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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

SEPTEMBER HIGHLIGHT

CATCH-22 BY JOSEPH HELLER

During the closing months of World War II, bombardier Yossarian is frantic to be sent home, furious that so many people want to kill him and that his own Army keeps raising the amount of missions required to be flown. The only way out is to be declared insane, but there's a catch: Catch-22 states that a man can be grounded due to insanity if he makes a formal request, but the very making of the request proves the man is sane.

CONTEXT & IMPACT

It's easy to explain how this month's highlighted novel was selected for this year's "Books that Shaped Us" theme. The title quickly became an allusion, a well-known catchphrase in the American lexicon, frequently used 60 years later. The popular satire helped define a fomenting antiwar movement and became the spiritual father of such powerhouses like the television show *MASH*, which may not have existed without the popularity of *Catch-22*. The paradox Yossarian and his comrades face and attempt to defeat resonates with many of us who know the feeling of being caught by bureaucratic knots over which we have no control, even if we have never been to war.

Catch-22 was Joseph Heller's first published novel, but he was no novice in the writing world. He'd spent many years as a copywriter for ad agencies and teaching collegiate English at institutions like Penn State and the University of Pennsylvania.

Catch-22 is informed by Heller's service in World War II, where he flew sixty missions as a B-25 wing bombardier in the U.S. Army Air Forces and earned the rank of first lieutenant. Heller stated that, though the novel was set in World War II, it was really critiquing another war: the Korean War. Heller began writing the novel in 1953, working on it for eight years before it was ready to publish in 1961. A signal to that critique is how few mentions *Catch-22* has of the purported enemy of the war. Instead, the novel focuses on the actions of the bombardier's own army, highlighting the ways that ordinary soldiers get caught up in a military-industrial complex that they have no control over or desire to be in. Unlike World War II, which was seen by the majority of America as a just and necessary horror, the Korean and Vietnam wars split the country into factions, with increasing protests of American involvement in what was seen as unnecessary political machinations.

At publication, the novel received a very much mixed reception. (To be honest, the satire doesn't always land even with today's readers.) Some critics loved it but others eviscerated it. US sales were mediocre at best, but in the UK it was an immediate bestseller. In the US, it wasn't until it entered paperback printing that word of mouth caught fire and the movie rights were sold. In discussing the factors for his novel's eventual success, Heller cites the most important as "Vietnam. Because this is the war I had in mind; a war fought without military provocation, a war in which the real enemy is no longer the other side but someone allegedly on your side. The ridiculous war I felt lurking in the future when I wrote the book." His novel crystallized the feelings of an increasing number of Americans about the injustice of war. The main character, Yossarian, became a symbol of the 1960s antiwar movement, with "Yossarian Lives" bumper stickers on cars and Army jackets worn by college students with his name on them.

Satire is a difficult genre to write. As Philip Toynbee states: "The method of satire is to inflate reality so that all its partially concealed blemishes turn in to monsters and apparent deformations. ... And this means that the social and personal evils which are being satirized must have been there, and must be felt by the reader to be there even while he is laughing at the results of the satirist's inflating imagination." Holding that tension between the

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inflation and its seed of reality is incredibly difficult, especially in something the length of a novel. Too much comedy and it's no longer critiquing; too much critique and it's no longer funny. Most successful satire ends up in short form (Consider: *The Onion*, *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live*) or is a brief joke or chapter in a longer novel. Not so for *Catch-22*, which manages to achieve hilarity throughout the novel until the author decides not to. The horrors of war are there, but they are glimpses hidden in the shadows, rarely coming into full focus. The trick of satire is to make you laugh but allow you to process that seed of reality. It's one of the reasons dark humor is so prevalent in those professions which see the worst of humanity. Laughing at the absurdity within *Catch-22* allowed the reader to both escape the horrors and articulate how war felt to them. The real enemy emerges not as the other side of the war, but as the war itself.

Heller wrote a number of other novels that were well-regarded, including a sequel featuring Yossarian (*Closing Time*), but none received the attention and success of his first novel. (When an interviewer said that Heller had not written anything else as good as *Catch-22*, Heller shot back, "Who has?") He faced a number of personal challenges, including a very public divorce and the rare neurological disorder Guillain-Barré syndrome, ending up estranged from his children. Until the end interviewers describe him as "crotchety". Yet he left behind one of the great novels of the 20th century, and an indelible mark on American culture.

FUN FACTS

- Heller once worked with famed novelist Mary Higgins Clark; they were both copywriters at ad agency Remington Rand.
- Two film adaptations were made of *Catch-22*; the first was a 1970 film and a six-episode miniseries in 2010. (There was a pilot made for a TV series in 1973 starring Richard Dreyfuss, but the series didn't come to fruition.)
- Heller coined the phrase 'catch-22' (with some help from publisher Bob Gottlieb), a phrase that entered the English lexicon and is now frequently used by people who have never read the novel. (Merriam-Webster records its first use aside from the novel in 1963. Other terms first used that year: AI, all over the map, gut check, hairy eyeball, and teleconferencing.)
- *Catch-22* has its first public foray as an excerpt published in New World Writing in 1955 under the title *Catch-18*. When the book was finalized, the publisher realized that the title would need to change; Leon Uris was publishing *Mila 18* the same year, and they feared that Heller's debut would get overlooked.



Joseph Heller,
Catch-22 author photo



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Heller chose to use satirical dark comedy to write his anti-war novel. Why do you think he used this style? Is there a conclusion to be drawn that a number of the best-known anti-war novels are satirical in nature? (Slaughterhouse-Five, The Good Soldier Švejk, MASH)
- Which character was the most compelling of the large cast? Why? What about the most likeable? Do you think that the characters were all actually crazy? Why or why not?
- The narrative of the novel hops all over time and perspectives, adding to the sense of restlessness and madness in the novel. Why does that work for the reader? Would it work in other mediums the same way? (Note: the miniseries decided no and presented the events linearly.)
- In the last quarter of the story, Yossarian is talking to Doc Daneeka again about being grounded. "They're not going to send a crazy man out there to be killed, are they?" "Who else will go?" What does this quote reveal about Heller's view of war?
- Why do you think Yossarian is the only soldier who was able to actually get Major Major to talk to him? What does that interlude say about each character's personality?
- There is quite a bit of casual misogyny displayed towards women in the book. Most women are sex workers in the book, and there is a disturbing anecdote in Chapter 27 where a nurse is sexually assaulted, yet ends up dating one of her assaulters. Why do you think this is? Is it a factor of the satire? A reflection of actual culture? Some other factor?
- What is the importance of Yossarian's learning about the survival of Orr? How did that clarify earlier events in the story? What did it give Yossarian, and why was that important?
- What is the purpose of M&M Enterprises in the novel? What is Heller satirizing with this element?
- Why do you think the phrase 'catch-22' escaped the context of the book to become a shorthand for any no-win circular problem?
- Yossarian is often involved in many of the mishaps that occur without anyone realizing it's him (e.g. Washington Irving). Why do you think this is? Do you think he realizes how involved he is in all of them?
- What scene brought out your emotions, if any? What about that scene made you feel the way you did? Was that something you expected to feel in the context of the narrative? Why did it work?
- There are several stories of bureaucratic missteps where there is some protocol that is preventing the obvious solution - like the dead man in Yossarian's tent. Did any of them spark a memory of a similar civilian experience? Share your story.
- Discuss whether the ending of Catch-22 is uplifting or downbeat. Is it a victory or a defeat?

SOURCES & MORE

Articles

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Books

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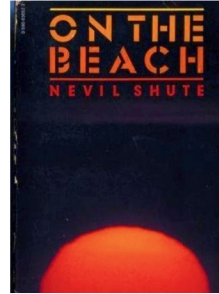
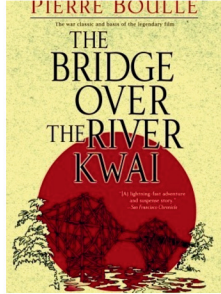
Video

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- *Catch-22*. Miniseries, Hulu, 2019.
- *Catch-22 Television Pilot*. ABC, 1973. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/AC7o7hhUErs?si=HrDgF4qvWLFwLH8w>
- *Catch-22 Thug Notes*. Wisecrack, 2014. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/8LazrN57iZg?si=jh4LkYBXgUrXyjFH>
- *Joseph Heller speaking at UCLA 4/8/1970*. UCLA, 1970; digitized 2013. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/xJ5Jpozwg8E?si=em_ffqvRmtYoAD8Z
- *Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller discuss World War II + Q&A*. C-SPAN, 1995. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/LWXXpMWqG9Q?si=2Hjs5T4DwNjJIEOY>

“FOR SIXTEEN YEARS, I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR THE GREAT ANTI-WAR BOOK WHICH I KNEW WWII MUST PRODUCE. I RATHER DOUBTED, HOWEVER, THAT IT WOULD COME OUT OF AMERICA; I WOULD HAVE GUESSED GERMANY. I AM HAPPY TO HAVE BEEN WRONG. THANK YOU.”

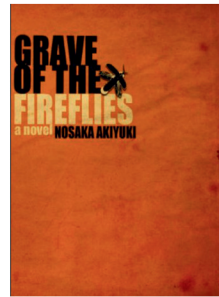
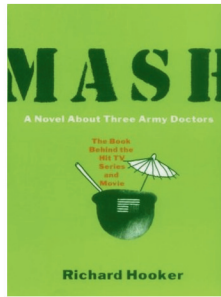
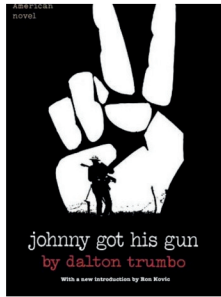
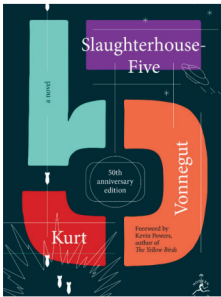
- STEPHEN AMBROSE, HISTORIAN

READ-ALIKES - CATCH-22



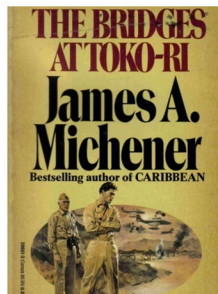
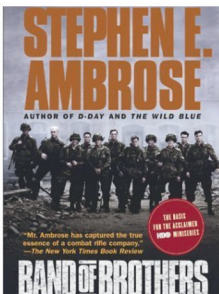
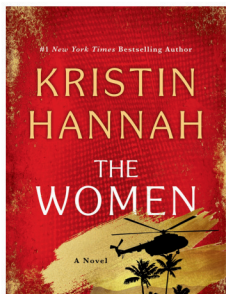
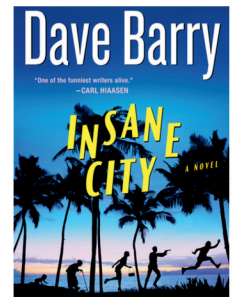
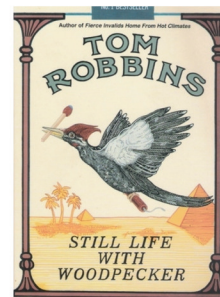
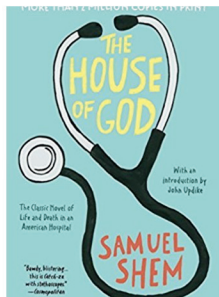
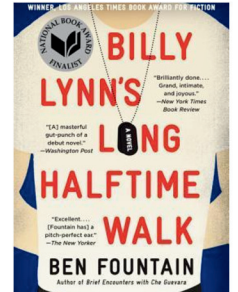
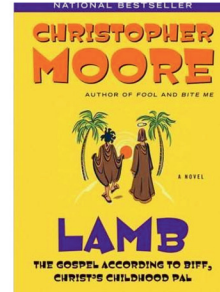
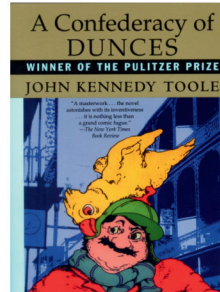
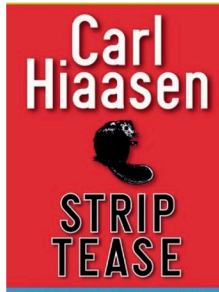
Anti-War Works:

- *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* by Pierre Boulle
- *The Good Soldier Švejk* by Jaroslav Hašek
- *MASH* by Richard Hooker
- *Grave of the Fireflies* by Akiyuki Nosaka
- *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien
- *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute
- *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo
- *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut



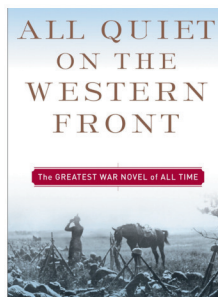
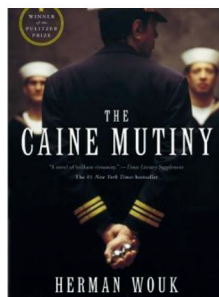
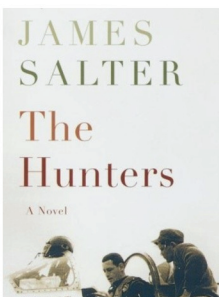
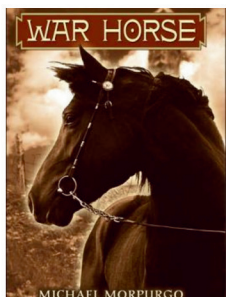
Dark Comedy:

- *Flight* by Sherman Alexie
- *Insane City* by Dave Barry
- *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* by Ben Fountain
- *Strip Tease* by Carl Hiaasen
- *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal* by Christopher Moore
- *Still Life with Woodpecker* by Tom Robbins
- *The House of God* by Samuel Shem
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole



Stories of Military Combat:

- *Band of Brothers* by Stephen E. Ambrose
- *The Women* by Kristin Hannah
- *Redemption at Hacksaw Ridge* by Booton Herndon
- *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* by James A. Michener
- *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo
- *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque
- *The Hunters* by James Salter
- *The Caine Mutiny* by Herman Wouk

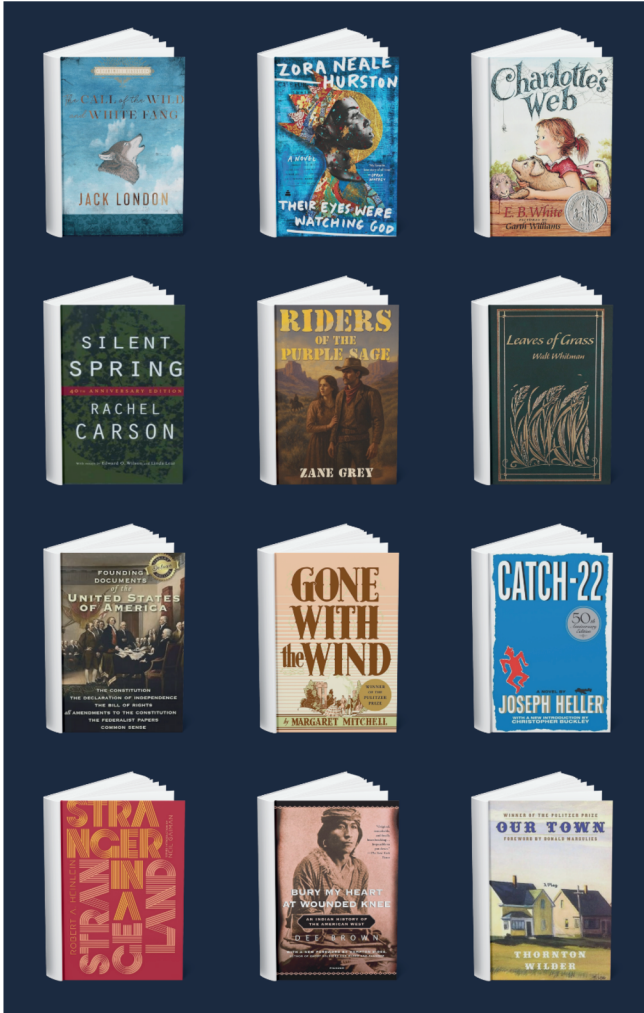


UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US



- **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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2026's Read with Your Librarian theme "The Books that Shape Us" honors America's 250th birthday by highlighting books influential in shaping America. Titles were chosen from the list featured in the Library of Congress' 2012 "Books that Shaped America" exhibit.

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