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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

AUGUST HIGHLIGHT

GONE WITH THE WIND BY MARGARET MITCHELL

Set in Georgia against the backdrop of the Civil War and Reconstruction, *Gone with the Wind* depicts the struggles of Scarlett O'Hara, the spoiled, ruthless daughter of a wealthy plantation owner.

Scarlett loses the love of her life Ashley to another woman, then watches the Southern world she knows crumble. She faces scorn, willing to do almost anything to claw her way out of poverty, save her beloved plantation, and somehow stay near to Ashley.

CONTEXT & IMPACT

Gone with the Wind is a cultural juggernaut. It is a Pulitzer Prize winner, one of the bestselling US novels of all time and spawned one of the most popular films of all time. (If adjusted for inflation, the only media project to exceed its gross profit is *Grand Theft Auto*.) What makes it so influential, however, is difficult to pin down. Each element, if broken apart and analyzed, is good but not great. Ideologically it is controversial, because the portrait of the South it paints is idealized at best. Put it all together, though, and the book becomes something more, something that draws people into its world. In his 2007 preface to the novel reprint, esteemed Southern author Pat Conroy puts it like this: "Gone with the Wind works because it possesses the inexpressible magic where the art of pure storytelling rises above its ancient use and succeeds in explaining to a whole nation how it came to be this way."

Margaret Mitchell wrote only one novel, and it took her about a decade to finish. She wrote through chronic pain, from both illness and injury, before passing away at the age of 48 from being hit by a drunk driver. As a result of her illnesses, she was unable to do many public appearances, so she instead wrote letters to readers. (After her death they were compiled and published as *Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind" Letters*.) It is speculated that many elements of her life made it into her novel: a personality strikingly like her own rebellious nature in Scarlett, a first love much like Ashley that died young, a devout Catholic mother, Irish roots, even an experience of marital rape. (Interestingly, though likely the most autobiographical, Scarlett was not her favorite character - her favorite was Melanie.)

Gone with the Wind is also a reflection of the many stories the South told itself for decades, passed down from survivors to a young Margaret. It's a crystallized vision of the past that allowed the conquered South to retain the romance of a lost cause and to indulge the nostalgia for a place and time that never really was. (For what it's worth, this isn't unique to Southerners or this book: most nostalgia is for a place or time that really wasn't the reality.) Part of what sets *Gone with the Wind* apart is the hours of research Mitchell did to make sure her historical details were right. It's easy to dismiss a novel that gets facts incorrect, but Mitchell doesn't get the facts wrong. She just changes the perspective.

The perspective of the novel is through the eyes of a spoiled, ruthless teenage girl (remember, Scarlett is only sixteen at the beginning!) Even the nameless narrator is really just Scarlett - we only see tiny glimpses from how others view the world. Scarlett doesn't have the education or the intrinsic empathy to experience life through another's eyes, she only sees them in relationship to herself. When the ladies of Atlanta are at the train station, reading off the names of those killed in action, the reader likely feels the emotion of it more than Scarlett does; she is processing it much more intellectually. It takes all 1,000 pages for Scarlett to realize that she might not, in fact, know what real love is. Scarlett also struggles to see beyond the moment for things outside of making money; she doesn't think about how any action will play out after the party. Despite this, Scarlett seems to have one of the clearest views of the changing world, having a pragmatic resignation to the loss of what she feels is the best version of the world.

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Scarlett's narrow, contradictory perspective is a major root of one of the novel's biggest controversies: the handling of racism and the misrepresentation of how slavery actually worked in the South. It is true that no one in the narrative is punished for their racism, especially Scarlett. (Actually, very few of Scarlett's amoral decisions are punished.) It is also true that the most likely view of a young plantation mistress is reflected in Scarlett's views, and the language Mitchell uses is likely historically accurate.

Was that authorial choice made for a reason other than to tell a story, a story which reflected the stories the author was told by those who lived through that time? Did Mitchell have an ulterior motive in her choice of perspective that was different than promulgation of a nostalgic fantasy? Is the racism in the novel reflective of the views of the majority of that character's class? Or, as is sometimes posited, was the author trying to influence a personal racist belief system onto an idealized story? What is the fault of the novel, and what is the fault of history?

There is no shortage of myths of America that we as a culture tell ourselves. Do we tell ourselves these stories to consciously perpetuate an ideal? Or is it just human nature to tell stories about ourselves that gloss over the rough edges and nasty parts? I don't know that we will ever know the answer, but discussing *Gone with the Wind* is one interesting way to explore the question.

FUN FACTS

- *Gone with the Wind* spawned two authorized sequels: *Scarlett* by Alexandra Ripley in 1991 and 2007's *Rhett Butler's People* by Donald McCaig. (McCaig also authored *Ruth's People* in 2014, another authorized extension that tells the story of Mammy.) There are also numerous parodies, fan fiction endings, and unauthorized sequels published overseas in countries where *Gone with the Wind* is in the public domain (primarily Australia and Russia).
- In Mitchell's manuscript, Scarlett's original name was "Pansy"; the publisher requested the change due to the negative slang connotations of the term pansy in the North. The publisher also changed Mitchell's working title, which was *Tomorrow is Another Day*.
- Though originally beloved in Germany, when the Nazis came to power during World War II the novel was promptly banned. Black market copies were very popular in occupied France, with rebellious French citizens clinging to the image of the defeated yet unbowed South, which pleased Mitchell.



Margaret Mitchell

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think the story ends where it does? Why didn't the story end at an earlier point? What are the actual bookends for the story?
- The semi-abrupt ending of the 1,000+ page novel has spawned numerous sequels, both authorized published works and a plethora of fanfiction. What do you envision happening after the written events? In particular, what will happen with her love life?
- *Gone with the Wind* is hard to read because of the racist language. (Note: the audiobook in our collection bleeps every n-word.) How should that racism impact how, or even if, we should read the novel anymore?
- It is generally acknowledged that the South depicted in the book is skewed and idealized. What, then, does reading the novel help us understand about our American history? Does it help us really understand the Civil War/Reconstruction Era, or is it more instructive of how the novel influenced cultural decisions from 1936 onwards?
- The characters in the novel are complex characters who are not wholly good or evil. Which of the characters left you the most conflicted? Were there any that you could find no redeeming quality in? Were there characters that were not complex? Why do you think that is so?
- We are introduced to Scarlett, "who had not willingly opened a book since leaving Fayetteville Female Academy the year before". What does this say about her character? How did it impact how you saw Scarlett? How does this lack of learning impact her life later?
- Scarlett's children all seem to prefer someone else to her, something she notices and resents (though not enough to change). Why is this true for their relationships? Is it a reflection of Scarlett's personality, or of the burden upon her to ensure their survival? How much are those relationships impacted by her relationship with their fathers?
- Scarlett's father Gerald was beloved by their Southern society, but he was not born into the gentry. How did his Irish immigrant background influence Scarlett? How does the book treat the tension between the "American spirit" of immigration, especially in the North and 'lower classes', with the exclusivity of the Southern gentry?
- Scarlett spends a good portion of the book in Atlanta; despite this, she views her home as Tara and many of her actions were done in the service of saving the plantation. How does this stance influence her relationships with others? What do you think will happen when she returns to Tara with her sister Suellen in charge?

- Do you think Scarlett has emotional intelligence? Does she truly love anyone else - Ashley, Rhett, her children, Melly, etc? Even when she says she doesn't love them, she often acts as if she does (nursing them, sending funds, etc.). What does this say about her and her choices?
- Class distinctions are a major theme in the novel. There is a definitive hierarchy in all layers of society, even in the slaves. How much of those class distinctions and friction reflect the reality of the time? Were similar tensions happening in the North? What about in today's culture? What do you see as evidence supporting your opinion?
- Why do you think Mitchell portrayed slavery in such a positive light, against all evidence? What influenced her perspective in the novel? Do you think that she meant to influence the imagination of society, or did she truly believe that her portrayal was reality?
- Scarlett and Rhett as characters are both contradictory, with many negative qualities. It's Scarlett, however, who draws the most derision and anger. Why is that, when Rhett is at least as manipulative and scheming as she?

SOURCES & MORE

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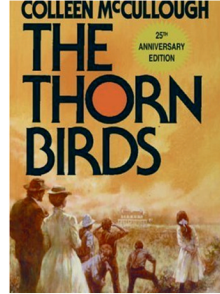
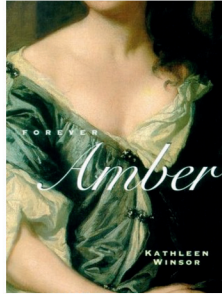
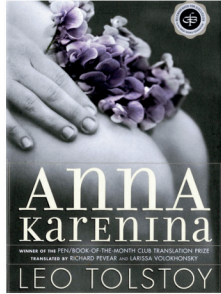
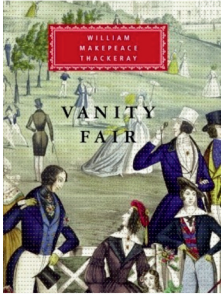
Books

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Video

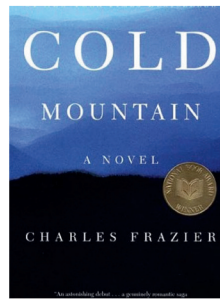
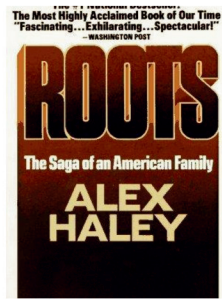
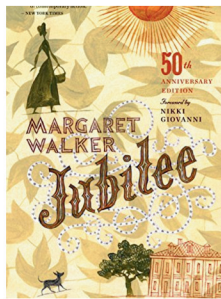
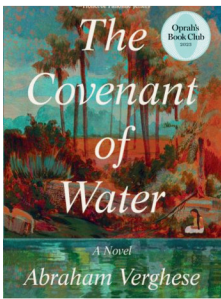
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READ-ALIKES - GONE WITH THE WIND



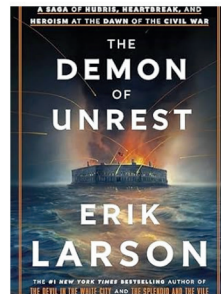
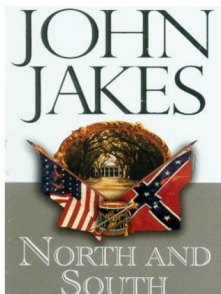
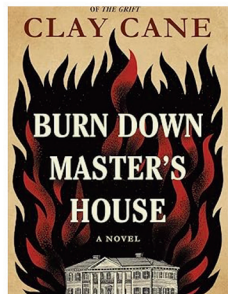
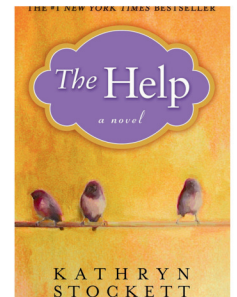
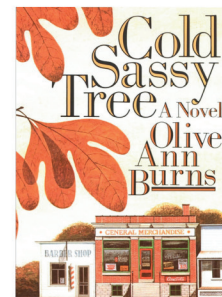
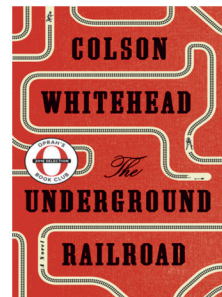
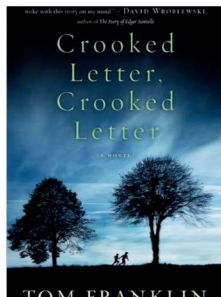
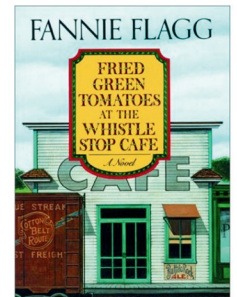
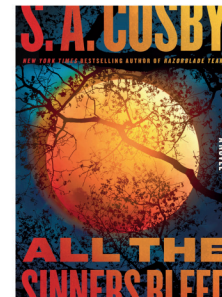
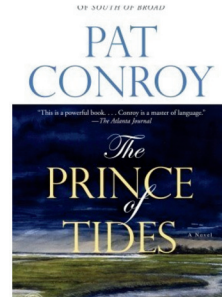
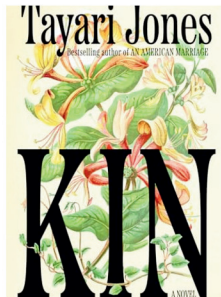
Epic Sagas:

- *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier
- *Roots* by Alex Haley
- *The Thorn Birds* by Colleen McCullough
- *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray
- *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy
- *The Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese
- *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker
- *Forever Amber* by Kathleen Winsor



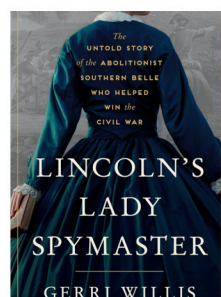
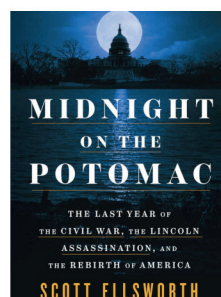
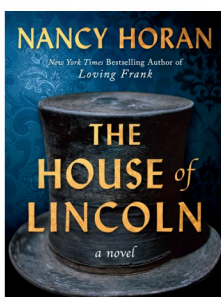
Stories of the South:

- *Cold Sassy Tree* by Olive Ann Burns
- *The Prince of Tides* by Pat Conroy
- *All the Sinners Bleed* by S.A. Cosby
- *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* by Fannie Flagg
- *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* by Tom Franklin
- *Kin* by Tayari Jones
- *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett
- *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead



Stories of the Civil War:

- *The Thread Collectors* by Shaunna J. Edwards & Alyson Rickman
- *Midnight on the Potomac* by Scott Ellsworth
- *Red Clay* by Charles B. Fancher
- *The House of Lincoln* by Nancy Horan
- *North and South* by John Jakes
- *Burn Down the Master's House* by Clay Kane
- *The Demon of Unrest* by Erik Larson
- *Lincoln's Lady Spymaster* by Gerri Willis

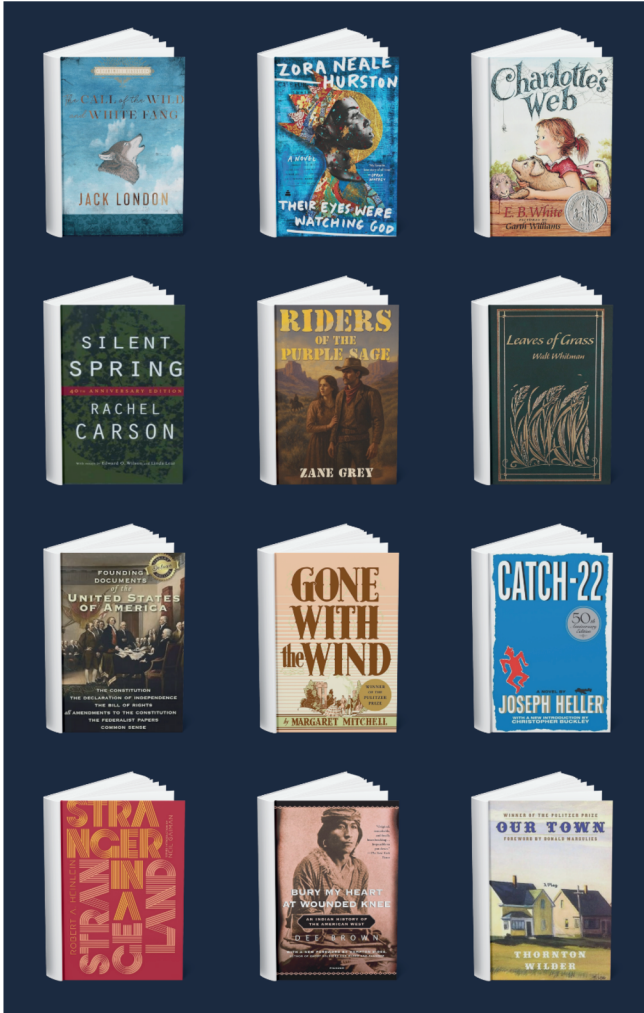


UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 2026 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- **January:** *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- **February:** *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- **March:** *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- **April:** *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- **May:** *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- **June:** *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- **July:** *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- **August:** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- **September:** *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- **October:** *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- **November:** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- **December:** *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder



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