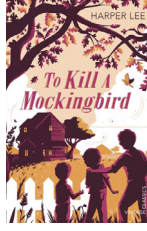
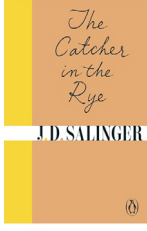
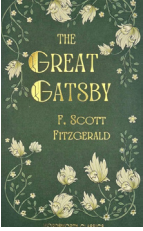




# Finding a Good Read

A column to help you find intriguing books

Maggie Gallagher

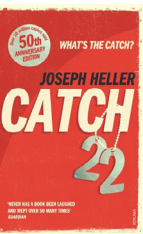


## Classics of American literature

Ask a bunch of Americans to suggest the best known works of American literature, and you could guarantee that they would come up with at least some of the titles listed below. They're certainly the ones that people will remember being made to read at school. The selection below is mostly from the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a few earlier ones – you could say they've stood the test of time!

Top of the list might be *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the story of Jay Gatsby, a young, handsome man of fabled wealth, living the life of the super-rich in 'The Jazz Age' in 1920s America. There's feverish fun and lavish parties in huge mansions. But the question is always there: who really is Jay Gatsby?

*The Catcher in the Rye's* unreliable narrator, Holden Caulfield, casts a spell over readers right from the start where he tells us he's not going to bother with all the usual biographical details of where he was born and who his parents were 'and all that David Copperfield kind of crap'. J. D. Salinger's coming-of-age novel is poignant and bittersweet and really packs a punch with its devastating ending.



*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee was an instant success on publication in 1960. A tale of growing up in the Deep South with racism, poverty and childhood innocence at its very heart, it's an unforgettable masterpiece.

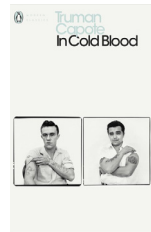
*Catch 22* is the often hilarious but perplexing story of combat pilot and anti-hero, Yossarian, who is trying to find a way to avoid fighting. It's not just the madness of war, but also the madness of the war-machine bureaucracy which Joseph Heller satirises so perfectly.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is the Pulitzer Prize-

winning story of a slave mother in the Deep South, her memories of her lost baby and her escape north to freedom. It's an intimate portrait of what it means to have no freedom, not even over your own body, and to be subject to the terrifying cruelties of others. Told with poetic language and magical realist imagery, it grips the reader's emotions.

A nineteenth-century classic, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain tells of a boy, Huck Finn, and his journey down the Mississippi River in the company of a runaway slave, Jim. By turns comic, tragic, picaresque, then stirringly adventurous, it's a thoroughly enjoyable novel full of richness and symbolism.

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is a fictionalised memoir from the 1950s about two young American men who take to the road and restless adventure through sex, drugs, drink and jazz. It's a wild blow against 'the American Dream'.



*In Cold Blood* isn't fiction, but reads like it. Journalist Truman Capote reconstructs the seemingly motiveless murders in 1959 of four members of a Kansas family. It's a portrait of the society in which both killers and victims lived, and a psychological study of the minds of the two young killers. Unputdownable!

Edith Wharton is the pre-eminent chronicler of America in the Gilded Age, that turn-of-the-century era when America's population and economy grew exponentially and vast fortunes were made, often by hitherto penniless immigrants. Snobbish 'old families' struggled against the influx of newcomers who elbowed their aside in the rush to get rich. Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence* is a brilliant Gilded Age depiction.

With thanks to Give a Book and PRG volunteer Maggie Gallagher



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