My Favorite Novels  
(chronological order)

- War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy, 1863  

While imprisoned in the shed Pierre had learned not with his intellect but with his whole being, by life itself, that man is created for happiness, that happiness is within him, in the satisfaction of simple human needs, and that all unhappiness arises not from privation but from superfluity. And now during these last three weeks of the march he had learned still another new, consolatory truth- that nothing in this world is terrible. He had learned that as there is no condition in which man can be happy and entirely free, so there is no condition in which he need be unhappy and lack freedom. He learned that suffering and freedom have their limits and that those limits are very near together....

Napoleon’s invasion of Russia—the historical event at the heart of the novel—irrevocably transforms the lives of all of the characters in this novel. For some the invasion puts an abrupt end to all dreams of the future. For others the invasion brings much dislocation and sadness, but ultimately offers them a second chance at happiness. Like Napoleon, who falsely believes he is directing history, and like General Kutuzov, who wisely lets history direct him, all characters have been caught up in a mysterious sweep of people and events—a historical tide that has pushed them inexorably toward a fate that is at once completely determined and utterly surprising.

- The Idiot, Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1868  

I have never in my life met a man like him for noble simplicity, and boundless truthfulness. I understood from the way he talked that anyone who chose could deceive him, and that he would forgive anyone afterwards who had deceived him, and that was why I grew to love him.

Prince Lyov Nikolayevich Myshkin Age 26, returns to Russia after a long absence. Myshkin suffers from epilepsy (just like Fyodor Dostoyevsky himself) and is prone to seizures. Myshkin is not bright, has not had much education, and traverses society with a mentality of simplistic innocence. For this reason, people consider him an idiot, but he is a good, honest, sympathetic, and gracious person. The materialistic Russian society which professes itself to be “good,” cannot accommodate Prince Myshkin.

- Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy, 1877  

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

This novel tells of the love affair between the sensuous and rebellious Anna and the dashing officer, Count Vronsky. Set in the 19th century Russia, the novel’s major characters play out the contrasts of city and country life and all the variations on love and family happiness. Some the best passages concern the nature of marriage, which Tolstoy examines from all angles. There are the bad marriages, of course, like Anna’s, and like that of Anna’s brother Oblonsky. But there is also a marriage that’s just a normal marriage between two people trying to get used to one another. They have ups and downs, times of tenderness and times of warfare, and Tolstoy shows it all.
- The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1880

Beauty is a terrible and awful thing! It is terrible because it has not been fathomed, for God sets us nothing but riddles. Here the boundaries meet and all contradictions exist side by side.

The Brothers Karamazov is a passionate philosophical novel that explores deep into the ethical debates of God, free will and morality. It is a spiritual drama of moral struggles concerning faith, doubt, and reason. It tackles the fundamental question of human existence--how best to live one’s life--in a truly engaging way. Dostoevsky creates three brothers (Ivan, Alexei, and Dmitri) with opposite answers to this fundamental question, and sets them loose in the world to see what happens. The novel shows that most of our struggles in life boil down to the fact that we desire contradictory things, simultaneously.

- The Buddenbrooks, Thomas Mann, 1901

Culture and possessions, there is the bourgeoisie for you.

The novel portrays the downfall of a wealthy mercantile family of Lübeck over four generations. At the beginning of the novel the ideal of a family is still intact. This dissolves, however, as the strength of the bond between the individual family members decreases and finally disintegrates. In the name of the family, individual happiness must be sacrificed again and again. The family’s emphasis on money rather than love and on appearances rather than substance brings about degeneration, sickness, and death.

- The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann, 1924

Can one tell – that is to say, narrate – time, time itself, as such, for its own sake?

What was life? No one knew. It was undoubtedly aware of itself, so soon as it was life; but it did not know what it was. (...) It was not matter and it was not spirit, but something between the two, a phenomenon conveyed by matter, like the rainbow on the waterfall, and like the flame. Yet why not material?—it is sentient to the point of desire and disgust, the shamelessness of matter become sensible of itself, the incontinent form of being. It was a secret and ardent stirring in the frozen chastity of the universal; it was a stolen and voluptuous impurity of sucking and secreting; an exhalation of carbonic gas and material impurities of mysterious origin and composition. It was a pullulation, and unfolding, a form-building (made possible by the overbalancing of its instability, yet controlled by the laws of growth inherent within it), of something brewed out of water, albumen, salt and fats, which was called flesh, and which became form, beauty, a lofty image, and yet all the time the essence of sensuality and desire.

Hans Castorp, the only child of a Hamburg mercantile family, is in his early 20s and about to take up a shipbuilding career in Hamburg, his home town. Just before beginning this professional career Castorp undertakes a journey to visit his tubercular cousin, Joachim Ziemssen, who is seeking a cure in a sanatorium in Davos, high up in the Swiss Alps. Hans Castorp planned to stay in Davos for three weeks…
- Absalom, Absalom! William Faulkner, 1936

It’s just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that’s it: they don’t explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sounds to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable—Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost undecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against the turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs.

This novel tells the story of Thomas Sutpen, a white man born into poverty in western Virginia who comes to Mississippi with the complementary aims of gaining wealth and becoming a powerful family patriarch. The rise and fall of the Sutpen dynasty mirrors the rise and fall of the Old South.

- The Age of Reason, Jean Paul Sartre, 1945

Perhaps it’s inevitable; perhaps one has to choose between being nothing at all and impersonating what one is. That would be terrible; it would mean that we were naturally bogus.

The novel, set against the background of the bohemian Paris of the late 1930s, focuses around a few days in the life of a philosophy teacher named Mathieu who is seeking to find the money to pay for an abortion for his mistress, Marcelle. Mathieu’s conscience tells him he should do the right thing and marry Marcelle but he doesn’t wish to lose his freedom. To complicate matters Mathieu is in love with Ivich, a student who is awaiting her exam results. The novel presents a detailed account of the characters’ psychologies as they are forced to make significant decisions in their lives.

- Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell, 1949

In a way, the world—view of the Party imposed itself most successfully on people incapable of understanding it. They could be made to accept the most flagrant violations of reality, because they never fully grasped the enormity of what was demanded of them, and were not sufficiently interested in public events to notice what was happening. By lack of understanding they remained sane. They simply swallowed everything, and what they swallowed did them no harm, because it left no residue behind, just as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird.
Winston Smith is a low-ranking member of the ruling Party in London, in the nation of Oceania. Everywhere Winston goes, even his own home, the Party watches him through telescreens; everywhere he looks he sees the face of the Party's seemingly omniscient leader, a figure known only as Big Brother. The Party controls everything in Oceania, even the people's history and language. Currently, the Party is forcing the implementation of an invented language called Newspeak, which attempts to prevent political rebellion by eliminating all words related to it. Even thinking rebellious thoughts is illegal. Such thoughtcrime is, in fact, the worst of all crimes.

- Freedom and Death, Nikos Kazantzakis, 1953

I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.

Set in late-19th-century Crete, when a new uprising takes place to rival those of 1854, 1866 and 1878. In the village of Megalokastro, a Cretan resistance fighter named Captain Michalis, is matched by the Turkish Nuri Bey, his blood-brother. The main theme of the novel is man's struggle for freedom from his own shortcomings.

- Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov, 1955

I simply can’t tell you how gentle, how touching my poor wife was. At breakfast, in the depressing bright kitchen, with its chrome glitter and Hardware and Co. Calendar and cute breakfast nook (simulating that Coffee Shoppe where in the old days Charlotte and Humbert used to coo together), she would sit, robed in red, her elbow on the plastic-topped table, her cheek propped on her fist, and stared at me with intolerable tenderness as I consumed my ham and eggs. Humbert's face might twitch with neuralgia, but in her eyes it vied in beauty and animation with the sun and shadows of leaves rippling on the white refrigerator. My solemn exasperation was to her the silence of love. My small income added to her even smaller one impressed her as a brilliant fortune; not because the resulting sum now sufficed for most middle-class needs, but because even my money shone in her eyes with the magic of my manliness, and she saw our joint account as one of those southern boulevards at midday that have solid shade on one side and smooth sunshine on the other, all the way to the end of a prospect, where pink mountains loom.

Into the fifty days of our cohabitation Charlotte crammed the activities of as many years. The poor woman busied herself with a number of things she had foregone long ago before or had never been much interested in, as if (to prolong these Proustian intonations) by my marrying the mother of the child I loved I had enabled my wife to regain an abundance of youth by proxy. With the zest of a banal young bride, she started to “glorify the home.” Knowing as I did its very cranny by heart—since those days when from my chair I mentally mapped Lolita’s course through the house—I had long entered into a sort of emotional relationship with it, with its very ugliness and dirt, and now I could almost feel the wretched thing cower in its reluctance to endure the bath of ecru and ochre and putty-buff-and-snuff that Charlotte planned to give it. She never got as far as that, thank God, but she did use up a tremendous amount of energy in washing window shades, waxing the slats of Venetian blinds, purchasing new shades and new blinds, returning them to the store, replacing them by others, and so on, in a constant chiaroscuro of smiles and frowns, doubts and pouts.
Humbert Humbert is a middle-aged, fastidious college professor. He also likes little girls. And none more so than Lolita, whom he’ll do anything to possess. 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?

- Something Happened, Joseph Heller, 1974

I get the willies when I see closed doors. Even at work, where I am doing so well now, the sight of a closed door is sometimes enough to make me dread that something horrible is happening behind it, something that is going to affect me adversely; if I am tired and dejected from a night of lies or booze or sex or just nerves and insomnia, I can almost smell the disaster mounting invisibly and flooding out toward me through the frosted glass panes. My hands may perspire, and my voice may come out strange. I wonder why.

Something must have happened to me sometime.

Maybe it was the day I came home unexpectedly with fever and a sore throat and caught my father in bed with my mother that left me with my fear of doors, my fear of opening doors and my suspicion of closed ones. Or maybe it was the knowledge that we were poor, which came to me late in childhood, that made me the way I am. Or the day my father died and left me feeling guilty and ashamed—because I thought I was the only little boy in the whole world then who had no father. Or maybe it was the realization, which came to me early, that I would never have broad shoulders and huge biceps, or be good enough, tall enough, strong enough, or brave enough to become an All-American football player or champion prizefighter, the sad discouraging realization that no matter what it was in life I ever tried to do, there would always be somebody close by who would be able to do it much better.

Bob Slocum was living the American dream. He had a beautiful wife, three lovely children, a nice house...and all the mistresses he desired. He had it all -- all, that is, but happiness.


Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", everyone of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you’ll have to swallow a world.

This novel is a historical chronicle of modern India centering on the inextricably linked fates of two children born within the first hour of independence from Great Britain. Exactly at midnight on August 15, 1947, two boys are born in a Bombay hospital, where they are switched by a nurse. Saleem Sinai, who will be raised by a well-to-do Muslim couple, is actually the illegitimate son of a low-caste Hindu woman and a departing British colonist. Shiva, the son of the Muslim couple, is given to a poor Hindu street performer whose unfaithful wife has died. Saleem represents modern India. When he is 30, he writes his memoir, Midnight's Children. Shiva is destined to be Saleem's enemy as well as India's most honored war hero. This
multilayered novel places Saleem in every significant event that occurred on the Indian subcontinent in the 30 years after independence.

- **The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Milan Kundera, 1984**

  The goals we pursue are always veiled. A girl who longs for marriage longs for something she knows nothing about. The boy who hankers after fame has no idea what fame is. The thing that gives our every move its meaning is always totally unknown to us.

  Chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute. Only chance can speak to us.

  The year is 1968. The protagonist, Tomas, a brilliant Prague surgeon, has fallen in love with a young woman named Tereza. Tomas has many mistresses, engaging in what he terms “erotic friendships.” When Tereza discovers Tomas’s many mistresses, she is distraught. It is this contrast between the weight of Tereza’s love and the lightness of Tomas’s love that provides much of the material for the novel.

- **The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, José Saramago, 1994**

  One has to be God to countenance so much blood.

  Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done.

  This is the gospel according to José Saramago and it is an irreverent, profound, skeptical, funny, heretical, deeply philosophical, provocative and compelling work. The novel takes its place alongside such challenging works a Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* as alternatives to the standard accounts of the gospels which have entered into popular culture and consciousness.

- **American Pastoral, Philip Roth, 1997**

  You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance, as untanklike as you can be, sans cannon and machine guns and steel plating half a foot thick; you come at them unmenacingly on your own ten toes instead of tearing up the turf with your caterpillar treads, take them on with an open mind, as equals, man to man, as we used to say, and yet you never fail to get them wrong. You might as well have the “brain” of a tank. You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception. And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of "other people," which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes on instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we all to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a
soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that--well, lucky you.

Roth's protagonist is Swede Lelov, a legendary athlete at his Newark high school, who grows up in the booming post-war years to marry a former Miss New Jersey, inherit his father's glove factory, and move into a stone house in the idyllic hamlet of Old Rimrock. And then one day in 1968, Swede's beautiful American luck deserts him.