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Somebody else could do their own list of 100 must-read modern classics that has absolutely no overlap with mine, and it would probably be a good list too. So check out my choices and tell me what you would add or take away! Excellent Women by Barbara Pym (1952): “Mildred Lathbury is a clergyman’s daughter and a mild-mannered spinster in 1950s England. She is one of those ‘excellent women,’ the smart, supportive, repressed women who men take for granted.” Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison (1952): “For not only does Ralph Ellison’s nightmare journey across the racial divide tell unparalleled truths about the nature of bigotry and its effects on the minds of both victims and perpetrators, it gives us an entirely new model of what a novel can be.” The Crucible by Arthur Miller (1953): “Arthur Miller’s classic play about the witch-hunts and trials in 17th century Salem is a searing portrait of a community engulfed by hysteria.” Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury (1953): “The classic dystopian novel of a post-literate future, Fahrenheit 451 stands alongside Orwell’s 1984 and Huxley’s Brave New World as a prophetic account of Western civilization’s enslavement by the media, drugs and conformity.” A Kiss Before Dying by Ira Levin (1953): “Now a modern classic, as gripping in its tautly plotted action as it is penetrating in its exploration of a criminal mind, it tells the shocking tale of a young man who will stop at nothing–not even murder–to get where he wants to go.” Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett (1953): “Vladimir and Estragon wait near a tree, inhabiting a drama spun of their own consciousness. The result is a comical wordplay of poetry, dreamscapes, and nonsense, which has been interpreted as mankind’s inexhaustible search for meaning.” Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead by Barbara Comyns (1954): “This is the story of the Willoweed family and the English village in which they live. It begins mid-flood, ducks swimming in the drawing-room windows, ‘quacking their approval’ as they sail around the room.” A Good Man is Hard to Find by Flannery O’Connor (1955): “This now classic book revealed Flannery O’Connor as one of the most original and provocative writers to emerge from the South. Her apocalyptic vision of life is expressed through grotesque, often comic situations in which the principal character faces a problem of salvation.” The Talented Mr. Ripley by Patricia Highsmith (1955): “Since his debut in 1955, Tom Ripley has evolved into the ultimate bad boy sociopath, influencing countless novelists and filmmakers. In this first novel, we are introduced to suave, handsome Tom Ripley: a young striver, newly arrived in the heady world of Manhattan in the 1950s.” The Fountain Overflows by Rebecca West (1956): “This is an unvarnished but affectionate picture of an extraordinary family, in which a remarkable stylist and powerful intelligence surveys the elusive boundaries of childhood and adulthood, freedom and dependency, the ordinary and the occult.” Night by Elie Wiesel (1956): “Night is Elie Wiesel’s masterpiece, a candid, horrific, and deeply poignant autobiographical account of his survival as a teenager in the Nazi death camps.” Palace Walk by Naguib Mafouz (1956): “Volume I of the masterful Cairo Trilogy. A national best-seller in both hardcover and paperback, it introduces the engrossing saga of a Muslim family in Cairo during Egypt’s occupation by British forces in the early 1900s.” The Assistant by Bernard Malamud (1957): “Like Malamud’s best stories, this novel unerringly evokes an immigrant world of cramped circumstances and great expectations. Malamud defined the immigrant experience in a way that has proven vital for several generations of writers.” Memories of a Catholic Girlhood by Mary McCarthy (1957): “Blending memories and family myths, Mary McCarthy takes us back to the twenties, when she was orphaned in a world of relations as colourful, potent and mysterious as the Catholic religion.” On the Road by Jack Kerouac (1957): “On the Road chronicles Jack Kerouac’s years traveling the North American continent with his friend Neal Cassady, ‘a sideburned hero of the snowy West.’ As ‘Sal Paradise’ and ‘Dean Moriarty,’ the two roam the country in a quest for self-knowledge and experience.” Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe (1958): “Things Fall Apart tells two overlapping, intertwining stories, both of which center around Okonkwo, a ‘strong man’ of an Ibo village in Nigeria.” The Haunting of Hill House by Shirley Jackson (1959): “It is the story of four seekers who arrive at a notoriously unfriendly pile called Hill House: Dr. Montague, an occult scholar looking for solid evidence of a ‘haunting’; Theodora, his lighthearted assistant; Eleanor, a friendless, fragile young woman well acquainted with poltergeists; and Luke, the future heir of Hill House.” A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry (1959): “Set on Chicago’s South Side, the plot revolves around the divergent dreams and conflicts within three generations of the Younger family: son Walter Lee, his wife Ruth, his sister Beneatha, his son Travis and matriarch Lena, called Mama.” To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee (1960): “The 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.” Catch-22 by Joseph Heller: (1961): “At the heart of Catch-22 resides the incomparable, malingering bombardier, Yossarian, a hero endlessly inventive in his schemes to save his skin from the horrible chances of war.” The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie by Muriel Spark (1961): “The elegantly styled classic story of a young, unorthodox teacher and her special – and ultimately dangerous – relationship with six of her students.” Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates (1961): “In the hopeful 1950s, Frank and April Wheeler appear to be a model couple: bright, beautiful, talented, with two young children and a starter home in the suburbs. Perhaps they married too young and started a family too early … Yet they have always lived on the assumption that greatness is only just around the corner.” Cassandra at the Wedding by Dorothy Baker (1962): “Dorothy Baker’s entrancing tragicomic novella follows an unpredictable course of events in which her heroine appears variously as conniving, self-aware, pitiful, frenzied, absurd, and heartbroken—at once utterly impossible and tremendously sympathetic.” The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing (1962): “Bold and illuminating, fusing sex, politics, madness and motherhood, The Golden Notebook is at once a wry and perceptive portrait of the intellectual and moral climate of the 1950s — a society on the brink of feminism — and a powerful and revealing account of a woman searching for her own personal and political identity.” Pale Fire by Vladimir Nabokov (1962): “An ingeniously constructed parody of detective fiction and learned commentary, Pale Fire offers a cornucopia of deceptive pleasures, at the center of which is a 999-line poem written by the literary genius John Shade just before his death.” The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath (1963): “Sylvia Plath’s shocking, realistic, and intensely emotional novel about a woman falling into the grip of insanity. Esther Greenwood is brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful, but slowly going under—maybe for the last time.” The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin (1963): “At once a powerful evocation of James Baldwin’s early life in Harlem and a disturbing examination of the consequences of racial injustice, the book is an intensely personal and provocative document.” Hopscotch by Julio Cortázar (1963): “Horacio Oliveira is an Argentinian writer who lives in Paris with his mistress, La Maga, surrounded by a loose-knit circle of bohemian friends who call themselves ‘the Club.’ Hopscotch is the dazzling, freewheeling account of Oliveira’s astonishing adventures.” The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea by Yukio Mishima (1963): “The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea tells the tale of a band of savage thirteen-year-old boys who reject the adult world as illusory, hypocritical and sentimental, and train themselves in a brutal callousness they call ‘objectivity.'” The Spy Who Came in From the Cold by John le Carré (1963): “With unsurpassed knowledge culled from his years in British Intelligence, le Carre brings to light the shadowy dealings of international espionage in the tale of a British agent who longs to end his career but undertakes one final, bone-chilling assignment.” A Personal Matter by Kenzaburō Ōe (1964): “A Personal Matter is the story of Bird, a frustrated intellectual in a failing marriage whose utopian dream is shattered when his wife gives birth to a brain-damaged child.” The Woman in the Dunes by Kobo Abe (1964): “After missing the last bus home following a day trip to the seashore, an amateur entomologist is offered lodging for the night at the bottom of a vast sand pit. But when he attempts to leave the next morning, he quickly discovers that the locals have other plans.” The Autobiography of Malcolm X by Malcolm X, Alex Haley (1965): “In the searing pages of this classic autobiography, originally published in 1964, Malcolm X, the Muslim leader, firebrand, and anti-integrationist, tells the extraordinary story of his life and the growth of the Black Muslim movement to veteran writer and journalist Alex Haley.” The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon (1965): “The highly original satire about Oedipa Maas, a woman who finds herself enmeshed in a worldwide conspiracy, meets some extremely interesting characters, and attains a not inconsiderable amount of self-knowledge.” Stoner by John Williams (1965): “William Stoner is born at the end of the nineteenth century into a dirt-poor Missouri farming family. Sent to the state university to study agronomy, he instead falls in love with English literature and embraces a scholar’s life, so different from the hardscrabble existence he has known.” In Cold Blood by Truman Capote (1966): “On November 15, 1959, in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas, four members of the Clutter family were savagely murdered by blasts from a shotgun held a few inches from their faces … As Truman Capote reconstructs the murder and the investigation that led to the capture, trial, and execution of the killers, he generates both mesmerizing suspense and astonishing empathy.” Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys (1966): “This mesmerizing work introduces us to Antoinette Cosway, a sensual and protected young woman who is sold into marriage to the prideful Mr. Rochester. Rhys portrays Cosway amidst a society so driven by hatred, so skewed in its sexual relations, that it can literally drive a woman out of her mind.” One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez (1967): “The novel tells the story of the rise and fall of the mythical town of Macondo through the history of the family. In the noble, ridiculous, beautiful, and tawdry story of the family, one sees all of humanity, just as in the history, myths, growth, and decay of Macondo, one sees all of Latin America.” A Sport and a Pastime by James Salter (1967): “Set in provincial France in the 1960s, [A Sport and a Pastime] is the intensely carnal story—part shocking reality, part feverish dream —of a love affair between a footloose Yale dropout and a young French girl.” Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep by Philip K. Dick (1968): “It was January 2021, and Rick Deckard had a license to kill. Somewhere among the hordes of humans out there, lurked several rogue androids. Deckard’s assignment–find them and then…’retire’ them. Trouble was, the androids all looked exactly like humans, and they didn’t want to be found!” Slouching Towards Bethlehem by Joan Didion (1968): “[Slouching Towards Bethlehem] focuses on such subjects as John Wayne and Howard Hughes, growing up a girl in California, ruminating on the nature of good and evil in a Death Valley motel room, and, especially, the essence of San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury, the heart of the counterculture.” I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou (1969): “Here is a book as joyous and painful, as mysterious and memorable, as childhood itself. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings captures the longing of lonely children, the brute insult of bigotry, and the wonder of words that can make the world right.” The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin (1969): “A groundbreaking work of science fiction, The Left Hand of Darkness tells the story of a lone human emissary to Winter, an alien world whose inhabitants can choose -and change – their gender.” Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut (1969): “In a plot-scrambling display of virtuosity, we follow [Billy] Pilgrim simultaneously through all phases of his life, concentrating on his (and Vonnegut’s) shattering experience as an American prisoner of war who witnesses the firebombing of Dresden.” 84, Charing Cross Road by Helene Hanff (1970): “It all began with a letter inquiring about second-hand books, written by Helene Hanff in New York, and posted to a bookshop at 84, Charing Cross Road in London.” Lives of Girls and Women by Alice Munro (1971): “Through these unwitting mentors and in her own encounters with sex, birth, and death, Del explores the dark and bright sides of womanhood. All along she remains a wise, witty observer and recorder of truths in small-town life. The result is a powerful, moving, and humorous demonstration of Alice Munro’s unparalleled awareness of the lives of girls and women.” Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya (1972): “Antonio Marez is six years old when Ultima comes to stay with his family in New Mexico. She is a curandera, one who cures with herbs and magic. Under her wise wing, Tony will test the bonds that tie him to his people, and discover himself in the pagan past, in his father’s wisdom, and in his mother’s Catholicism.” The Summer Book by Tove Jansson (1972): “An elderly artist and her six-year-old granddaughter while away a summer together on a tiny island in the gulf of Finland. Gradually, the two learn to adjust to each other’s fears, whims and yearnings for independence, and a fierce yet understated love emerges.” An Unsuitable Job for a Woman by P. D. James (1972): “Handsome Cambridge dropout Mark Callender died hanging by the neck with a faint trace of lipstick on his mouth. When the official verdict is suicide, his wealthy father hires fledgling private investigator Cordelia Gray to find out what led him to self-destruction.” The Gulag Archipelago by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1973): “Drawing on his own incarceration and exile, as well as on evidence from more than 200 fellow prisoners and Soviet archives, Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn reveals the entire apparatus of Soviet repression — the state within the state that ruled all-powerfully.” Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard (1974): “An exhilarating meditation on nature and its seasons—a personal narrative highlighting one year’s exploration on foot in the author’s own neighborhood in Tinker Creek, Virginia.” The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston (1976): “A Chinese American woman tells of the Chinese myths, family stories and events of her California childhood that have shaped her identity. It is a sensitive account of growing up female and Chinese-American in a California laundry.” Too Loud a Solitude by Bohumil Hrabal (1976): “Too Loud a Solitude is a tender and funny story of Hant’a – a man who has lived in a Czech police state – for 35 years, working as compactor of wastepaper and books.” Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko (1977): “Tayo, a young Native American, has been a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II, and the horrors of captivity have almost eroded his will to survive. His return to the Laguna Pueblo reservation only increases his feeling of estrangement and alienation.” The Hour of the Star by Clarice Lespector (1977): “Narrated by the cosmopolitan Rodrigo S.M., this brief, strange, and haunting tale is the story of Macabéa, one of life’s unfortunates.” The Shining by Stephen King (1977): “Danny was only five years old but in the words of old Mr Halloran he was a ‘shiner’, aglow with psychic voltage. When his father became caretaker of the Overlook Hotel his visions grew frighteningly out of control.” The Sea, The Sea by Iris Murdoch (1978): “First published in 1978, this is the story of Charles Arrowby who, retiring from his glittering London world in order to abjure magic and become a hermit turns to the sea: turbulent and leaden, transparent and opaque, magician and mother.” If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler by Italo Calvino (1979): “Italo Calvino’s masterpiece combines a love story and a detective story into an exhilarating allegory of reading, in which the reader of the book becomes the book’s central character.” Kindred by Octavia Butler (1979): “Having just celebrated her 26th birthday in 1976 California, Dana, an African-American woman, is suddenly and inexplicably wrenched through time into antebellum Maryland.” Sophie’s Choice by William Styron (1979): “Three stories are told: a young Southerner wants to become a writer; a turbulent love-hate affair between a brilliant Jew and a beautiful Polish woman; and of an awful wound in that woman’s past–one that impels both Sophie and Nathan toward destruction.” Clear Light of Day by Anita Desai (1980): “Set in India’s Old Delhi, Clear Light of Day is Anita Desai’s tender, warm, and compassionate novel about family scars, the ability to forgive and forget, and the trials and tribulations of familial love.” Housekeeping by Marilynne Robinson (1980): “Housekeeping is the story of Ruth and her younger sister, Lucille, who grow up haphazardly, first under the care of their competent grandmother, then of two comically bumbling great-aunts, and finally of Sylvie, their eccentric and remote aunt.” The Transit of Venus by Shirley Hazzard: (1980): “Caroline and Grace Bell, two beautiful orphan sisters eager to begin their lives in a new land, journey to England from Australia.” Midnight’s Children by Salman Rushdie (1981): “Born at the stroke of midnight, at the precise moment of India’s independence, Saleem Sinai is destined from birth to be special. For he is one of 1,001 children born in the midnight hour, children who all have special gifts, children with whom Saleem is telepathically linked.” So Long a Letter by Mariama Bâ (1981): “This novel is a perceptive testimony to the plight of articulate women who live in social milieux dominated by attitudes and values that deny them their proper place. It is a sequence of reminiscences, some wistful, some bitter, recounted by a recently widowed Senegalese school teacher.” What We Talk About When We Talk About Love by Raymond Carver (1981): “In his second collection, Carver establishes his reputation as one of the most celebrated short-story writers in American literature—a haunting meditation on love, loss, and companionship, and finding one’s way through the dark.” The Color Purple by Alice Walker (1982): “Celie is a poor black woman whose letters tell the story of 20 years of her life, beginning at age 14 when she is being abused and raped by her father and attempting to protect her sister from the same fate, and continuing over the course of her marriage to ‘Mister,’ a brutal man who terrorizes her.” The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende (1982): “In one of the most important and beloved Latin American works of the twentieth century, Isabel Allende weaves a luminous tapestry of three generations of the Trueba family, revealing both triumphs and tragedies.” Look at Me by Anita Brookner (1983): “A lonely art historian absorbed in her research seizes the opportunity to share in the joys and pleasures of the lives of a glittering couple, only to find her hopes of companionship and happiness shattered.” The Name of the Rose by Umberto Eco (1983): “The year is 1327. Franciscans in a wealthy Italian abbey are suspected of heresy, and Brother William of Baskerville arrives to investigate. When his delicate mission is suddenly overshadowed by seven bizarre deaths, Brother William turns detective.” The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros (1984): “Told in a series of vignettes – sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes deeply joyous – it is the story of a young Latina girl growing up in Chicago, inventing for herself who and what she will become.” Love Medicine by Louise Erdrich (1984): “Written in Erdrich’s uniquely poetic, powerful style, it is a multigenerational portrait of strong men and women caught in an unforgettable drama of anger, desire, and the healing power that is love medicine.” The Lover by Marguerite Duras (1984): “Set in the prewar Indochina of Marguerite Duras’s childhood, this is the haunting tale of a tumultuous affair between an adolescent French girl and her Chinese lover.” Nights at the Circus by Angela Carter (1984): “Is Sophie Fevvers, toast of Europe’s capitals, part swan…or all fake? Courted by the Prince of Wales and painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, she is an aerialiste extraordinaire and star of Colonel Kearney’s circus.” The Unbearable Lightness of Being by Milan Kundera (1984): “In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Milan Kundera tells the story of a young woman in love with a man torn between his love for her and his incorrigible womanizing and one of his mistresses and her humbly faithful lover.” Blood Meridian by Cormac McCarthy (1985): “An epic novel of the violence and depravity that attended America’s westward expansion, Blood Meridian brilliantly subverts the conventions of the Western novel and the mythology of the ‘wild west.'” The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985): “In the Republic of Gilead, we see a world devastated by toxic chemicals and nuclear fallout and dominated by a repressive Christian fundamentalism.” Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985): “This startling novel describes the adolescence of a ferociously bright and rebellious orphan adopted into a Pentecostal household in the dour, industrial Midlands and her coming to terms with her unorthodox sexuality.” Anagrams by Lorrie Moore (1986): “Disillusioned and loveless, a chain-smoking art history professor who spends her spare time singing in nightclubs and tending to her young daughter finds herself pursued by an erratic, would-be librettist.” Beloved by Toni Morrison (1987): “Sethe was born a slave and escaped to Ohio, but eighteen years later she is still not free. She has too many memories of Sweet Home, the beautiful farm where so many hideous things happened.” Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987): “Anzaldúa, a Chicana native of Texas, explores in prose and poetry the murky, precarious existence of those living on the frontier between cultures and languages.” A Small Place by Jamaica Kincaid (1988): “Jamaica Kincaid’s expansive essay candidly appraises the ten-by-twelve-mile island in the British West Indies where she grew up, and makes palpable the impact of European colonization and tourism.” The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan (1989): “In 1949 four Chinese women, recent immigrants to San Francisco, begin meeting to eat dim sum, play mahjong, and talk. United in shared loss and hope, they call themselves the Joy Luck Club.” The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro (1989): “In 1956, Stevens, a long-serving butler at Darlington Hall, decides to take a motoring trip through the West Country. The six-day excursion becomes a journey into the past of Stevens and England, a past that takes in fascism, two world wars, and an unrealised love between the butler and his housekeeper.” Animal Dreams by Barbara Kingsolver (1990): “Blending flashbacks, dreams, and Native American legends, Animal Dreams is a suspenseful love story and a moving exploration of life’s largest commitments.” The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien (1990): “Since its first publication, The Things They Carried has become an unparalleled Vietnam testament, a classic work of American literature, and a profound study of men at war that illuminates the capacity, and the limits, of the human heart and soul.” Possession by A. S. Byatt (1990): “Possession is an exhilarating novel of wit and romance, at once an intellectual mystery and triumphant love story. It is the tale of a pair of young scholars researching the lives of two Victorian poets.” How the García Girls Lost Their Accents by Julia Alvarez (1991): “Uprooted from their family home in the Dominican Republic, the four Garcia sisters – Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofía – arrive in New York City in 1960 to find a life far different from the genteel existence of maids, manicures, and extended family they left behind.” The English Patient by Michael Ondaatje (1992): “Michael Ondaatje’s Booker Prize-winning novel traces the intersection of four damaged lives in an Italian villa at the end of World War II.” Jesus’ Son by Denis Johnson (1992): “In their intensity of perception, their neon-lit evocation of a strange world brought uncomfortably close to our own, the stories in Jesus’ Son offer a disturbing yet eerily beautiful portrayal of American loneliness and hope.” The Secret History by Donna Tartt (1992): “Under the influence of their charismatic classics professor, a group of clever, eccentric misfits at an elite New England college discover a way of thinking and living that is a world away from the humdrum existence of their contemporaries.” The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven by Sherman Alexie (1993): “In this darkly comic short story collection, Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian, brilliantly weaves memory, fantasy, and stark realism to paint a complex, grimly ironic portrait of life in and around the Spoke Indian Reservation.” A Suitable Boy by Vikram Seth (1993): “A sweeping panoramic portrait of a complex, multi ethnic society in flux, A Suitable Boy remains the story of ordinary people caught up in a web of love and ambition, humor and sadness, prejudice and reconciliation, the most delicate social etiquette and the most appalling violence.” Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat (1994): “At the age of twelve, Sophie Caco is sent from her impoverished village of Croix-des-Rosets to New York, to be reunited with a mother she barely remembers.” Blindness by José Saramago (1995): “As Blindness reclaims the age-old story of a plague, it evokes the vivid and trembling horrors of the twentieth century, leaving readers with a powerful vision of the human spirit that’s bound both by weakness and exhilarating strength.” The Rings of Saturn by W. G Sebald (1995): “In August 1992, W.G. Sebald set off on a walking tour of Suffolk, one of England’s least populated and most striking counties … The Rings of Saturn is his record of these travels, a phantasmagoria of fragments and memories, fraught with dizzying knowledge and desperation and shadowed by mortality.” Infinite Jest by David Foster Wallace (1996): “Infinite Jest explores essential questions about what entertainment is and why it has come to so dominate our lives; about how our desire for entertainment affects our need to connect with other people; and about what the pleasures we choose say about who we are.” The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (1997): “Equal parts powerful family saga, forbidden love story, and piercing political drama, it is the story of an affluent Indian family forever changed by one fateful day in 1969.” I Love Dick by Chris Kraus (1997): “I Love Dick is a manifesto for a new kind of feminist who isn’t afraid to burn through her own narcissism in order to assume responsibility for herself and for the injustice in the world, and it’s a book you won’t put down until the author’s final, heroic acts of self-revelation and transformation.” Underworld by Don Delillo (1997): “Through fragments and interlaced stories—including those of highway killers, artists, celebrities, conspiracists, gangsters, nuns, and sundry others—DeLillo creates a fragile web of connected experience, a communal Zeitgeist that encompasses the messy whole of five decades of American life, wonderfully distilled.” We’re giving away a stack of our 20 favorite books of the year. Click here to enter, or just click the image below. A modern classic is a book post-WWII that readers find relatable in a familiar world.Modern classics have themes and styles that reflect shifts in society's views on race, gender, and class.Books like 'On the Road' and 'Catch-22' are examples of modern classics due to their enduring appeal. The phrase is a bit of a contradiction, isn’t it? “Modern classics”—it’s a bit like “ancient baby,” isn’t it? Haven’t you ever seen babies sporting wise yet cantankerous looks that made them seem like smooth-skinned octogenarians? Modern classics in literature are like that—smooth-skinned and young, yet with a sense of longevity. But before we define that term, let's start by defining what a work of classic literature is. A classic usually expresses some artistic quality—an expression of life, truth, and beauty. A classic stands the test of time. The work is usually considered to be a representation of the period in which it was written, and the work merits lasting recognition. In other words, if the book was published in the recent past, the work is not a classic. A classic has a certain universal appeal. Great works of literature touch us to our very core beings—partly because they integrate themes that are understood by readers from a wide range of backgrounds and levels of experience. Themes of love, hate, death, life, and faith touch upon some of our most basic emotional responses. A classic makes connections. You can study a classic and discover influences from other writers and other great works of literature. That’s as good a definition of a classic as you’ll find. But what is a “modern classic?” And can it meet all of the above criteria? “Modern” is an interesting word. It gets tossed around by cultural commentators, architectural critics, and suspicious traditionalists. Sometimes, it just means “nowadays.” For our purposes here, let’s define modern as “based in a world the reader recognizes as familiar.” So although “Moby Dick” is certainly a classic, it has a hard time being a modern classic because many of the settings, lifestyle allusions, and even moral codes seem dated to the reader. A modern classic, then, would have to be a book written after World War I, and probably after World War II. Why? Because those cataclysmic events shifted the way the world sees itself in irreversible ways. Certainly, classic themes endure. Romeo and Juliet will still be foolish enough to kill themselves without checking for a pulse thousands of years from now. But readers who live in a post-WWII era are concerned with much that is new. Ideas about race, gender, and class are shifting, and literature is both a cause and an effect. Readers have a broader understanding of an interconnected world where people, pictures, and words travel in all directions at warp speed. The idea of “young people speaking their minds” is no longer new. A world that has witnessed totalitarianism, imperialism, and corporate conglomeration cannot turn back that clock. And perhaps most importantly, readers today bring a hardened realism that stems from contemplating the enormity of genocide and perennially living on the edge of self-destruction. These hallmarks of our modernism can be seen in a wide variety of works. A glance at previous winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature brings us Orhan Pamuk, who explores conflicts in modern Turkish society; J.M. Coetzee, best known as a white writer in a post-apartheid South Africa; and Günter Grass, whose novel “The Tin Drum” is perhaps the seminal exploration of post-WWII soul-searching. Beyond content, modern classics also demonstrate a shift in style from earlier eras. This shift began in the early part of the century, with luminaries such as James Joyce expanding the reach of the novel as a form. In the post-war era, the hardened realism of the Hemingway school became less of a novelty and more a requirement. Cultural shifts have meant that obscenities once viewed as outrageous are commonplace. Sexual “liberation” may be more of a fantasy than a reality in the real world, but in literature, the characters certainly sleep around a lot more casually than they used to. In tandem with television and movies, literature has also shown its willingness to spill blood on the pages, as violent horrors that once would not even have been alluded to now become the basis of best-selling novels. Philip Roth is one of America’s preeminent authors of modern classics. In his early career, he was best known for “Portnoy’s Complaint,” in which young sexuality was explored in unprecedented ways. Modern? Certainly. But is it a classic? It can be argued it is not. It suffers the burden of those who go first—they seem less impressive than those who come after. Young readers looking for a good shocker that reveals all no longer remember “Portnoy’s Complaint.” One modern classic is Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road.” This book is modern—it’s written in a breezy, breathless style, and it’s about cars and ennui and easy morality and vigorous youth. And it’s a classic—it stands the test of time. For many readers, it has a universal appeal. Another novel that often appears atop the contemporary classics lists is Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22.” This certainly meets every definition of an enduring classic, yet it is thoroughly modern. If WWII and its ramifications mark the boundary, this novel of the absurdities of war stands definitively on the modern side. In the science fiction aisle—a modern genre in itself—“A Canticle for Leibowitz” by Walter M. Miller Jr. is perhaps the modern classic, post-nuclear holocaust novel. It has been copied endlessly, but it holds up as well—or better than any other work in painting a stark warning of the dire consequences of our path to destruction. scoresvideos By Esther LombardiEsther Lombardi Literature ExpertThe phrase is a bit of a contradiction, isn’t it? “Modern classics”—it’s a bit like “ancient baby,” isn’t it? Haven’t you ever seen babies sporting wise yet cantankerous looks that made them seem like smooth-skinned octogenarians?Modern classics in literature are like that—smooth-skinned and young, yet with a sense of longevity. But before we define that term, let's start by defining what a work of classic literature is.A classic usually expresses some artistic quality—an expression of life, truth, and beauty. A classic stands the test of time. The work is usually considered to be a representation of the period in which it was written, and the work merits lasting recognition. In other words, if the book was published in the recent past, the work is not a classic. A classic has a certain universal appeal. Great works of literature touch us to our very core beings—partly because they integrate themes that are understood by readers from a wide range of backgrounds and levels of experience. Themes of love, hate, death, life, and faith touch upon some of our most basic emotional responses. A classic makes connections. You can study a classic and discover influences from other writers and other great works of literature.That’s as good a definition of a classic as you’ll find. But what is a “modern classic?” And can it meet all of the above criteria?Something That's Modern Can Be Familiar“Modern” is an interesting word. It gets tossed around by cultural commentators, architectural critics, and suspicious traditionalists. Sometimes, it just means “nowadays.” For our purposes here, let’s define modern as “based in a world the reader recognizes as familiar.” So although “Moby Dick” is certainly a classic, it has a hard time being a modern classic because many of the settings, lifestyle allusions, and even moral codes seem dated to the reader.A modern classic, then, would have to be a book written after World War I, and probably after World War II. Why? Because those cataclysmic events shifted the way the world sees itself in irreversible ways.Certainly, classic themes endure. Romeo and Juliet will still be foolish enough to kill themselves without checking for a pulse thousands of years from now.But readers who live in a post-WWII era are concerned with much that is new. Ideas about race, gender, and class are shifting, and literature is both a cause and an effect. Readers have a broader understanding of an interconnected world where people, pictures, and words travel in all directions at warp speed. The idea of “young people speaking their minds” is no longer new. A world that has witnessed totalitarianism, imperialism, and corporate conglomeration cannot turn back that clock. And perhaps most importantly, readers today bring a hardened realism that stems from contemplating the enormity of genocide and perennially living on the edge of self-destruction.Modern Themes and Styles Shift With the TimesThese hallmarks of our modernism can be seen in a wide variety of works. A glance at previous winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature brings us Orhan Pamuk, who explores conflicts in modern Turkish society; J.M. Coetzee, best known as a white writer in a post-apartheid South Africa; and Günter Grass, whose novel “The Tin Drum” is perhaps the seminal exploration of post-WWII soul-searching.Beyond content, modern classics also demonstrate a shift in style from earlier eras. This shift began in the early part of the century, with luminaries such as James Joyce expanding the reach of the novel as a form. In the post-war era, the hardened realism of the Hemingway school became less of a novelty and more a requirement. Cultural shifts have meant that obscenities once viewed as outrageous are commonplace. Sexual “liberation” may be more of a fantasy than a reality in the real world, but in literature, the characters certainly sleep around a lot more casually than they used to. In tandem with television and movies, literature has also shown its willingness to spill blood on the pages, as violent horrors that once would not even have been alluded to now become the basis of best-selling novels.Philip Roth is one of America’s preeminent authors of modern classics. In his early career, he was best known for “Portnoy’s Complaint,” in which young sexuality was explored in unprecedented ways. Modern? Certainly. But is it a classic? It can be argued it is not. It suffers the burden of those who go first—they seem less impressive than those who come after. Young readers looking for a good shocker that reveals all no longer remember “Portnoy’s Complaint.”Great Examples of Modern ClassicsOne modern classic is Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road.” This book is modern—it’s written in a breezy, breathless style, and it’s about cars and ennui and easy morality and vigorous youth. And it’s a classic—it stands the test of time. For many readers, it has a universal appeal.Another novel that often appears atop the contemporary classics lists is Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22.” This certainly meets every definition of an enduring classic, yet it is thoroughly modern. If WWII and its ramifications mark the boundary, this novel of the absurdities of war stands definitively on the modern side.In the science fiction aisle—a modern genre in itself—“A Canticle for Leibowitz” by Walter M. Miller Jr. is perhaps the modern classic, post-nuclear holocaust novel. It has been copied endlessly, but it holds up as well—or better than any other work in painting a stark warning of the dire consequences of our path to destruction.Lombardi, Esther. "What Is a Modern Classic in Literature?" ThoughtCo, Apr. 5, 2023, thoughtco.com/what-is-a-modern-classic-book-738758. Masterfully-crafted prose, timeless themes, and unforgettable characters are the reasons why classic literary works endure for generations. They awaken the imagination and allow us to experience different places, time periods, triumphs, and struggles through the lens of a whole host of characters. But the most excellent books are not limited to the old classics of Dante or Homer. Time and again, a book rises to the bestseller list and is considered at par with the classics of the past century. These are aptly termed modern classics. A modern classic book is typically written after World War I, and possibly after World War II. This is because these two events marked the emergence of new ideas and ways of thinking, such as ideologies about gender, race, and class. What makes a book a classic? A classic usually possesses high quality of artistic expression, and it usually serves as a representation of the time period it writes about, even though its themes remain “timeless”—making it worthy of lasting recognition. With that said, here are some of the must-read modern classics to add to your collection: Often cited as Virginia Woolf’s best novel, the book tells the story of a single day in Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway’s life: she’s in the middle of last-minute party preparation, as she contemplates years of her life. Set during the Jazz Age, this story follows the rich Jay Gatsby and his love affair with Daisy Buchanan, during the Roaring Twenties when lavish parties, liquor, and sex were a mainstay on Long Island. This dystopian novel is set in a future World State where the citizens are genetically modified and the social hierarchy is based on intelligence. Eerily prophetic, the book imagines the leaps in scientific progress especially in the areas of reproduction, psychology, and classical conditioning. George and Lennie are two friends looking for work. They have nothing but each other and their dream of one day having their own land. Both find work on a ranch, but Lennie ends up struggling with conflicting emotions and cruelty, showing a deep look at friendship and shared vision. Set during the Great Depression, this modern classic follows the Joad family’s migration from the Dust Bowl during the 1930s. Driven away from their homestead in Oklahoma, they’re obligated to move west to California. This short illustrated book deals with philosophical questions in an innocent, childlike way, following a little boy who leaves his tiny planet to journey around the universe. When a group of overworked animals rebels against their farmer and takes over the farm, they think everything will be perfect from then on. Little do they know that while they envision their paradise, another group of leaders—in the form of the heartless pigs—slowly take the rein. This dystopian novel has reached modern classic status with its thought-provoking premise and uncannily accurate predictions of a future world where totalitarianism reigns supreme. The narrator of this modern classic is 16-year-old New Yorker Holden Caulfield, who leaves his Pennsylvania prep school and spends three days in underground New York City. This short modern classic tells the tragic tale of a Cuban fisherman who catches a giant marlin but loses it. In 1954, Hemingway won the Nobel Prize for Literature for this work. Inspired by Ralph Ellison’s own struggles with racial inequality, Invisible Man takes a hard look at bigotry, and how it affects both the victims and the perpetrators. The story follows a minister’s daughter, Mildred Lathbury, who lives as a gentle spinster in England during the 1950s. The author portrays her as one of the “excellent women,” those who are smart and supportive, but highly repressed and taken for granted by the men around them. The classic dystopian novel deals with what the world looks like post-literacy, when a fireman is tasked with burning all the books. This classic play that tells of the witch-hunts and witch trials in Salem during the 17th century, painting a heartbreaking picture of what happens when a community is driven by illogical hysteria. The book features the author’s apocalyptic view of life, using grotesque but often amusing scenes, with the main character grappling with the issue of salvation. A group of children survive a plane crash and find themselves stranded on a deserted island. The initial freedom is exhilarating, but soon their struggle for survival shows a poignant look at the propensity of human nature toward sin and evil. This book explores the issues of racial injustice, as seen through the eyes of a young girl, Scout, and earned Harper Lee a place among the greats. Published in 1960, it is often required reading in middle schools and high schools across the United States. Set during World War II, this book tells the story of Captain John Yossarian, a bombardier struggling to keep sane in the midst of his assignment, with the goal of returning safely home. Follow the heartbreaking story of Antoinette Cosway, a young woman who grew up protected and then sold to marry Mr. Rochester, a very proud man. The story effectively shows the struggles of a woman in a society with a skewed picture of sexual relations.   The novel follows the history of one family in the fictional town of Macando, giving us a glimpse of Latin America through the history and myths, growth and decay that the book portrays. This modern classic effectively captures the heart’s cry of children made lonely by the injustice of bigotry, and the power that the right words have to make everything all right. Ultima, a woman who has the power to cure others using magic and herbs, comes to stay with six-year-old Antonio Marez and his family. Under her care, Tony tries out his bonds with his people and finds himself amid their pagan past and Catholicism. This personal narrative highlights the author’s year of exploration in Tinker Creek, Virginia, enjoying nature in its fullness across the different seasons. This no-holds-barred look at racial inequalities in the South during the Great Depression is made slightly lighter by the fact that its narrator is Cassie, a pre-adolescent girl whose coming of age is also detailed in the book and its sequels.   This story is set in 1327, when a rich Italian abbey sees some of its Franciscans accused of heresy. Brother William comes to look into the case, but strange deaths suddenly propel him into the role of detective. This dystopian masterpiece follows a world where women function as handmaids in the Biblical sense—where they birth children to belong to other women—as a result of the dominance of Christian fundamentalism. The main character is Santiago, a shepherd boy traveling from his home in Spain to the deserts of Egypt in search of a treasure. He meets interesting people along the way, all pointing him in the right direction. Set in the late 1940s, four Chinese women who recently migrated to San Francisco start meeting regularly to play mahjong, have dim sum, and share their lives, hopes, and losses. If you want to challenge your mind, try modern classics over lighter reads once in a while: the ideas they present will give you food for thought, and broaden your perspective of the world. You can check out our list of 100 books to read before you die for more reading list inspiration! Do you have a favorite modern classic? Share it with us in the comments below! Yen Cabag is the Blog Writer of TCK Publishing. She is also a homeschooling mom, family coach, and speaker for the Charlotte Mason method, an educational philosophy that places great emphasis on classic literature and the masterpieces in art and music. She has also written several books, both fiction and nonfiction. Her passion is to see the next generation of children become lovers of reading and learning in the midst of short attention spans. A modern classic is a book post-WWII that readers find relatable in a familiar world.Modern classics have themes and styles that reflect shifts in society's views on race, gender, and class.Books like 'On the Road' and 'Catch-22' are examples of modern classics due to their enduring appeal. The phrase is a bit of a contradiction, isn’t it? “Modern classics”—it’s a bit like “ancient baby,” isn’t it? Haven’t you ever seen babies sporting wise yet cantankerous looks that made them seem like smooth-skinned octogenarians? Modern classics in literature are like that—smooth-skinned and young, yet with a sense of longevity. But before we define that term, let's start by defining what a work of classic literature is. A classic usually expresses some artistic quality—an expression of life, truth, and beauty. A classic stands the test of time. The work is usually considered to be a representation of the period in which it was written, and the work merits lasting recognition. 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It has been copied endlessly, but it holds up as well—or better than any other work in painting a stark warning of the dire consequences of our path to destruction. As readers, we often find ourselves torn between the allure of classic literature and the excitement of modern fiction. Both genres have their own unique charm and offer distinct experiences. In this comparative analysis, we delve into the similarities and differences between classic literature and modern fiction, exploring the elements that make each genre exceptional. I. Historical Context and Timelessness Classic literature encompasses works that were written in the past, often in a different time and cultural context than our own. These timeless pieces have stood the test of time, capturing the essence of the era in which they were created. When we read classic literature, we embark on a journey through history, gaining insights into the mindset, values, and societal norms of the past. Modern fiction, on the other hand, is influenced by the present-day world and reflects the issues, challenges, and social dynamics of our times. It allows us to connect more easily with the characters and themes, as they reflect our contemporary experiences. While classic literature immerses readers in long-gone eras, modern fiction tends to be more relatable and accessible. II. Writing Style and Language The writing styles employed in classic literature and modern fiction greatly differ due to the changes in language and literary trends over time. Classic literature often features elaborate prose, rich descriptions, and a more formal language. Writers of this period paid meticulous attention to detail, focusing on constructing immersive worlds for their readers. Reading classic literature can be akin to savoring a meticulously crafted piece of art. On the contrary, modern fiction tends to favor a more concise and direct writing style. Authors today frequently employ simpler language, allowing for a faster-paced and more accessible reading experience. Modern fiction often relies on dialogue and action to drive the narrative forward, intensifying the reader’s engagement. III. Themes and Subject Matter Another point of divergence between classic literature and modern fiction lies in their themes and subject matter. Classic literature frequently addresses universal themes that remain applicable across generations. It tackles timeless subjects such as love, morality, power, and existentialism. The exploration of complex human emotions and moral dilemmas is a hallmark of classic literature, forcing readers to confront their own beliefs and values. Modern fiction, on the other hand, tends to be more eclectic and diverse in its themes. It often reflects the complexities of today’s society, delving into topics such as identity, technology’s impact, and societal change. Modern fiction’s capacity to adapt and tackle contemporary issues enables it to resonate deeply with readers, opening up discussions about our present realities. IV. Impact and Cultural Significance Classic literature undoubtedly holds immense cultural and intellectual significance. These works have shaped literary traditions, influenced subsequent generations of writers, and left an indelible mark on our collective consciousness. The timeless quality of these texts gives them the power to transcend borders, time, and language, making them part of a global literary heritage. Modern fiction, albeit not yet boasting the same historical longevity, plays a vital role in capturing the essence of our ever-changing world. It reflects current trends, ideologies, and issues, becoming an important cultural mirror. By addressing matters relevant to our time, modern fiction helps us examine the present critically and shape future narratives. V. Personal Preferences and Reading Experience In the end, choosing between classic literature and modern fiction often comes down to personal preference and the desired reading experience. Classic literature offers a slower, immersive reading experience, often challenging readers with its complex language and intricate narratives. Engaging with these works can feel like embarking on a journey of self-discovery, gaining valuable insights from the past. In contrast, modern fiction provides a more accessible and relatable experience. Its faster pace and contemporary themes make it easier for readers to connect with the characters and plots, allowing for a more immediate emotional and intellectual connection. Ultimately, both classic literature and modern fiction have their merits and can provide unique and enriching reading experiences. The choice depends on individual taste, mood, and the desire for either timelessness or immediacy. As readers, we are fortunate to have the option of exploring both genres to broaden our literary horizons. So whether you find yourself reaching for a cherished classic or a newly released modern novel, the joy of reading and discovering new worlds remains constant. More From Classics Authority Books Book Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë Book Dream of the Red Chamber by Cao Xueqin Book A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith Book Little Women by Louisa May Alcott Book The Influence of Classic Literature on Contemporary Writers Book Understanding Symbolism in Nathaniel