

American Literature Summer Reading 2022

Students:

We are going to offer the following choices for your summer reading possibilities. You can select any one from the following list based on your own interest and preference as a starting place for our course this year. Regardless of which text you choose, enjoy, make notes, and think about the text and how it might fit within the broader horizons of American literature or the American experience.

We will use these summer readings to initiate our opening unit in the course, so make sure to read carefully. Most importantly, use this as an opportunity to exercise choice and cultivate your own reading preferences and practices.

The texts below are also accompanied by a publisher note or a brief 'recommendation' from one of the American literature faculty. Use the notes to make a selection and guide you in your reading.

1. *Passing* by Nella Larsen

Litten's Shelf Talker: This forgotten Harlem Renaissance classic has been given renewed attention for its sophisticated treatment of class, gender, sexuality, and the cultural politics of race passing, particularly in the context of a burgeoning black middle class in Harlem, New York. Larsen writes with an almost Victorian attention to the nuances of social posturing and the power of the unspoken and unarticulated politics of race in America during this complicated historical moment. This is a short novel bursting with hidden undertones, perfect for a student of the quiet complexities of the human experience. Difficulty (6.5/10)

2. *Night of the Hunter* by Davis Grubb

Litten's Shelf Talker: Set in Depression-era Ohio River Valley, *Night of the Hunter* explores timeless themes of good vs. evil. Amid the backdrop of extreme poverty and desperation, two young siblings and their widowed mother become the victims of a menacing presence. This sharp, Southern Gothic thriller weaves a world of demented religious fervor that never relents. While eventually eclipsed by the popular film adaptation, many critics consider this novel "a forgotten masterpiece." For lovers of thriller, suspense, and the creepy undercurrents of American evangelicalism, this book expertly combines a gripping story with masterful prose. Difficulty (5/10)

3. *Tell me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli

Larner-Lewis' Shelf Talker: This is a beautifully written and highly readable piece of nonfiction with a fascinating structure and an urgent and hopeful message about immigration policy, racism and compassion. A good pick for anyone interested in public policy, the legal profession, social activism, race and "othering" in America. This is also a great model for creative essay writing which bridges the personal and the political. Difficulty (6/10).

4. *All the Real Indians Died Off: And 20 Other Myths About Native Americans* By Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz & Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Larner-Lewis' Shelf Talker: A more mainstream piece of historical nonfiction, the short chapters, forceful arguments, and focused questions and "myths" of this book make it urgent and informative without feeling like dense academic reading. You will come away from this book feeling like you know a ton more about American history and all the different ways it has been hampered by racism and self-delusion around Native peoples. This is a good choice for history buffs, people curious about Indigenous cultures, and students with an activist spirit. Difficulty (5/10)

5. *Citizen: An American Lyric* By Claudia Rankine

Larner-Lewis' Shelf Talker: This is a complex, beautiful, moving piece of experimental, multi-genre writing by one of America's most exciting and cerebral poets. It jumps creatively through memoir, essay, poetry, visual art, and photography in an effort to capture some of the different ways racism manifests itself in the daily lives of Americans. The final picture is one in which defiance and resistance and basic humanity overcome shame and anger. A good read for poets, artists, and people looking to get smarter in their own thinking about race and racism. Difficulty (9/10)

6. *Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie

Duncan's Shelf Talker: This is local author and Spokane Native American, Sherman Alexie's, first collection of short stories. Both heartbreaking and absurdly funny, *Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven* will examine life on "the Rez" from one author's point of view. Alexie has described his own style as "Indian Realism", a mixture of Magical Realism and Native traditional story-telling. In this collection, Alexie seeks to both confront and break the stereotypes associated with indigenous peoples as well as educate his readers about his own struggles growing up on a reservation in the Northeast corner of Washington State. Difficulty (5/10)

