



Popular

Latest

Newsletters

*The Atlantic*

Best Stories


My Account

Subscribe

# *The* GREAT AMERICAN NOVELS

MARCH 14, 2024

SHARE 

SAVE 

In 1868, a little-known writer by the name of John William

DeForest proposed a new type of literature, a collective artistic project for a nation just emerging from an existential conflict: a work of fiction that accomplished “the task of painting the American soul.” It would be called the Great American Novel, and no one had written it yet, DeForest admitted. Maybe soon.

A century and a half later, the idea has endured, even as it has become more complicated. In 2024, our definition of literary greatness is wider, deeper, and weirder than DeForest likely could have imagined. At the same time, the novel is also under threat, as the forces of anti-intellectualism and authoritarianism seek to ban books and curtail freedom of expression. The American canon is more capacious, more fluid, and more fragile than perhaps ever before. But what, exactly, is in it? What follows is our attempt to discover just that.

In setting out to identify that new American canon, we decided to define *American* as having first been published in the United States (or intended to be—read more in our entries on *Lolita* and *The Bell Jar*). And we narrowed our aperture to the past 100 years—a period that began as literary modernism was cresting and contains all manner of literary pleasure and possibility, including the experimentations of postmodernism and the narrative satisfactions of genre fiction.

This still left millions of potential titles. So we approached experts—scholars, critics, and novelists, both at *The Atlantic* and

outside it—and asked for their suggestions. From there, we added and subtracted and debated and negotiated and considered and reconsidered until we landed on the list you're about to read. We didn't limit ourselves to a round, arbitrary number; we wanted to recognize the very best—novels that say something intriguing about the world and do it distinctively, in intentional, artful prose—no matter how many or few that ended up being (136, as it turns out). Our goal was to single out those classics that stand the test of time, but also to make the case for the unexpected, the unfairly forgotten, and the recently published works that already feel indelible. We aimed for comprehensiveness, rigor, and open-mindedness. Serendipity, too: We hoped to replicate that particular joy of a friend pressing a book into your hand and saying, “You have to read this; you'll love it.”

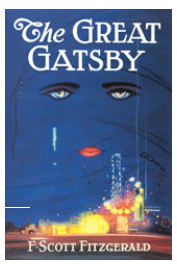
This list includes 45 debut novels, nine winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and three children's books. Twelve were published before the introduction of the mass-market paperback to America, and 24 after the release of the Kindle. At least 60 have been banned by schools or libraries. Together, they represent the best of what novels can do: challenge us, delight us, pull us in and then release us, a little smarter and a little

[Read More](#)

*The Great Gatsby*

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

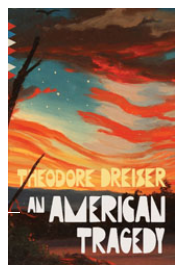
1925



*An American Tragedy*

THEODORE DREISER

1925



*The Making of Americans*

GERTRUDE STEIN

1925



*Death Comes for the Archbishop*

WILLA CATHER

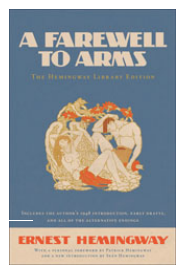
1927



*A Farewell to Arms*

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

1929



*Passing*

NELLA LARSEN

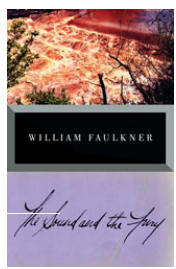
1929



*The Sound and the Fury*

WILLIAM FAULKNER

1929



*Absalom, Absalom!*

WILLIAM FAULKNER

1936



*Nightwood*

DJUNA BARNES

1936



*East*

*Their*

*U.S.A.*

*Goes West*

YOUNGHILL KANG

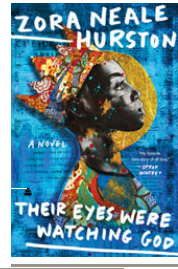
1937



*Eyes Were Watching God*

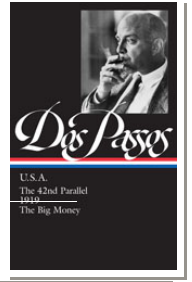
ZORA NEALE HURSTON

1937



JOHN DOS PASSOS

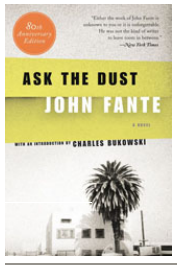
1937



*Ask the Dust*

JOHN FANTE

1939



*The Big Sleep*

RAYMOND CHANDLER

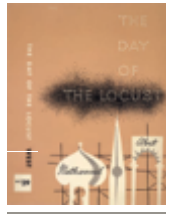
1939



*The Day of the Locust*

NATHANAEL WEST

1939



HOW MANY OF THESE BOOKS  
HAVE YOU READ?

Create Your  
Checklist

*The Grapes of Wrath*

*Native Son*

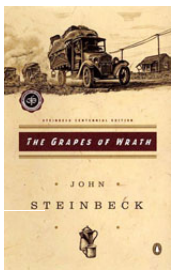
RICHARD WRIGHT

1940

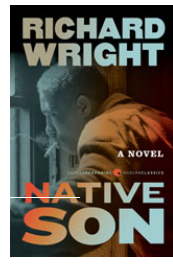
*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

JOHN  
STEINBECK

1939



1940



CARSON  
MCCULLERS

1940



*A  
Time  
to Be  
Born*

DAWN  
POWELL

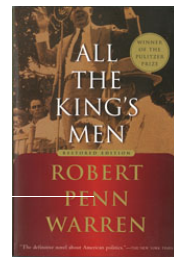
1942



*All  
the  
King's  
Men*

ROBERT  
PENN  
WARREN

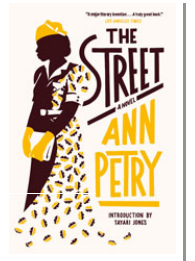
1946



*The  
Street*

ANN  
PETRY

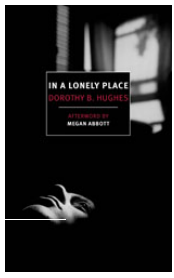
1946



*In a  
Lonely  
Place*

DOROTHY  
B.  
HUGHES

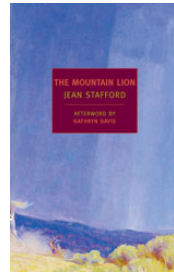
1947



*The  
Mountain  
Lion*

JEAN  
STAFFORD

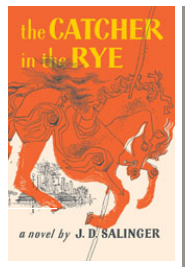
1947



*The  
Catcher  
in the  
Rye*

J. D.  
SALINGER

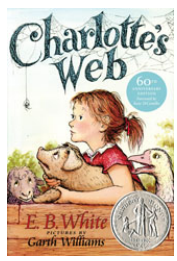
1951



*Charlotte's  
Web*

E. B. WHITE

1952



*Invisible  
Man*

RALPH  
ELLISON

1952



*Fahrenheit  
451*

RAY  
BRADBURY

1953



*Maud*

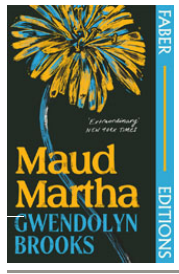
*The*

*Lolita*

*Martha*

GWENDOLYN  
BROOKS

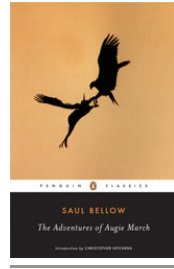
1953



*Adventures  
of Augie  
March*

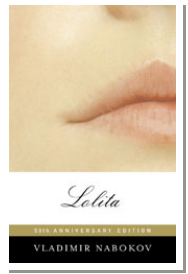
SAUL BELLOW

1953



VLADIMIR  
NABOKOV

1955

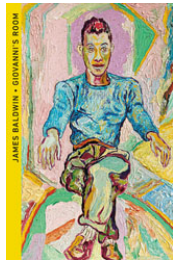


ADVERTISEMENT

*Giovanni's  
Room*

JAMES  
BALDWIN

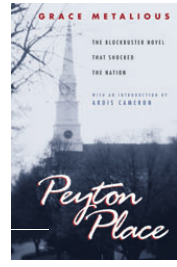
1956



*Peyton  
Place*

GRACE  
METALIOUS

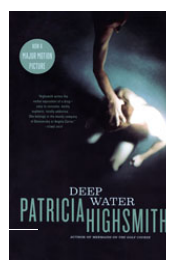
1956



*Deep  
Water*

PATRICIA  
HIGHSMITH

1957



*No-No  
Boy*

JOHN  
OKADA

*On the  
Road*

JACK  
KEROUAC

*The  
Haunting  
of Hill  
House*

1957

1957

SHIRLEY

JACKSON

1959

*Catch-  
22*

JOSEPH  
HELLER

1961

*A  
Wrinkle  
in Time*

MADELEINE  
L'ENGLE

1962

*Another  
Country*

JAMES  
BALDWIN

1962

*One Flew  
Over the  
Cuckoo's  
Nest*

KEN KESEY

1962

*Pale Fire*

VLADIMIR  
NABOKOV

1962

*The  
Zebra-  
Striped  
Hearse*

ROSS  
MACDONALD

1962

*The  
Bell Jar*

SYLVIA  
PLATH

1963

*The  
Group*

MARY  
MCCARTHY

1963

*The  
Crying of  
Lot 49*

THOMAS  
PYNCHON

1966

*A Short*

*Couples*

*Do*



*A Sport  
and a  
Pastime*

JAMES SALTER

1967

*Couples*

JOHN  
UPDIKE

1968

*Do*

*Androids  
Dream of  
Electric  
Sheep?*

PHILIP K. DICK

1968

*Divorcing*

SUSAN  
TAUBES

1969

*Portnoy's  
Complaint*

PHILIP ROTH

1969

*Slaughterhouse-  
Five*

KURT VONNEGUT

1969

*Are You  
There God?  
It's Me,  
Margaret*

JUDY BLUME

1970

*Desperate  
Characters*

PAULA FOX

1970

*Play It as  
It Lays*

JOAN  
DIDION

1970

*Log of the  
S.S. The  
Mrs  
Unguentine*

STANLEY  
CRAWFORD

1972

*Mumbo  
Jumbo*

ISHMAEL  
REED

1972

*Sula*

TONI  
MORRISON

1973

*The Revolt  
of the  
Cockroach  
People*

OSCAR ZETA  
ACOSTA  
1973

*Oreo*

FRAN  
ROSS  
1974

*The  
Dispossessed*

URSULA K. LE  
GUIN  
1974

*Winter in  
the Blood*

JAMES  
WELCH  
1974

*Corregidora*

GAYL JONES  
1975

*Speedboat*

RENATA  
ADLER  
1976

*Ceremony*

LESLIE  
MARMON  
SILKO  
1977

*Song of  
Solomon*

TONI  
MORRISON  
1977

*A  
Contract  
With God*

WILL EISNER  
1978

*Dancer  
From the  
Dance*

ANDREW  
HOLLERAN  
1978

*The  
Stand*

STEPHEN  
KING  
1978

*Kindred*

OCTAVIA E.  
BUTLER  
1979

*The Dog  
of the  
South*

CHARLES  
PORTIS  
1979

*Housekeeping*

MARILYNNE  
ROBINSON  
1980

*The Salt  
Eaters*

TONI CADE  
BAMBARA  
1980

*Little, Big:  
Or, the  
Fairies'  
Parliament*

JOHN CROWLEY  
1981

*Oxherding  
Tale*

CHARLES  
JOHNSON  
1982

*Machine  
Dreams*

JAYNE ANNE  
PHILLIPS  
1984

*Blood  
Meridian*

CORMAC  
MCCARTHY  
1985

*A  
Summons  
to  
Memphis*

PETER  
TAYLOR  
1986

*Watchmen*

ALAN MOORE  
AND DAVE  
GIBBONS  
1986

*Beloved*

TONI  
MORRISON  
1987

*Dawn*

OCTAVIA E.  
BUTLER  
1987

*Geek  
Love*

KATHERINE  
DUNN

1989

*Tripmaster  
Monkey*

MAXINE HONG  
KINGSTON

1989

*Dogeaters*

JESSICA  
HAGEDORN

1990

*American  
Psycho*

BRET  
EASTON  
ELLIS

1991

*How the  
García  
Girls Lost  
Their  
Accents*

JULIA ALVAREZ

1991

*Mating*

NORMAN  
RUSH

1991

*Bastard  
Out of  
Carolina*

DOROTHY  
ALLISON

1992

*The  
Secret  
History*

DONNA  
TARTT

1992

*So Far  
From  
God*

ANA  
CASTILLO

1993

*Stone  
Butch  
Blues*

LESLIE  
FEINBERG

1993

*The  
Shipping  
News*

*Native  
Speaker*

*Sabbath's  
Theater*

ANNUALS

ANNIE  
PROULX

1993

CHANG-RAE  
LEE

1995

PHILIP  
ROTH

1995

*Under the  
Feet of  
Jesus*

HELENA  
MARÍA  
VIRAMONTES

1995

*Infinite  
Jest*

DAVID  
FOSTER  
WALLACE

1996

*I Love  
Dick*

CHRIS  
KRAUS

1997

*Underworld*

DON DELILLO

1997

*The  
Intuitionist*

COLSON  
WHITEHEAD

1999

*Blonde*

JOYCE  
CAROL  
OATES

2000

*House of  
Leaves*

MARK Z.  
DANIELEWSKI

2000

*The  
Amazing  
Adventures  
of Kavalier*

*& Clay*

MICHAEL  
CHABON

2000

*The Last  
Samurai*

HELEN  
DEWITT

2000

*The  
Quick  
and the  
Dead*

JOY WILLIAMS  
2000

*Erasure*

PERCIVAL  
EVERETT  
2001

*I, the  
Divine*

RABIH  
ALAMEDDINE  
2001

*The  
Corrections*

JONATHAN  
FRANZEN  
2001

*Caramelo*

SANDRA  
CISNEROS  
2002

*Perma  
Red*

DEBRA  
MAGPIE  
EARLING  
2002

*The  
Russian  
Debutant's  
Handbook*

GARY  
SHTEYNGART  
2002

*The  
Namesake*

JHUMPA  
LAHIRI  
2003

*Veronica*

MARY  
GAITSKILL  
2005

*The Brief  
Wondrous  
Life of  
Oscar Wao*

JUNOT DÍAZ  
2007

*A Visit  
From the  
Goon  
Squad*

JENNIFER  
EGAN

*I Hotel*

KAREN TEI  
YAMASHITA  
2010

2010

*Open  
City*

TEJU  
COLE  
2011

*Salvage  
the Bones*

JESMYN  
WARD  
2011

*The  
Round  
House*

LOUISE  
ERDRICH  
2012

*Americanah*

CHIMAMANDA  
NGOZI ADICHIE  
2013

*Nevada*

IMOGEN  
BINNIE  
2013

*A Brief  
History of  
Seven  
Killings*

MARLON JAMES  
2014

*Family  
Life*

AKHIL  
SHARMA  
2014

*Fates  
and  
Furies*

LAUREN  
GROFF  
2015

*The  
Fifth  
Season*

N. K.  
JEMISIN  
2015

*The  
Sellout*

PAUL  
BEATTY

*The  
Sympathizer*

VIET THANH  
NGUYEN

*Amiable  
With Big  
Teeth*

CLAUDE

2015

*Lincoln  
in the  
Bardo*

GEORGE  
SAUNDERS

2017

2015

*Sabrina*

NICK  
DRNASO

2018

MCKAY

2017

*Severance*

LING MA

2018

*There  
There*

TOMMY  
ORANGE

2018

*Lost  
Children  
Archive*

VALERIA  
LUISELLI

2019

*Nothing  
to See  
Here*

KEVIN  
WILSON

2019

*The Old  
Drift*

NAMWALI  
SERPELL

2019

*No One Is  
Talking  
About  
This*

PATRICIA  
LOCKWOOD

2021

*The Love  
Songs of  
W. E. B.  
Du Bois*

HONORÉE  
FANONNE  
JEFFERS

2021

*Biography  
of X*



CATHERINE  
LACEY  
2023

---

*When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting  
The Atlantic.*

---