

**Independent Reading Unit**  
**English III**  
**Ms. Robbins**

Students will select one book to read for the Independent Reading Unit (IRU). The list of titles is below and I have provided a brief explanation of each text. You will read through the descriptions and identify which book or play you want to read for this unit. Check your agenda to see when I will introduce the IRU to my classes. On that day, after I distribute the handout, journal questions and presentation requirements, we will go to the library and students will check out their individual books.

***Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott** - The March family is having a difficult time while their Dad is at war but even when times are bad Meg, (oldest) Jo, (second oldest) Beth (second youngest) and Amy (youngest) still have heaps of fun, make new friends, in the end fall in love, and find out that life does not have to be glamorous as long as you have a loving family and friends in your life.

***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie** - In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), Sherman Alexie recounts the trials of a Native American teenager, Arnold "Junior" Spirit, during his first year in high school. Using humor to soften the sometimes difficult and emotional story, Alexie creates a loveable, misfit protagonist whom readers cannot help but root for.

***The Awakening* by Kate Chopin** - *The Awakening* explores one woman's desire to find and live fully within her true self. Her devotion to that purpose causes friction with her friends and family, and also conflicts with the dominant values of her time.

***The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger** - *The Catcher in the Rye* is the story of teenager Holden Caulfield's turbulent last few days before his Christmas vacation. During these days, Holden leaves Pencey Prep, a boys' school he's been kicked out of, and takes off for a few nights alone in New York City. Holden tells the story as a monologue, from some sort of a mental facility where he's recovering from the stress of the experiences he retells.

***Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury** - Internationally acclaimed with more than 5 million copies in print, *Fahrenheit 451* is Ray Bradbury's classic novel of censorship and defiance, as resonant today as it was when it was first published nearly 50 years ago.

***Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller** - Ever since it was first performed in 1949, *Death of a Salesman* has been recognized as a milestone of the American theater. In the person of Willy Loman, the aging, failing salesman who makes his living riding on a smile and a shoeshine, Arthur Miller redefined the tragic hero as a man whose dreams are at once insupportably vast and dangerously insubstantial. He has given us a figure whose name has become a symbol for a kind of majestic grandiosity—and a play that compresses epic extremes of humor and anguish, promise and loss, between the four walls of an American living room.

***A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines** - *A Lesson Before Dying*, is set in a small Cajun community in the late 1940s. Jefferson, a young black man, is an unwitting party to a liquor store shoot out in which three men are killed; the only survivor, he is convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Grant Wiggins, who left his hometown for the university, has returned to the plantation school to teach. As he struggles with his decision whether to stay or escape to another state, his aunt and Jefferson's godmother persuade him to visit Jefferson in his cell and impart his learning and his pride to Jefferson before his death. In the end, the two men forge a bond as they both come to understand the simple heroism of resisting—and defying—the expected.

***Ordinary People* by Judith Guest** - In *Ordinary People*, Judith Guest's remarkable first novel, the Jarrets are a typical American family. Calvin is a determined, successful provider and Beth an organized, efficient wife. They had two sons, Conrad and Buck, but now they have one. In this memorable, moving novel, Judith Guest takes the reader into their lives to share their misunderstandings, pain...and ultimate healing.

***The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway** - *The Old Man and the Sea* is the story of an epic struggle between an old, seasoned fisherman and the greatest catch of his life. For eighty-four days, Santiago, an aged Cuban fisherman, has set out to sea and returned empty-handed. So conspicuously unlucky is he that the parents of his young, devoted apprentice and friend, Manolin, have forced the boy to leave the old man in order to fish in a more prosperous boat. Nevertheless, the boy continues to care for the old man upon his return each night. He helps the old man tote his gear to his ramshackle hut, secures food for him, and discusses the latest developments in American baseball, especially the trials of the old man's hero, Joe DiMaggio. Santiago is confident that his unproductive streak will soon come to an end, and he resolves to sail out farther than usual the following day.

***Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston** - With haunting sympathy and piercing immediacy, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of Janie Crawford's evolving selfhood through three marriages. Light-skinned, long-haired, dreamy as a child, Janie grows up expecting better treatment than she gets until she meets Tea Cake, a younger man who engages her heart and spirit in equal measure and gives her the chance to enjoy life without being a man's mule or adornment.

**Sula by Toni Morrison** - Two girls who grow up to become women. Two friends who become something worse than enemies. In this brilliantly imagined novel, Toni Morrison tells the story of Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who meet as children in the small town of Medallion, Ohio. Their devotion is fierce enough to withstand bullies and the burden of a dreadful secret. It endures even after Nel has grown up to be a pillar of the black community and Sula has become a pariah. But their friendship ends in an unforgivable betrayal—or does it end? Terrifying, comic, ribald and tragic, *Sula* is a work that overflows with life.

**The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath** - Esther Greenwood is brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful, but slowly going under—maybe for the last time. In her acclaimed and enduring masterwork, Sylvia Plath brilliantly draws the reader into Esther's breakdown with such intensity that her insanity becomes palpably real, even rational—as accessible an experience as going to the movies. A deep penetration into the darkest and most harrowing corners of the human psyche, *The Bell Jar* is an extraordinary accomplishment and a haunting American classic.

**The Color Purple by Alice Walker** - Winner of the National Book Award as well as the Pulitzer Prize, *The Color Purple* established Alice Walker as a major voice in modern fiction. Her unforgettable portrait of Celie and her friends, family, and lovers is rich with passion, pain, inspiration, and an indomitable love of life. Beautifully imagined and deeply compassionate, *The Color Purple* is a classic of American literature.

**A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry** - This play tells the story of a lower-class black family's struggle to gain middle-class acceptance. When the play opens, Mama, the sixty-year-old mother of the family, is waiting for a \$10,000 insurance check from the death of her husband, and the drama will focus primarily on how the \$10,000 should be spent. The son, Walter Lee Younger, is so desperate to be a better provider for his growing family that he wants to invest the entire sum in a liquor store with two of his friends. The mother objects mainly for ethical reasons; she is vehemently opposed to the idea of selling liquor. Minor conflicts erupt over their disagreements.

**A Death in the Family by James Agee** - James Agee's novel *A Death in the Family* is a classic American story, chronicling just a few days in 1915 during which a husband and father is called out of town to be with his own father, who has had a heart attack, and while returning is killed in a car accident. Agee patterned the story closely after his own life, focusing on a boy who is the same age that he was when his father died. The narrative shifts from one perspective to another, including the young widow and her two children and her atheistic father and the dead man's alcoholic brother, to name just a few, in an attempt to capture the ways in which one person's loss immediately and powerfully affects everyone around.

**The Ox-Bow Incident by Walter Van Tilburg Clark** - Set in 1885, *The Ox-Bow Incident* is a searing and realistic portrait of frontier life and mob violence in the American West. First published in 1940, it focuses on the lynching of three innocent men and the tragedy that ensues when law and order are abandoned. The result is an emotionally powerful, vivid, and unforgettable re-creation of the Western novel, which Clark transmuted into a universal story about good and evil, individual and community, justice and human nature.

**The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier** - The plot for *The Chocolate War* was inspired by an event in Cormier's own life. When his son decided, without repercussion, not to sell chocolates in his school's annual sale, Cormier asked himself, "What if?" This question, he has declared, is the spark for all his writing. If the novel had been simply about harassment and intimidation among a group of boys, it would not have been in any way remarkable. What makes it disturbing is the collusion between the Catholic teaching staff and a group of boys known as the Vigils who exert a Mafia-like influence at the school and employ psychological tactics against other pupils and staff. One of *The Chocolate War's* principle themes is the futility of individual protests and resistance in the face of such power structures and, by implication, the importance of collective action.

**The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald** - *The Great Gatsby* is set in the jazz age, the 1920's. It tells the fictional story of an enigmatic and lonely millionaire named Jay Gatsby, who has been in love with the same woman for years and tries to win her back. The narrator is Nick, who lives across the lawn from Gatsby and becomes friends with him. This book written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the greatest authors of all time shows that no matter how rich we are, it cannot buy us love.

**Catch-22 by Joseph Heller** - *Catch-22* is one of this century's greatest works of American literature. First published in 1961, Joseph Heller's profound and compelling novel has appeared on nearly every list of must read fiction. It is a classic in every sense of the word. *Catch-22* took the war novel genre to a new level, shocking us with its clever and disturbing style. Set in a World War II American bomber squadron off the coast of Italy, *Catch-22* is the story of John Yossarian, who is furious because thousands of people he has never met are trying to kill him. Yossarian is also trying to decode the meaning of Catch-22, a mysterious regulation that proves that insane people are really the sanest, while the supposedly sensible people are the true madmen. And this novel is full of madmen -- Colonel Cathcart, who keeps raising the number of missions the men must fly in order to finish their tour; Milo Minderbinder, a dedicated entrepreneur who bombs his own airfield when the Germans offer him an extra 6 percent; Major Major Major, whose tragedy in life is that he resembles Henry Fonda; and Major -- de Coverley, whose face is so forbidding no one has dared ask his name.

**One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey** - Boisterous, ribald, and ultimately shattering, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the seminal novel of the 1960s that has left an indelible mark on the literature of our time. Here is the unforgettable story of a mental ward and its inhabitants, especially the tyrannical Big Nurse Ratched and Randle Patrick McMurphy, the brawling, fun-loving new inmate who resolves to oppose her. We see the struggle through the eyes of Chief Bromden, the seemingly mute half-Indian patient who witnesses and understands McMurphy's heroic attempt to do battle with the awesome powers that keep them all imprisoned.

**The Learning Tree by Gordon Parks** - *The Learning Tree* relates two crucial years in the life of Newt Winger. It opens with a terrible tornado that causes death and destruction in the small Kansas town of Cherokee Flats and leads to Newt's sexual awakening as he is comforted during the storm by Big Mabel. The novel concludes with the deaths of Newt's mother, Sarah, and of Marcus Savage, whose last act before his own death is his attempt to murder Newt in revenge for Newt's testimony against Marcus's father.

**The Jungle by Upton Sinclair** - Jurgis Rudkus and Ona Lukoszaite, a young man and woman who have recently immigrated to Chicago from Lithuania, hold their wedding feast at a bar in an area of Chicago known as Packingtown. The couple and several relatives have come to Chicago in search of a better life, but Packingtown, the center of Lithuanian immigration and of Chicago's meatpacking industry, is a hard, dangerous, and filthy place where it is difficult to find a job. After the reception, Jurgis and Ona discover that they are more than a hundred dollars in debt to the saloonkeeper. In Lithuania, custom dictates that guests at a wedding-feast leave money to cover the cost, but in America, many of the impoverished immigrants depart from the feast without leaving any money. Jurgis, who has great faith in the American Dream, vows that he will simply work harder to make more money.

**The Time Machine by H.G. Wells** - A group of men, including the narrator, is listening to the Time Traveller discuss his theory that time is the fourth dimension. *The Time Traveller* produces a miniature time machine and makes it disappear into thin air. The next week, the guests return, to find their host stumble in, looking disheveled and tired. They sit down after dinner, and the Time Traveller begins his story.

**Native Son by Richard Wright** - Bigger Thomas, a poor, uneducated, twenty-year-old black man in 1930s Chicago, wakes up one morning in his family's cramped apartment on the South Side of the city. He sees a huge rat scamper across the room, which he corners and kills with a skillet. Having grown up under the climate of harsh racial prejudice in 1930s America, Bigger is burdened with a powerful conviction that he has no control over his life and that he cannot aspire to anything other than menial, low-wage labor. His mother pesters him to take a job with a rich white man named Mr. Dalton, but Bigger instead chooses to meet up with his friends to plan the robbery of a white man's store.