In April 1992 a young man from a well-to-do family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. His name was Christopher Johnson McCandless. He had given $25,000 in savings to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet, and invented a new life for himself. Four months later, his decomposed body was found by a moose hunter. How McCandless came to die is the unforgettable story of Into the Wild.

Immediately after graduating from college in 1991, McCandless had roamed through the West and Southwest on a vision quest like those made by his heroes Jack London and John Muir. In the Mojave Desert he abandoned his car, stripped it of its license plates, and burned all of his cash. He would give himself a new name, Alexander Supertramp, and, unencumbered by money and belongings, he would be free to wallow in the raw, unfiltered experiences that nature presented. Craving a blank spot on the map, McCandless simply threw the maps away. Leaving behind his desperate parents and sister, he vanished into the wild.

Jon Krakauer constructs a clarifying prism through which he reassembles the disquieting facts of McCandless's short life. Admitting an interest that borders on obsession, he searches for the clues to the dries and desires that propelled McCandless. Digging deeply, he takes an inherently compelling mystery and unravels the larger riddles it holds: the profound pull of the American wilderness on our imagination; the allure of high-risk activities to young men of a certain cast of mind; the complex, charged bond between fathers and sons.

When McCandless's innocent mistakes turn out to be irreversible and fatal, he becomes the stuff of tabloid headlines and is dismissed for his naiveté, pretensions, and hubris. He is said to have had a death wish but wanting to die is a very different thing from being compelled to look over the edge. Krakauer brings McCandless's uncompromising pilgrimage out of the shadows, and the peril, adversity, and renunciation sought by this enigmatic young man are illuminated with a rare understanding--and not an ounce of sentimentality. Mesmerizing, heartbreaking, Into the Wild is a tour de force. The power and luminosity of Jon Krakauer's storytelling blaze through every page.
The Secret Life of Bees, by Sue Monk Kidd, was published by Viking Press in 2002. It was the first novel by Kidd, who had already found success writing inspirational personal memoirs such as The Dance of the Dissident Daughter (1996). A bestseller, the novel has become a favorite of book clubs around the country, including the "Read This!" Book Club sponsored by the ABC network morning show, Good Morning America.

The Secret Life of Bees is the story of Lily, a fourteen-year-old girl who runs away from her unloving father to search for the secrets of her dead mother's past. The setting of the novel is South Carolina in 1964, a time when racial tensions were inflamed by the civil rights movement and white racists' frequently violent responses to it. Against this backdrop, Lily and her house-keeper, Rosaleen, find shelter in the home of the eccentric Boatwright sisters, three African American beekeepers who worship before the statue of a Black Madonna they call "Our Lady of Chains." In the Boatwright household, Lily finds love and acceptance and begins to come to terms with the guilt she feels over her mother's death.

In the novel, Kidd addresses the sometimes painful divide between races and generations through a rich tapestry of religious symbolism, imagining for the Daughters of Mary (as the Boatwrights and their small circle of fellow worshipers call themselves) a nurturing, personal alternative to the Catholic faith.
Written in 1931 and published the following year, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is a dystopian—or anti-utopian—novel. In it, the author questions the values of 1931 London, using satire and irony to portray a futuristic world in which many of the contemporary trends in British and American society have been taken to extremes. Though he was already a best-selling author, Huxley achieved international acclaim with this now-classic novel. Because *Brave New World* is a novel of ideas, the characters and plot are secondary, even simplistic. The novel is best appreciated as an ironic commentary on contemporary values.

The story is set in a London six hundred years in the future. People all around the world are part of a totalitarian state, free from war, hatred, poverty, disease, and pain. They enjoy leisure time, material wealth, and physical pleasures. However, in order to maintain such a smoothly running society, the ten people in charge of the world, the Controllers, eliminate most forms of freedom and twist around many traditionally held human values. Standardization and progress are valued above all else. These Controllers create human beings in factories, using technology to make ninety-six people from the same fertilized egg and to condition them for their future lives. Children are raised together and subjected to mind control through sleep teaching to further condition them. As adults, people are content to fulfill their destinies as part of five social classes, from the intelligent Alphas, who run the factories, to the mentally challenged Epsilons, who do the most menial jobs. All spend their free time indulging in harmless and mindless entertainment and sports activities. When the Savage, a man from the uncontrolled area of the world (an Indian reservation in New Mexico) comes to London, he questions the society and ultimately has to choose between conformity and death.
Yann Martel's imaginative and unforgettable *Life of Pi* is a magical reading experience, an endless blue expanse of storytelling about adventure, survival, and ultimately, faith. The precocious son of a zookeeper, 16-year-old Pi Patel is raised in Pondicherry, India, where he tries on various faiths for size, attracting "religions the way a dog attracts fleas." Planning a move to Canada, his father packs up the family and their menagerie and they hitch a ride on an enormous freighter. After a harrowing shipwreck, Pi finds himself adrift in the Pacific Ocean, trapped on a 26-foot lifeboat with a wounded zebra, a spotted hyena, a seasick orangutan, and a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker ("His head was the size and color of the lifebuoy, with teeth"). It sounds like a colorful setup, but these wild beasts don't burst into song as if co-starring in an anthropomorphized Disney feature. After much gore and infighting, Pi and Richard Parker remain the boat's sole passengers, drifting for 227 days through shark-infested waters while fighting hunger, the elements, and an overactive imagination. In rich, hallucinatory passages, Pi recounts the harrowing journey as the days blur together, elegantly cataloging the endless passage of time and his struggles to survive: "It is pointless to say that this or that night was the worst of my life. I have so many bad nights to choose from that I've made none the champion."

An award winner in Canada, *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel's second novel, should prove to be a breakout book in the U.S. At one point in his journey, Pi recounts, "My greatest wish--other than salvation--was to have a book. A long book with a never-ending story. One that I could read again and again, with new eyes and fresh understanding each time." It's safe to say that the fabulous, fablelike *Life of Pi* is such a book. --Brad Thomas Parsons --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.
Francie Nolan, avid reader, penny-candy connoisseur, and adroit observer of human nature, has much to ponder in colorful, turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. She grows up with a sweet, tragic father, a severely realistic mother, and an aunt who gives her love too freely--to men, and to a brother who will always be the favored child. Francie learns early the meaning of hunger and the value of a penny. She is her father's child--romantic and hungry for beauty. But she is her mother's child, too--deeply practical and in constant need of truth. Like the Tree of Heaven that grows out of cement or through cellar gratings, resourceful Francie struggles against all odds to survive and thrive. Betty Smith's poignant, honest novel created a big stir when it was first published over 50 years ago. Her frank writing about life's squalor was alarming to some of the more genteel society, but the book's humor and pathos ensured its place in the realm of classics--and in the hearts of readers, young and old. (Ages 10 and older) 

-Emilie Coulter
In 1996, young cycling phenom Armstrong discovered he had testicular cancer. In 1999, he won the Tour de France. Now he's a grateful husband, a new father and a memoirist: with pluck, humility and verve, this volume covers his early life, his rise through the endurance sport world and his medical difficulties. Cancer "was like being run off the road by a truck, and I've got the scars to prove it," Armstrong declares. Earlier scars, he explains, came from a stepfather he casts as unworthy; early rewards, from his hardworking mother and from the triathlons and national bike races Armstrong won as a Texas teen. "The real racing action was over in Europe": after covering that, Armstrong and Jenkins (Men Will Be Boys, with Pat Summit, etc.) ascend to the scarier challenges of diagnoses and surgeries. As he gets worse, then better, Armstrong describes the affections of his racing friends and of the professionals who cared for him. Armstrong is honest and delightful on his relationship to wife Kristin (Kik), and goes into surprising detail about the technology that let them have a child. The memoir concludes with Armstrong's French victory and the birth of their son. The book features a disarming and spotless prose style, one far above par for sports memoirs. Bicycle-racing fans will enjoy the troves of inside information and the accounts of competitions, but Armstrong has set his sights on a wider meaning and readership: "When I was sick I saw more beauty and triumph and truth in a single day than I ever did in a bike race."
Grade 9 Up–Zusak has created a work that deserves the attention of sophisticated teen and adult readers. Death himself narrates the World War II-era story of Liesel Meminger from the time she is taken, at age nine, to live in Molching, Germany, with a foster family in a working-class neighborhood of tough kids, acid-tongued mothers, and loving fathers who earn their living by the work of their hands. The child arrives having just stolen her first book—although she has not yet learned how to read—and her foster father uses it, *The Gravediggers Handbook*, to lull her to sleep when she is roused by regular nightmares about her younger brothers death. Across the ensuing years of the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Liesel collects more stolen books as well as a peculiar set of friends: the boy Rudy, the Jewish refugee Max, the mayor’s reclusive wife (who has a whole library from which she allows Liesel to steal), and especially her foster parents. Zusak not only creates a mesmerizing and original story but also writes with poetic syntax, causing readers to deliberate over phrases and lines, even as the action impels them forward. Death is not a sentimental storyteller, but he does attend to an array of satisfying details, giving Liesel’s story all the nuances of chance, folly, and fulfilled expectation that it deserves. An extraordinary narrative.
The Five People You Meet in Heaven
Mitch Albom

From the author of the phenomenal #1 New York Times bestseller Tuesdays with Morrie, a novel that explores the unexpected connections of our lives, and the idea that heaven is more than a place; it's an answer.

Eddie is a wounded war veteran, an old man who has lived, in his mind, an uninspired life. His job is fixing rides at a seaside amusement park. On his 83rd birthday, a tragic accident kills him as he tries to save a little girl from a falling cart. He awakes in the afterlife, where he learns that heaven is not a destination. It's a place where your life is explained to you by five people, some of whom you knew, others who may have been strangers.

One by one, from childhood to soldier to old age, Eddie's five people revisit their connections to him on earth, illuminating the mysteries of his "meaningless" life, and revealing the haunting secret behind the eternal question: "Why was I here?"