall life on a single planet. But I'm an optimist. We will reach out to the stars."

## **Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life**

**Barbara Kingsolver**

Although perhaps best known for her works of fiction (*The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Lacuna*, *Animal Dreams*), this book is a non-fiction account of Kingsolver's family's attempt to eat only locally grown food for an entire year. Along with her husband and daughters, the family starts a farm in Virginia where they grow and preserve different varieties of tomatoes, learn about rooster husbandry, make cheese, and adjust to eating foods only when they are locally in season. The book contrasts this way of life with the ecological costs of growing food on factory farms, transporting it thousands of miles, and adding chemical preservatives.

**Barbara Kingsolver** (1955--) is the author of seven works of fiction as well as books of poetry, essays, and creative nonfiction. Kingsolver's books have been translated into more than two dozen languages and have been adopted into the core literature curriculum in

high schools and colleges throughout the nation. She was awarded the National Humanities Medal, our country's highest honor for service through the arts, in 2000. Kingsolver was named one of the most important writers of the 20th Century by *Writers Digest*. *The Poisonwood Bible* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* won numerous prizes including the James Beard award.

“Recall that whatever lofty things you might accomplish today, you will do them only because you first ate something that grew out of the dirt”

## **Blowin' in the Wind**

Song lyrics by Bob Dylan

Yes, and how many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
And how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows  
That too many people have died?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind

*Blowin' in the Wind* is a song written by Bob Dylan in 1962 and released on his album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, in 1963. It was one of the vanguard of protest songs of the 1960s posing questions about peace, war, and freedom. In 1995 the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. In 2004, it was ranked number 14 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the 500 Great Songs of our Time.

**Bob Dylan** (born Robert Allen Zimmerman, 1941--) received the Nobel Prize for Literature “for having created a new poetic expression within the American song tradition.” While his initial reception in most quarters was tepid, he went on to broader acceptance and critical acclaim, including being honored by the Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement Awards, winning an Oscar and a Golden Globe, a Pulitzer Prize, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

“I had principles and sensibilities and an informed view of the world, and I had it for awhile. I learned it all in grammar school: “Don Quixote,” “Ivanhoe,” “Robinson Crusoe,” “Gulliver’s Travels,” “A Tale of Two Cities,” all the rest.”

## **Beloved**

**By Toni Morrison**

This 1987 novel by the iconic American writer, Toni Morrison, is set after the Civil War. The author tells the story of a family of former slaves whose home is haunted by a malevolent spirit. *Beloved* is inspired by an event that actually happened: Margaret Garner was a slave who escaped and fled to Ohio in 1856. She was subject to capture in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. When U.S. Marshals burst into the cabin where Garner and her husband had barricaded themselves, she was attempting to kill her children, and had already killed her two-year-old daughter, to spare them from being returned to slavery. Morrison had come across an account of Garner titled "A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed Her Child" in an 1856 newspaper article. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 and was a finalist for the 1987 National Book Awards. Literary critics at the New York Times ranked it as the best work of American fiction from 1981 to 2006.

**Toni Morrison** (born Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison 1931 -2019) published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. She followed that in 1977 with her critically acclaimed *Song of Solomon* which brought her national attention and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 for *Beloved*, novel offering a harrowing look at slavery and its impacts. She received the Nobel Prize 1993, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012. The Nobel citation praised her as an author, "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality. She was the first black woman of any nationality to win the prize."

"We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."

## **Author Awards**

**Caldecott** (Children's book illustrator)

**Coretta Scott King** (given annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults)

**Edgar** (named after Edgar Allen Poe, they honor the best in mystery fiction, non-fiction, television film)

**Eisner** (for best Comic books and graphic novels)

**Hugo** (Science Fiction's most prestigious award)

**Nebula** (best Science fiction/Fantasy publication)

**Newbery Medal** (awarded to most distinguished contribution to American literature for children)

**Lambda** (24 categories presented to LGBTQ books)

**Booker Prize** (leading literary award in the English speaking world)

**National Book Award** (annually awarded to best literature in United States)

**Nobel Prize** (for achievements that have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind)

**Poetry Society of America** (awarded to both established and emerging poets)

**Pulitzer** (achievements in newspaper, magazine, online journalism, literature and musical composition within the United States)

**Pura Belpre** (presented to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth)