



KS5 Reading list: The English department recommends...

The books here are grouped by form. It is not essential to read every one but you should be working through different texts to add to your knowledge and appreciation of literature. This will also help with application to top Universities, as evidence of your reading habits is often a topic in interview questions.

Novels

***Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie** (2013), a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, moves to the United States for school, leaving behind her boyfriend, Obinze, and her family. It's a story of relocation, far-flung love and life as an alien, spread across three continents. It's also about the lonely but privileged perspective a stranger gains by entering a new culture.

***The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga** (2009) follows a darkly comic Bangalore driver through the poverty and corruption of modern India's caste society. Balram Halwai, a poor Indian villager whose great ambition leads him to the zenith of Indian business culture. On the occasion of the president of China's impending trip to Bangalore, Balram writes a letter to him describing his transformation and his experience as driver and servant to a wealthy Indian family, which he thinks exemplifies the contradictions and complications of Indian society.

***The Tortilla Curtain* by TC Boyle** (1995). When Delaney Mossbacher knocks down a Mexican pedestrian, he neither reports the accident nor takes his victim to hospital. Instead the man accepts \$20 and limps back to poverty and his pregnant 17-year-old wife, leaving Delaney to return to his privileged life in California. But these two men are fated against each other, as Delaney attempts to clear the land of the illegal immigrants who he thinks are turning his state park into a ghetto, and a boiling pot of racism and prejudice threatens to spill over.

***The Terrible* by Yrsa Daley-Ward** (2018) is the autobiographical story of Yrsa Daley-Ward, and all the things that happened - 'even the Terrible Things (and God, there were Terrible Things)'. It's about her childhood in the north-west of England with her beautiful, careworn mother and her little brother who sees things written in the stars. It's also about growing up and discovering the power and fear of sexuality, about pitch grey days of pills and powder: going under, losing yourself, and finding your voice.

***The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick deWitt** (2011) An effortlessly flowing western with poignant moments of hilarity and sadness.

***Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo** (2019) has no overarching story. Instead, each chapter of the book follows the life of one of the 12 characters (mostly black women) as they negotiate the world. Although each character has their own chapter set across a particular time, their lives intertwine in numerous ways – from friends and relatives to chance acquaintances. Some of the themes explored in the characters' lives are feminism, politics, patriarchy, success, relationships and sexuality.

***The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald** (1925) Opulent, dark tale of the excesses of the jazz age and the problems of identity as the narrator goes in search of 'The Great Gatsby'. The story of the mysteriously wealthy Jay Gatsby and his love for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan, of lavish parties on Long Island at a time when The New York Times noted "gin was the national drink and sex the national obsession," it is an exquisitely crafted tale of America in the 1920s.

***A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey** (2003). At the age of 23, James Frey woke up on a plane to find his front teeth knocked out and his nose broken. He had no idea where the plane was headed nor any recollection of the past two weeks. An alcoholic for ten years and a crack addict for three, he checked into a treatment facility shortly after landing. There he was told he could either stop using or die before he reached age 24. This is Frey's acclaimed account of his six weeks in rehab

***Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman (2017)** Eleanor Oliphant, the novel's protagonist and narrator, is academically intelligent, with a degree in Classics and high standards of literacy. She is socially awkward and leads a solitary lifestyle. She has no friends or social contacts, and every weekend consumes two bottles of vodka. The novel tackles her traumatic past as she becomes enamoured with a singer, whom she believes she is destined to be with. It deals with themes of isolation and loneliness.

***Red Dust: A Path Through China* by Ma Jian (2001)** In 1983, at the age of thirty, dissident artist Ma Jian finds himself divorced by his wife, separated from his daughter, betrayed by his girlfriend, facing arrest for "Spiritual Pollution," and severely disillusioned with the confines of life in Beijing. So with little more than a change of clothes and two bars of soap, Ma takes off to immerse himself in the remotest parts of China. His journey would last three years and take him through smog-choked cities and mountain villages, from scenes of barbarity to havens of tranquillity. Remarkably written and subtly moving, the result is an insight into the teeming contradictions of China that only a man who was both insider and outsider in his own country could have written.

***The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera (1984)** A serious, funny novel about the deeper questions of life – and meaning – set in a totalitarian state, though it is the characters' comi-tragic domestic disharmonies that steal the show. A young woman is in love with a successful surgeon - a man torn between his love for her and his incorrigible womanising. His mistress, a free-spirited artist, lives her life as a series of betrayals - while her other lover stands to lose everything because of his noble qualities.

***Sarah* by JT Leroy (2001)** Enamoured by skimpy leather skirts and make-up, twelve-year-old Cherry Vanilla wants to be the world's most famous "lot lizard" and prove to his mother, Sarah, and the rest of the world, that he is more woman than most. Journeying to West Virginia, he encounters evil pimps, mystical Jack-a-lobes, superstitious prostitutes, and a wealth of other unforgettable characters.

***If This Is a Man* by Primo Levi (1947)** is a memoir describing his arrest as a member of the Italian anti-fascist resistance during the Second World War, and his incarceration in the Auschwitz concentration camp from February 1944 until the camp was liberated on 27 January 1945. The calm sobriety of Levi's prose style is all the more striking given the horrific nature of the events he describes.

***The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006)** is a post-apocalyptic novel that questions what it is to be human and how to hold on in the face of terrible odds. A heart-wrenching journey of one man and his son, trying to stay alive and hold onto his humanity.

***Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng (2017)** Everyone in Shaker Heights was talking about it that summer: how Isabelle, the last of the Richardson children, had finally gone around the bend and burned the house down. In Shaker Heights, a placid, progressive suburb of Cleveland, everything is meticulously planned - from the layout of the winding roads, to the colours of the houses, to the successful lives its residents will go on to lead. And no one embodies this spirit more than Elena Richardson, whose guiding principal is playing by the rules. When the Richardsons' friends attempt to adopt a Chinese-American baby, a custody battle erupts that dramatically divides the town.

***Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (1955)** Unsettling, deeply lyrical tale told by one of the most famous unreliable narrators in literature: Humbert Humbert who becomes obsessed by twelve-year-old Lolita and seeks to possess her, first carnally and then artistically, out of love, 'to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets'. Is he in love or insane? A silver-tongued poet or a pervert? A tortured soul or a monster? Or is he all of these? Humbert Humbert's seduction is one of many dimensions in Nabokov's dizzying masterpiece, which is suffused with a savage humour and rich, elaborate verbal textures.

***Accordion Crimes* by Annie Proulx (1996)** is a masterpiece of story-telling that spans a century and a continent. It opens in 1890 in Sicily, when an accordion-maker and his son, carrying little more than his finest button accordion, begin their voyage to the teeming, violent port of New Orleans. Within a year, the accordion-maker is murdered by an anti-Italian lynch mob, but his instrument carries the novel into another community of immigrants: German-Americans founding a new town in South Dakota. Through the music of the accordion they express their fantasies, sorrows and exuberance.

***The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (1997)** is the story of Rahel and Estha, twins growing up among the banana vats and peppercorns of their blind grandmother's factory, and amid scenes of political turbulence in Kerala. Armed

only with the innocence of youth, they fashion a childhood in the shade of the wreck that is their family: their lonely, lovely mother, their beloved Uncle Chacko (pickle baron, radical Marxist, bottom-pincher) and their sworn enemy, Baby Kochamma (ex-nun, incumbent grand-aunt).

***Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie (2017)** Isma is free. After years of watching out for her younger siblings in the wake of their mother's death, she's accepted an invitation from a mentor in America that allows her to resume a dream long deferred. But she can't stop worrying about Aneeka, her beautiful, headstrong sister back in London, or their brother, Parvaiz, who's disappeared in pursuit of his own dream, to prove himself to the dark legacy of the jihadist father he never knew. When he resurfaces half a globe away, Isma's worst fears are confirmed.

***Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson (1971)** Hunter S. Thompson is roaring down the desert highway to Las Vegas with his attorney, the Samoan, to find the dark side of the American Dream. Armed with a drug arsenal of stupendous proportions, the duo engage in a surreal succession of chemically enhanced confrontations with casino operators, police officers and assorted Middle Americans.

***Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson (1985)** Magic realist novel in which a working-class girl struggles to find her identity against her deeply religious adoptive mother. This is the story of Jeanette, adopted and brought up by her mother as one of God's elect. Zealous and passionate, she seems destined for life as a missionary, but then she falls for one of her converts. At sixteen, Jeanette decides to leave the church, her home and her family, for the young woman she loves. Innovative, punchy and tender, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is a journey into the bizarre outposts of religious excess and human obsession.

***A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara (2015)** When four graduates from a small Massachusetts college move to New York to make their way, they're broke, adrift, and buoyed only by their friendship and ambition. There is kind, handsome Willem, an aspiring actor; JB, a quick-witted, sometimes cruel Brooklyn-born painter seeking entry to the art world; Malcolm, a frustrated architect at a prominent firm; and withdrawn, brilliant, enigmatic Jude, who serves as their centre of gravity. Over the decades, their relationships deepen and darken, tinged by addiction, success, and pride. Yet their greatest challenge, each comes to realize, is Jude himself, by midlife a terrifyingly talented litigator yet an increasingly broken man, his mind and body scarred by an unspeakable childhood, and haunted by what he fears is a degree of trauma that he'll not only be unable to overcome - but that will define his life forever.

Graphic Novels

***Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006)** is a darkly funny family tale, pitch-perfectly illustrated with Alison Bechdel's sweetly gothic drawings. Meet Alison's father, a historic preservation expert and obsessive restorer of the family's Victorian home, a third-generation funeral home director, a high-school English teacher, an icily distant parent, and a closeted homosexual who, as it turns out, is involved with his male students and the family babysitter. Through narrative that is alternately heartbreaking and fiercely funny, we are drawn into a daughter's complex yearning for her father.

***From Hell* by Alan Moore (1989).** A graphic novel set in the squalid, enigmatic world of Jack the Ripper and the Whitechapel murders of 1888, Moore presents an ingenious take on the slaughter. His Ripper's brutal activities are the epicentre of a conspiracy involving the very heart of the British Establishment, including the Freemasons and The Royal Family. A popular claim, which is transformed through Moore's exquisite and thoroughly gripping vision, of the Ripper crimes being the womb from which the 20th century, so enmeshed in the celebrity culture of violence, received its shocking, visceral birth.

***Dragonslippers: This is what an Abusive Relationship Looks Like* by Rosalind B. Penfold (2005)** A successful young businesswoman with loving family and friends, Rosalind Penfold couldn't believe her luck when she met and quickly fell for a charming widower and father of four who seemed absolutely devoted to her. Only a few months into the relationship, however, the first worrying signs began to emerge that the man she eventually married was not quite as he seemed. A pattern of small lies and petty cruelties began to emerge, which, over the course of their ten-year relationship, would come to encompass a litany of physical, mental and sexual abuse truly shocking in its scope and malevolence.

***Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2000)** The intelligent and outspoken child of radical Marxists, and the great-granddaughter of Iran's last emperor, Satrapi bears witness to a childhood uniquely entwined with the history of her country. *Persepolis* paints an unforgettable portrait of daily life in Iran and of the bewildering contradictions between

home life and public life. This is a beautiful and intimate story full of tragedy and humour - raw, honest and incredibly illuminating.

***Maus* by Art Spiegelman** (1991) tells the story of Vladek Spiegelman, a Jewish survivor of Hitler's Europe, and his son, a cartoonist coming to terms with his father's story. *Maus* approaches the unspeakable through the diminutive. Its form, the cartoon (the Nazis are cats, the Jews mice), shocks us out of any lingering sense of familiarity and succeeds in drawing us closer to the bleak heart of the Holocaust.

***Habibi* by Craig Thompson** (2011) is a profound love story, but it also functions as a parable about the environment and the state of the world. Set in the place where Christianity and Islam began, it explores the fundamental connection between these religions, and also the relationship between the first and the third world and the increasingly important battle for the earth's resources.

Short Story Collections

***The Library of Babel* by Jorge Luis Borges** (1941) A mind-boggling idea unfolded with beautiful simplicity, as Borges asks: where do we find meaning?

***The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter** (1979) is a darkly erotic reworking of Bluebeard's Castle, a bawdy Puss in Boots and a sado-masochistic version of Little Red Riding Hood - Angela Carter's subversive take on traditional fairy stories in *The Bloody Chamber* creates and reimagines gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, and tales of terror – with fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious.

***The Wind's Twelve Quarters* by Ursula K Le Guin** (1975) some of the finest short fiction from a master of short story writing. This stunning collection explores human values, relationships, and survival, and showcases the myriad talents of one of the most provocative writers of our time.

***The Lottery and Other Stories* by Shirley Jackson** (1948) This is the definitive collection of Shirley Jackson's short stories, including 'The Lottery' - one of the most terrifying and iconic stories of the twentieth century, and an influence on writers such as Neil Gaiman and Stephen King.

***The Turning* by Tim Winton** (2004) Beautifully crafted, and as tender as they are confronting, these elegiac stories examine the darkness and frailty of ordinary people and celebrate the moments when the light shines through.

Poetry

Listen online: 'Josephine Baker finds herself' and 'The Doll's House' by Patience Agbabi Compelling live performances by one of our Anthology poets: <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/patience-agbabi/>

***The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy** (1999) Powerful, witty and sexy writing from one of Britain's sharpest writers, of famous tales and men from history retold from a female point of view.

***Ariel* by Sylvia Plath** (1965) Few poets write more beautifully than Plath about the dark side of life: motherhood, depression, power and alienation.

***Skirrid Hill* by Owen Sheers** (2005) Poetry about separation and divorce both physical and emotional by one of Britain's more celebrated, contemporary poets.

***A Sleepwalk on the Severn* by Alice Oswald** (2009) A longer poem written in several registers, set at night on the Severn estuary. Here to challenge your understanding of what a poem should be.

***Fléche* by Mary Jean Chan** (2019) An eight-part poetic sequence with complex themes of multilingualism, queerness, psychoanalysis and cultural history.

***Staying Alive* edited by Neil Astley** (2002) Contemporary poetry, with a broad selection of poetry from a diverse range of poets.