



I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

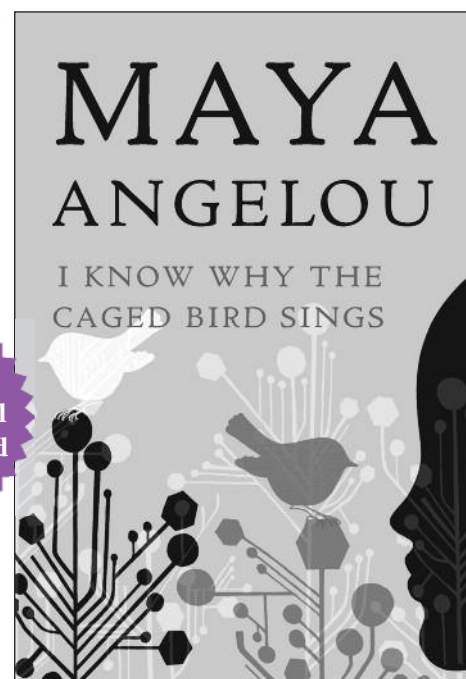
Written by Maya Angelou

Nominated
for National
Book Award

Random House Trade Paperbacks | Trade Paperback | 978-0-8129-8002-8 | 304 pp | \$17.00/\$20.00 Canada
Random House | Mass Market Paperback | 978-0-345-51440-0 | 304 pp | \$6.99/\$8.99 Canada

ALSO AVAILABLE IN HARDCOVER AND AUDIO CD

Reading Level: 9th Grade



• note to teachers •

As with all great works of literature, there are some challenges associated with the use of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the classroom. Along with classic books such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Angelou's work has drawn attention from critics advocating censorship, who claim that it is too graphic for student use. Angelou's unguarded depiction of rape and sexual abuse, and her treatment of topics such as racism and teenage pregnancy, placed the work at the top of the American Library Association's list of banned books, where it still remains today. Although this presents some obstacles for teachers, the attempted censorship of the book only serves to illuminate its most important themes: namely, the power of literature and the power of our own voices, as well as the greater theme of freedom in all of its varieties, and the struggles we undertake in order to preserve it.

Teachers who wish to use *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in their classroom should possess a solid awareness of the subject matter it contains. They should also be prepared to confront the challenging issues the book presents by engaging students in an active examination of these issues, rather than down-playing the book's controversial attributes. Taking this approach in the classroom can yield tremendous rewards. An exploration of such dynamic topics can re-invigorate the classroom by inviting students to participate in an active form of learning. In opening up these topics for discussion, students do more than witness someone else's story; they engage in a process of reflection, formulating and sharing their own thoughts. They learn to value their story and to develop and find confidence in their own voices. Throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, we witness Maya and her brother reading voraciously, and through their interaction with literature, they are educated and empowered. Angelou also makes note of the tremendous influence of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who acts as a mentor not only by sharing books, but by encouraging a young Angelou to give voice to her ideas. With the same principles of mentoring applied in the classroom, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* can have a similar effect on your students, inspiring them to find their own voices.

Finally, while the book certainly possesses a distinct sense of time and place throughout, teachers (who will no doubt note the book's historical and cultural significance) should resist the urge to reduce their lesson to a study of the book from a purely historical perspective. The work certainly has many cultural and historical merits, but the primary challenge for teachers today lies in helping students recognize how the book applies to their own lives. Challenge them to ask: Why has this book had such a lasting impact? What significance does *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* hold for me? In fact, these are questions which should not only be asked in consideration of Angelou's works, but in our confrontation with all works of literature. How does literature reflect, challenge, or define notions of our identity, our culture, our history, and our philosophies? Encouraging this line of questioning will help your students truly connect with the book, allowing the work to enter their lives in a way they might not have expected.

• about the book

In 1969, Random House published *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, an autobiographical work of literature which instantly catapulted its author, Maya Angelou, to fame. The book, which told the story of the first 17 years of Angelou's life, broke records for the unprecedented time it spent on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and cemented its place in literary history by challenging stale conventions attributed to the genres of memoir and autobiography. It was the first and most successful of six autobiographical works written by Angelou, honored with a National Book Award nomination in 1970, and countless accolades throughout the decades that followed. The book reveals the story of Angelou's development from a child into a mother at age 17, and presents an unrestrained look at the many challenges she faced during that time. Within the dynamic retelling of the events of Angelou's own childhood lies a candid exploration of the issues facing American youth. Although *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was written 40 years ago, it remains fresh and relevant for today's readers with Angelou's story giving voice to universal concerns. The book speaks about contemporary issues with which many students continue to be confronted today: the effects of emotional, sexual, and intellectual development; the complexity of familial relationships, the struggle to overcome racism and prejudice in its various forms; and the journey towards knowing one's self. Remarkably, even while addressing topics of such enormous significance, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* remains accessible and captivating, a pleasurable read. This winning combination of features, which has propelled the book's success in both the popular and literary realm, has made it a natural candidate for use in the classroom and accordingly, the text has been adopted for use in high schools, colleges, and universities around the world.

One of the book's greatest accomplishments has been its ability to redefine and refresh the genre of autobiography, a particular point of interest for scholars and critics. By acting as both narrator and protagonist, Angelou is able to generate a memoir with the feel of a novel, transforming her story into something that extends beyond herself. She heightens this feeling by employing fictional devices such as dialogue, character development, unified themes, and motifs. Today, the question of how autobiography can be defined has transcended the literary realm, finding its way into other venues as well. It is a significant and timely question, which pertains not only to the definition or re-definition of literary genres, but which ultimately leads us to a consideration of identity and truth.

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings liberates the reader into life simply because Maya Angelou confronts her own life with such a moving wonder, such a luminous dignity."

—James Baldwin

"A beautiful book—an unconditionally involving memoir for our time or any time...Maya Angelou is a natural writer with an inordinate sense of life and she has written an exceptional autobiographical narrative."

—Kirkus Reviews

• about the author



MAYA ANGELOU is best known as a poet, autobiographer, and activist, although she has assumed many roles throughout her career. She was born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. The name Maya was given to her by her older brother, Bailey Jr., who referred to her in his youth as “my-a-sister,” a moniker which was later shortened to “Maya.” After her parents divorced, Maya and her brother resided with their paternal grandmother and crippled uncle in Stamps, Arkansas, where they bore witness to the racism and prejudice that plagued the American South. Angelou turned to literature at an early age, studying a wide range of books which inspired her to begin writing works of her own. In addition to the composition of many volumes of poetry, Angelou chronicled her life in a series of six autobiographical works which included her most lauded and controversial work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She was convinced to tell her story by the author James Baldwin, whom she met after joining the Harlem Writers Guild in the 1950s. Angelou allowed her voice be heard not only in her writing, but also through her political and social activism. During the 1960s, Angelou served as the Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She also assisted Malcolm X in his work and was deeply affected by the subsequent assassinations of both men. In addition to her work in literature and poetry, and her involvement in social activism, Angelou was also engaged in theater, film, and music. She worked on adaptations, produced, directed, wrote, and composed musical scores. She earned a Tony Award nomination for her role in the play *Look Away*, and three Grammy Awards for her spoken word albums. Angelou’s literary works also garnered significant attention and praise. Her 1971 volume of poetry *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and in 1993, she recited her poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration. Angelou has served on two presidential committees. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000 and the Lincoln Medal in 2008, and has been the recipient of countless honorary degrees. Angelou lectures widely and continues to teach at Wake Forest University in North Carolina as Reynolds Professor of American Studies.

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• teaching ideas

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a versatile text which can be utilized in a variety of classroom settings. If you are considering the book for use in **literature or English** classes, you might begin by exploring genre. The work is often identified as autobiography or autobiographical fiction, with many scholars and critics proposing that there is a distinction between the two. Consider if there is a difference between memoir and autobiographical fiction. What about semi-autobiographical fiction or works which include the “based on a true story” disclaimer? Alternatively, you might wish to discuss the critical reception of the book. For instance, despite the book’s many merits, the work has also been criticized for its aesthetic characteristics. Discuss why Angelou’s work has received this response and allow your students to present their own conclusions. In order to answer these questions, it will be helpful to break the book into its formal elements—structure, plot, narration and voice, characters, setting, etc.—and analyze them. Discuss the style of the book. How does it relate to Angelou’s role as poet? Finally, remember that while the book can certainly serve as your primary text, it can also be used profitably in conjunction with other texts. Consider the work as a coming-of-age story or *bildungsroman*, or examine the book within the context of Southern literature.

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• teaching ideas (continued)

Alternatively, you might choose to address the historical and cultural context of the work by studying its role as a social device or impetus for cultural change. If you take this approach, you may wish to look at the book within a tradition of American protest literature. This approach might be adopted in literature classes, but would also be a fitting and dynamic approach for history students, or those studying the American South in particular. Consider how the work addresses racism and identity. Explain the significance of scenes such as the Joe Louis fight and the scene where readers find Uncle Willie hiding in a potato bin. How do these scenes tie in to larger historical and cultural issues?

Those interested in teaching the text from a **sociological** standpoint might wish to consider how the various groups of people in the story relate to and identify with one another, or how they fail to do so. How do the different races interact? Does Angelou want us to form judgments about races as single entities? Or is there something else that she is getting at? How do the characters of varying generations interact? Finally, what do we learn about social class? In each of these instances, you would do well to focus primarily on character. Are the characters in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* flat characters or round characters? Do the characters serve a function beyond themselves, symbolizing something greater?

The book is also a valuable resource for those studying **psychology and human development**. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* covers tough issues such as the effects of rape and the trauma resulting from abuse; sexual development and gender issues; identity; and the impact of relationships between family members, friends, teachers, and students.

• discussion and writing

1. The text presents us with many variations of Maya's name, culminating in a pivotal scene wherein Mrs. Viola Cullinan refers to Angelou as "Mary," instead of "Marguerite." What is the significance of this scene? How does Maya react? Are her actions justified? Explain.
2. Where does the title of the book come from and why is it significant? Where do we find this image of the caged bird applied in the story both literally and figuratively?
3. Following her rape, Marguerite becomes silent. Why does she refrain from speaking? What allows her to find her voice again?
4. What impact does literature have on Maya and her brother? Where in the story do we witness its effects?
5. Analyze the style of the book. Consider its structure as a whole, as well as the sentence structure and Angelou's use of metaphor and simile. How does the style of the book relate to Angelou's role as poet? Is the style characteristic of other autobiographical works? Why or why not? How does this affect our response to the story?
6. Why does Angelou devote an entire chapter to the Joe Louis fight? How do the characters in the book react to the fight? Why is it significant? What do we learn from this scene?
7. Is Maya's view always accurate? Is she a reliable narrator? Why or why not? Consider the perspective of the story. Is it told solely through the eyes of the young Marguerite? Or is an older, wiser Angelou also present in the book? How does the narration affect our reception of the text?
8. How does Angelou's own story reflect the social conventions and concerns of the day? Does it also reflect today's social conventions and concerns? Explain.
9. Consider the role of truth in literature. Is it fair to say that the book is an autobiography, or is autobiographical fiction a more accurate categorization? What defines a work as autobiography and what distinguishes a work as fiction? Does Angelou's use of literary devices such as dialogue, characterization, and cohesive themes change the categorization of the book?

10. Analyze Maya's development throughout the story. How does the Maya at the conclusion of the story compare to the young Marguerite that we meet at the start? How has she changed? To what can these changes be attributed?
11. Why does Angelou include the opening church scene as an introduction to the book? Why would she choose to lead with this, and how does this scene tie in with the story as a whole?
12. Consider the structure of the book. Why do you think that Angelou chose to divide the book into so many chapters? Are the chapters lengthy or concise? How might the structure of the book tie in with common themes of the text such as memory?
13. Is Maya's portrayal of her parents accurate or should we be wary of it? Consider her descriptions of them and her reactions to both parents.
14. How does *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* address racial stereotypes? What is Maya's view of "whitefolk" and how do the so-called "whitefolk" perceive African Americans? What do we learn about racism and prejudice?
15. In Chapter 23, Maya says "we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets." What does she mean by this? What does it say about the importance of literature?
16. In Chapter 27, what is the relationship between African Americans and the Japanese inhabitants of the city? What does Angelou attribute this to?
17. In Chapter 29, Daddy Clidell introduces Maya to con men. Maya says that "the needs of a society determine its ethics." What do you think she means by this? Do you feel that she is correct? Discuss.
18. What are some of the themes of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*? How can we identify them as such? How do these themes unify the text and help to create a cohesive whole?

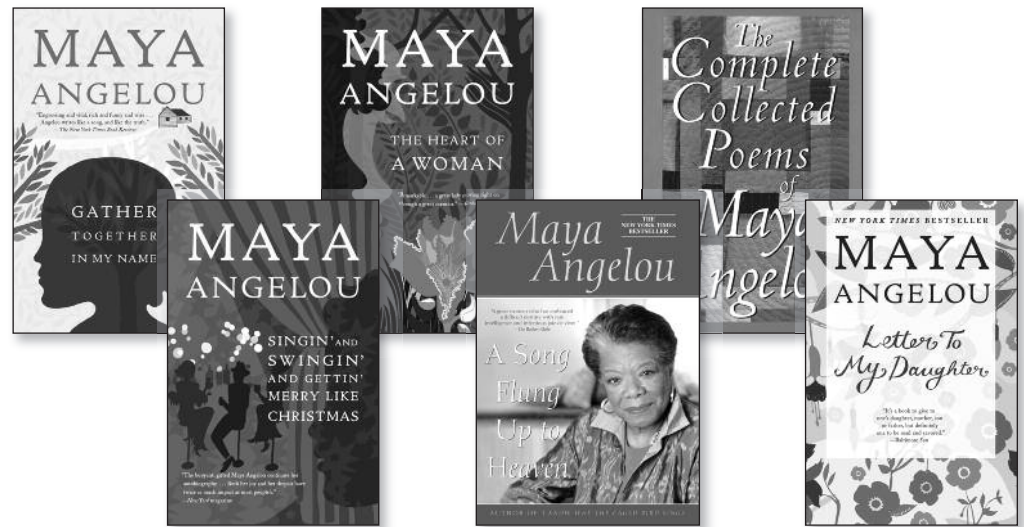
• beyond the book (suggested activities)

1. Discuss an event that you consider to have been a critical part of your growth and development. How has your perception or understanding of this event changed (or remained the same) as you have grown older? How did this event help to define who you are?
2. In 2008, Angelou's family history was explored on the PBS series *African American Lives 2*. Explore your own family history. Create a work (a story, a video, a piece of art, etc.) which documents this history.
3. Throughout the story Angelou references many works of literature which have inspired her. Does *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* share anything in common with these works of literature? Are we able to see their direct influence in her own work? For instance, do the characters in Angelou's story and the stories she read as a youth share a similar fate or confront common obstacles? Does the subject matter of the work compare? Or the form and style? Choose one work and analyze its relation to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.
4. Consider the book within the framework of the history of banned books. Why has this book been the subject of censorship? How does it compare to other banned texts? Consult the American Library Association website at www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/bannedbookweek/bannedbookweek.cfm for suggested projects associated with Banned Books Week. How does Angelou's book confront issues of voice, freedom, and censorship?
5. Read Angelou's original poem, "Those Who Burn Books," written for Random House's RHI magazine at www.randomhouse.com/highschool/RHI_magazine/pdf3/Angelou.pdf. What can be determined about the author's position on the banning of books? What does Angelou suggest censors are fearful of? Why would censors be fearful of allowing students to read about these issues? What other authors and works of literature does Angelou reference in the poem, and what do these works share in common?

• topics for further discussion

- Censorship
- Joe Louis
- Racism
- Freedom
- Ku Klux Klan
- Rape
- Identity
- Pregnancy
- Segregation

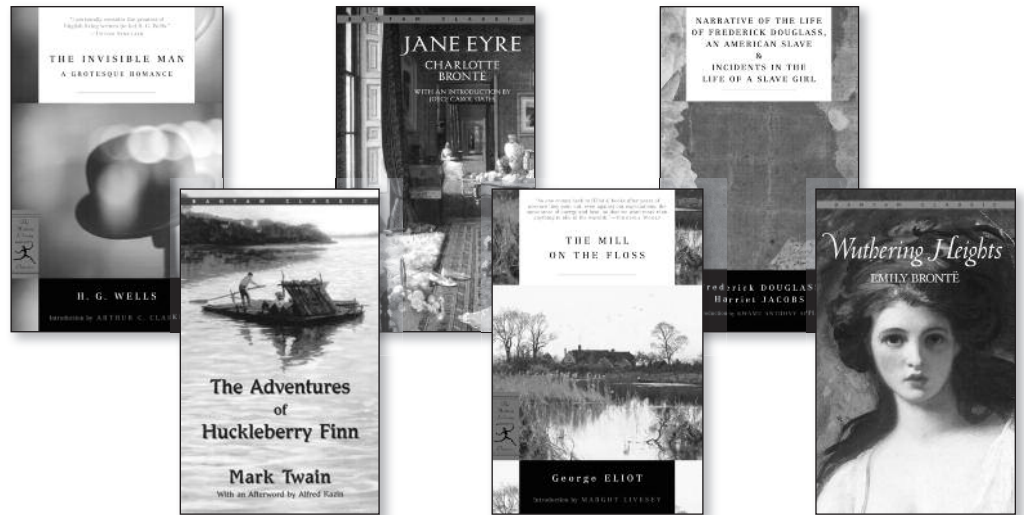
• other books by Maya Angelou



- | | |
|---|---|
| <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> (1970) | <i>Now Sheba Sings the Song</i> (1987) |
| <i>Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diie</i> (1971) | <i>I Shall Not Be Moved</i> (1990) |
| <i>Gather Together in My Name</i> (1974) | " <i>On the Pulse of the Morning</i> " (1993) |
| <i>Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well</i> (1975) | <i>Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now</i> (1993) |
| <i>Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas</i> (1976) | <i>The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou</i> (1994) |
| <i>And Still I Rise</i> (1978) | " <i>A Brave and Startling Truth</i> " (1995) |
| <i>The Heart of a Woman</i> (1981) | <i>Even the Stars Look Lonesome</i> (1997) |
| " <i>Why I Moved Back to the South</i> " (1982) | <i>Phenomenal Women</i> (2000) |
| <i>Shaker, Why Don't You Sing</i> (1983) | <i>A Song Flung Up to Heaven</i> (2002) |
| <i>All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes</i> (1986) | " <i>Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem</i> " (2005) |
| " <i>My Grandson, Home at Last</i> " (1986) | " <i>Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me</i> " (2006) |
| <i>Poems: Maya Angelou</i> (1986) | " <i>Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer</i> " (2006) |
| | <i>Letter to My Daughter</i> (2008) |

• other books of interest

The following list contains suggested works which can be studied profitably alongside *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Included are works which share similarities in formal characteristics such as style, character, and plot, as well as works which share a historical and cultural significance. The list also references some of the works known to have influenced Angelou, which she mentions in the book.



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,
Mark Twain

*The Collected Poetry of
Paul Laurence Dunbar*

*The Collected Works of Shakespeare
including The Rape of Lucrece*

The Color Purple, Alice Walker

Complete Tales of Poems of Edgar Allan Poe

Go Tell It on the Mountain, James Baldwin

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,
Harriet Jacobs

Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte

To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee

The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,
Frederick Douglass

Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral,
Jessie Redmon Fauset

Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe

The writings of W. E. B. Du Bois

Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte

• about this guide's writer

This guide was produced by JENNIFER BANACH, a writer from Connecticut. A member of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, Banach has written on a wide range of topics from Romanticism to contemporary literature for publishers such as Random House, EBSCO, and Oxford University Press. She was the Contributing Editor for *Bloom's Guides: The Glass Menagerie* and *Bloom's Guides: Heart of Darkness*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc., and the author of *How to Write about Tennessee Williams*. Currently, Banach is at work on *How to Write about Arthur Miller* and *How to Write about Kurt Vonnegut*, also to be edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc., and *Understanding Norman Mailer* for the University of South Carolina Press.

• other available guides

We have developed teacher's guides to help educators by providing questions that explore reading themes, test reading skills and evaluate reading comprehension. These guides have been written by teachers like you and other experts in the fields of writing and education. Each book is appropriate for high school readers. Reading ability, subject matter and interest level have been considered in each teacher's guide.

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www.randomhouse.com/highschool

Fiction:

Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. **Purple Hibiscus**
Asimov, Isaac. **I, Robot**
Bradbury, Ray. **Fahrenheit 451**
Brooks, Terry. **The Shannara Trilogy**
Butler, William. **The Butterfly Revolution**
Cather, Willa. **My Antonia**
Cisneros, Sandra. **The House on Mango Street**
Clark, William van Tilburg. **The Ox-Bow Incident**
Clarke, Arthur C. **Childhood's End**
Cook, Karin. **What Girls Learn**
Crichton, Michael. **Jurassic Park**
Doctorow, E.L. **Ragtime**
Drew, Alan. **Gardens of Water**
Dunn, Mark. **Ella Minnow Pea**
Ellis, Ella Throp. **Swimming with the Whales**
Ellison, Ralph. **Invisible Man**
Gaines, Ernest. **A Lesson Before Dying**
García Márquez, Gabriel. **Chronicle of a Death Foretold**
Gibbons, Kaye. **Ellen Foster**
Grisham, John. **A Time to Kill**
Guterson, David. **Snow Falling on Cedars**
Hansberry, Lorraine. **A Raisin in the Sun**
Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**
Jones, Lloyd. **Mister Pip**
Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**
Khedairi, Betool. **Absent**
L'Amour, Louis. **Hondo**
Le Guin, Ursula K. **A Wizard of Earthsea**
Matar, Hisham. **In the Country of Men**
Maxwell, William. **So Long, See You Tomorrow**
McCarthy, Cormac. **All The Pretty Horses**
McCarthy, Susan Carol. **Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands**
Miéville, China. **Un Lun Dun**
Mitchell, David. **Black Swan Green**
Mullen, Thomas. **The Last Town on Earth**
Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**
Potok, Chaim. **The Chosen**
Pullman, Philip. **The Amber Spyglass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Golden Compass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Subtle Knife**
Rawles, Nancy. **My Jim**
Remarque, Erich Maria. **All Quiet on the Western Front**
Richter, Conrad. **The Light in the Forest**
See, Lisa. **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan**
Shaara, Jeff. **Gods and Generals**
Shaara, Jeff. **The Last Full Measure**

Shaara, Michael. **The Killer Angels**
Shute, Neil. **On the Beach**
Sinclair, Upton. **The Jungle**
Smith, Alexander McCall. **The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency**
Sparks, Christine. **The Elephant Man**
Spiegelman, Art. **Maus I**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **Lord of the Rings Trilogy**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit**
Twain, Mark. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Dacey's Song**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Homecoming**
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Cat's Cradle**
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Slaughterhouse-Five**
Wartski, Maureen. **Candle in the Wind**
Wolff, Tobias. **Old School**

Nonfiction:

Armstrong, Karen. **Islam**
Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**
Bible. **The Five Books of Moses**
Bryson, Bill. **Short History of Nearly Everything**
Cahill, Tierney. **Ms. Cahill for Congress**
Cary, Lorene. **Black Ice**
Chen, Da. **Colors of the Mountain**
Collins, Billy. **Poetry 180/180 More**
Conway, Jill Ker. **The Road from Coorain**
Dumas, Firoozeh. **Funny in Farsi**
Farrow, Anne, et. al. **Complicity**
Frank, Anne. **Diary of a Young Girl**
Haley, Alex. **The Autobiography of Malcolm X**
Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. **Made to Stick**
Hickam, Homer. **October Sky**
Hunter, Latoya. **The Diary of Latoya Hunter**
Hunter-Gault, Charlayne. **In My Place**
Katz, Jon. **Geeks**
Kennedy, Randall. **Nigger**
Kidder, Tracy. **Mountains Beyond Mountains**
Lewis, Anthony. **Gideon's Trumpet**
Miller, Jennifer. **Inheriting the Holy Land**
Nafisi, Azar. **Reading Lolita in Tehran**
Nazario, Sonia. **Enrique's Journey**
Opdyke, Irene Gut. **In My Hands**
Pollan, Michael. **The Botany of Desire**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **Almost a Woman**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **When I Was Puerto Rican**
Suskind, Ron. **A Hope in the Unseen**
Taylor, Nick. **American-Made**
Thomas, Piri. **Down These Mean Streets**
Whiteley, Opal. **Opal: The Journey of an Understanding Heart**