



chalk the sun
creative writing

CHALK THE SUN TUTORS' TOP TWENTY-ONE



An eclectic selection of books:
Some well known, some unusual, all great to read

Students often ask the Chalk the Sun tutors to recommend novels so we decided to put together a book list. It was harder even than working out our fantasy Desert Island Disc selection (and we've spent hours on that). But after loads of in-house wrangling over shared favourites – we almost came to blows over Elmore Leonard - we finally picked three each. Sometimes we chose books with personal meaning; sometimes we chose the writers whose style and talent made us most jealous; sometimes we chose books that reflect our own work, travels or peculiar obsessions. The result is eclectic, exotic, obscure: in other words, very Chalk the Sun.

In case you follow the 'read the first line to see if you like it' selection principle we have given you the opening line of each book.



Jo Hepplewhite spent the first half of her career to date working in TV (mostly children's) before deciding to get a proper job and moving into academia. Her book choices reflect her interest in linguistics and classic literature, and her romantic soul...

Precious Bane by Mary Webb (1924)

"It was at a love-spinning that I saw Kester first."



My mother gave me this book to read when I was in my teens. It was a favourite of hers, written in the 1920s but set in 19th century Shropshire. Three things made it unusual for me. Firstly, it has a facially disfigured heroine: Prudence Sarn has a hare lip and the suspicion her appearance arouses in her fellow men makes her hide a wild and loving heart. Secondly, the novel contains two contrasting models of masculinity. There is the brave yet gentle figure of the weaver, Kester Woodseaves, who discerns Prue's passionate inner nature but who is absent for most of the book (mainly when Prue needs him most!). Then there is Prue's brother, the dark and driven Gideon Sarn, whose uncompromising determination wreaks tragedy for those who try to love him, and ultimately, for himself. His character pervades the novel to the extent that I suspect the author found him the more compelling of the two male figures. The third unusual aspect is the dense Shropshire dialect of the novel's narration, which for me brought a sense of rugged authenticity to this deeply romantic tale.

Mary Webb (1881 - 1927), was a romantic novelist and poet of the early 20th century who died at the age of 46 from Graves Disease (a thyroid condition). Her work has been successfully dramatized, most notably in the film *Gone to Earth* in 1950 by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Her books inspired the parody *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons [1932], which Ardella finds hilarious but Jo doesn't because she is too fond of Webb's work - and others in that vein, such as Thomas Hardy - to enjoy having it lampooned.

The Golden Bowl by Henry James (1804)

'The Prince had always liked his London, when it had come to him; he was one of the modern Romans who find by the Thames a more convincing image of the truth of the ancient state than any they have left by the Tiber.'

The Golden Bowl

This is a big, fat book with sentences of intimidating length and complexity, so it's easy to be put off. A common reaction when reading James is to finish a scene and think, "Did what I think happened, actually happen? Surely not." Especially when, as here, these rich occupants of beautiful rooms are engaged in personal relationships that even today would raise more than an eyebrow. An impoverished Italian prince marries the daughter of a wealthy American living

in London. But he cannot bear to finish with his mistress. And the mistress, not wanting to miss out on the spoils of this marriage, takes up with the prince's father-in-law. So a classy little ménage à quatre develops, with some members



more conscious of what's going on than others. James has the reputation of being "hard" but it's worth persevering because beneath his allusive and elusive, multi-layered, multi-textured prose, full of subtlety and subtext, his exposure of the psychology of male/female relationships and the social forces exerted upon them, is just as relevant now as at the time of their writing. Challenging, yes, but endlessly rewarding.

James, Henry (1843-1916) an American-born writer, who spent much of his life in England, living in Lamb's House in Rye, East Sussex. He also wrote *The Portrait of A Lady*, *Washington Square*, *The Bostonians*, *The Ambassadors*, *What Maisie Knew* and *The Wings of a Dove*, all of which explore the nuances of English and American society and, in particular, the role of women and the psychology of his female characters, with humour as well as drama.

Their Eyes were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston (1937) **"Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board."**



When writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston wrote this book she said she wanted to write about black people loving and living without her characters looking over their shoulders to see what white society thought. It's a tragic love story, set in Florida and Mississippi during the Depression, depicting the heroine Janey's quest for love and freedom of expression. I found the vitality of the storytelling (again in dialect: this time of the Deep South) and the forthright exploration of female desire to be really striking, especially considering when it was written. Janey marries three men, the first to please her dying grandmother, the second because it seems 'sensible', and the third most certainly to please herself. Bursting with heat, colour and down-home humanity, it also has Teacake, one of the sexiest, if flawed, men in literature.

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) spent much of her youth in the all black town of Eatonville in Florida which is fictionalised in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She hobnobbed with the black literati in New York (whom she mischievously dubbed the 'niggerati') but, while many of them were trying hard to conform to white American norms, Zora was way ahead of her time donning African head-dresses and robes and revelling in the language and culture of the rural black south. She also wrote the autobiographical *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1943) and a collection of African American folklore *Mules and Men* (1935). Forgotten and out of print, her work was rediscovered in the 1970s by a new generation of African American women writers like Alice Walker who put a headstone on her unmarked grave in Eatonville in recognition of Zora's literary legacy.



Ardella Jones' worked for Lambeth Council, moonlighted as reggae correspondent for the NME, took to the stand up circuit, then switched to performing poetry, writing and travelling; all of which is reflected in her book selection.

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys [1966] **"They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks."**

I became fascinated with Jamaica when I was a five year old at school in Ladbroke Grove surrounded by children who had just arrived in London from the Caribbean. I am intrigued by the lives of 'marginal' people, mixtures and misfits, and, as a white Dominican of French/Welsh extraction, Jean Rhys was certainly one of those. Her alienation in 1920s London prefigures that of many black Caribbean immigrants decades later, except no one could tell from her appearance that she was different. When the critic A. Alvarez described her as one of the finest English women writers she was vexed. Jean Rhys searched for other white Caribbean women in English literature and found only Bertha, Rochester's bad, mad wife in *Jane Eyre*. Indignant, Jean Rhys wondered how she had felt married to a cold, calculating fortune hunter, rejected, denounced for her foreignness,



then held prisoner in a cold, grey land. The resulting novel, which took Rhys nine years to write, is concise, poetic and passionate. Her portrayal of a conflicted, racially-mixed society, just after the abolition of slavery, is brilliantly nuanced. Christophene, the mammy and obeah woman, is one of the most powerful black female characters in literature. Rhys' subtle use of Caribbean speech rhythms, her narrative voices, the layers of meaning are superb. You will never feel the same about Jane Eyre.

Jean Rhys [1890 - 1979] was born in Dominica; we are not sure when as she lied about her age. She was sent to England to be educated and hated it. By 1924, she was in Paris where her work, and her body, became of interest to the writer, Ford Maddox Ford. Married three times, volatile and fond of booze, Rhys dropped out of view in the 1940s to live in Devon where she wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea*. A perfectionist, she was furious when she found her husband had sent it to the publishers, claiming that it had two words, a 'then' and a 'but', which should've been cut.

Earthly Powers by Anthony Burgess (1980)

"It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me."



I loved *Clockwork Orange* as a delinquent teenager and went around speaking Burgess' strange, part-Russian invented language with my 'droogies.' Years later *Earthly Powers* blew me away with its erudition, laugh-out-loud humour and sheer scale. This dauntingly thick book follows the life of a successful, popular novelist and closet gay, Twomey, believed to be based on W. Somerset Maugham, over eighty odd years. Shunned by the intelligentsia, ambivalent about his sexuality, Twomey is the unlikely witness to a miracle performed by his late brother-in-law, the Pope, an earthy, fat cleric bound for beatification. As always Burgess' use of language is precise, his tone perfect and the story gripping. The sharp, ironic humour, with which he dissects the petty literati and the changing nature of the gay scene from 'musical' to militantly out, follows in a great English tradition from Evelyn Waugh to Fay Weldon, yet in addition to this Burgess contemplates the nature of faith, our relationship with God and the politics of Catholicism. Burgess missed the 1980

Booker for *Earthly Powers* but was awarded a special prize for the best first line.

Anthony Burgess (1917 - 1993) Born in Manchester, he began writing prolifically to support his widow-to-be when he was diagnosed as terminally ill: he lived another thirty-three years. He was also a prominent critic, a composer and linguist. His dystopian satire *Clockwork Orange* was banned in the UK for decades, as the man said, "Art is dangerous. It is one of the attractions: when it ceases to be dangerous you don't want it."

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe (1958)

"Okonkwo was well-known throughout the nine villages and beyond."



I read this long before I visited anywhere in West Africa but I was fascinated by the inside view of a completely different society. Achebe takes his title from W.B. Yeats' speculations on the demise of European civilisation after World War 1, *The Second Coming* (1921) - 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold, Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.'

In Achebe's novel it is the traditional African civilisation of the forest people in Umuofia which is threatened by European culture in the form of Christian missionaries and colonial exploitation, and other Ibos who emulate the whites and profit from development. I love the way that one young man acquiring a bicycle, and the controversy it inspires, embodies the duality of Progress, and the range of attitudes towards it. Achebe's writes in English but his prose is peppered with Ibo phrases and proverbs; he says that he felt he had to create a new language, not the English of Dickens and the other classics he read as boy. His portrayal of Africans as diverse, complicated people is also something new [Jean Rhys' depictions of black Caribbean people are similarly complex]. He indicates Ibo speakers by measured, dignified language, a far cry from Conrad whom, Achebe says, gives only six words to his African characters

in the whole of the 'thoroughgoingly racist' Heart of Darkness; the rest of the time they just grunt and shriek. The novel is perhaps even more resonant today than when it was written.

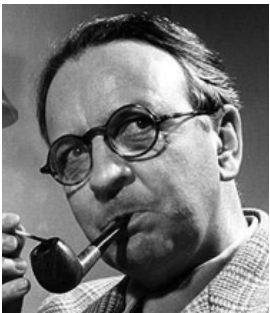
Chinua Achebe (1930 - 2013) was born in Ogidi, Onitsha, when Nigeria was still a British colony. His family had converted to Christianity in the previous generation and he was educated in a government-run school. After the civil war with Biafra, in 1972 he accepted a post at the University of Massachusetts. He went back to Nigeria as a lecturer but, after a car crash in 1990 left him partially disabled, he returned to the USA and lived in New York until his death in March 2013.



Jonathan Wolfman may work as a script editor for Children's BBC but his real interests lie in crime and movies by the likes of Scorsese, Peckinpah and Brian de Palma.

The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler (1939)

"It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of wet rain in the clearness of the foothills."



Raymond Chandler only wrote seven novels. He didn't invent pulp fiction or the hard-boiled thriller, nor was he the first to write in the first person. But just about every great American thriller writer since, whether writing in prose or for TV and film, acknowledges the debt they owe him and his incorruptible hero – the romanticised cynic Philip Marlowe who walked the mean streets of LA unmasking the corrupt underbelly of the American dream. Unlike most thrillers with some kind of mystery at its centre, getting to the end of a Chandler novel doesn't make you want to put the book away, it makes you want to read it again...and again...and again – not for the plots, which aren't that great, but for the sheer pleasure of the journey - its character, wit and poetry. The Big Sleep isn't his best book but it is the first, and once you read that you'll want to read the rest - in order - culminating in what some consider his masterpiece – The Long Goodbye. There is another one, Playback, after that, but it's a disappointing footnote by comparison: an unmade screenplay he

souped-up as a novella shortly before he died. And for those who love the genre, Chandler also wrote screenplays, including three classics: Double Indemnity, The Blue Dahlia and Strangers on a Train.

Raymond Chandler (1888 – 1959) was born in Chicago but educated at Dulwich College, London. He joined the civil service but hated it so he returned to the USA in 1912. In the Depression, Chandler lost his job as an oil company executive, and, aged forty-five, decided to become a writer. In 1933 his first story was published in a pulp magazine called Black Mask. He went to work in Hollywood but the studio system didn't suit his individuality and perfectionism.

Rum Punch by Elmore Leonard (1992)

"Sunday morning, Ordell took Louis to watch the white-power demonstration in downtown Palm Beach."



By comparison, Elmore Leonard is an anti-stylist who doesn't like the writer getting in the way of the story. His characters come at you the moment they enter the page. Whether you like them or not is up to you. They say what they say, do what they do. Things unfold and the story ends as abruptly as it begins. And when it does, you feel like the coolest person on the planet just by reading this shit. Leonard has an uncanny knack of plunging you into the moment with as few words as possible. One second he's writing in the past tense and without you noticing he'll slip in a present participle and you're right there, in the rhythm, in the scene, seeing what's happening through another character's eyes. Many so called "literary" writers like Martin Amis love Elmore Leonard. He's their guilty pleasure, almost an anti-writer, except he's not. Sparse, lean, mean and riveting. You want to bottle his dialogue and say it like he does.

Elmore Leonard (1923 - 2013) served in the US navy, wrote historical adventures and westerns, short stories and novels, hitting big in 1961 when *Hombre* was made into a movie with Paul Newman. When the market for westerns dried up he wrote for encyclopaedias, before turning to crime writing. Tarantino made *Get Shorty* and *Rum Punch*, renamed Jackie Brown (1997), into movies wisely using much of Elmore's dialogue verbatim.

Last Car To Elysian Fields – James Lee Burke (2003)

“The first week after Labour Day, after a summer of hot wind and drought that left the cane fields dust blown and spiderwebbed with cracks, rain showers once more danced across the wetlands, the temperature dropped twenty degrees, and the sky turned the hard flawless blue of an inverted ceramic bowl.”



Elmore Leonard never describes weather but James Lee Burke can envelop you in the sights, sounds and smells of Louisiana weather systems like no one else. His alcoholic hero Dave Robicheaux seems forever locked in a battle for redemption, confronting his own demons while facing malevolent forces which are somehow ingrained in the land, in the malignant history of the Deep South. As Michael Connelly, another great thriller writer, said when he picked up Burke's debut novel before writing his own first book, "I had stumbled onto something rare. I had found the real thing, a writer whose work transcends genre and elevates it to art." Given the critical acclaim and the amount of awards Burke has won, he is not alone in thinking that. There's a poetic, biblical intensity to his writing, elevating the mystery thriller genre onto another level, at times even allegorical and profound enough to become cathartic. He's written many novels now and I have them all.

James Lee Burke (1936 -) was born in Houston, Texas. He has an M.A. in English but has worked as a landman and a pipeliner for an oil company, as well as a newspaper reporter, professor, social worker on L.A.'s Skid Row, clerk for the Louisiana Employment Service, and instructor in the U. S. Job Corps. His novel *The Lost Get-Back Boogie* (1986) was rejected 111 times in nine years, but on publication was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.



Gillian Corderoy is scriptwriter for *64 Zoo Lane*, *Wibbly Pig*, *Postman Pat* and many other successful children's animations and puppet shows. Her choices reflect her interest in children's fiction, her weird sense of humour and her ability to juggle writing and motherhood.

Smith by Leon Garfield (1967)

“He was called Smith and was twelve years old. Which, in itself, was a marvel; for it seems as if the smallpox, the consumption, brain-fever, jail-fever and even the hangman's rope had given him a wide berth for fear of catching something. Or else they weren't quick enough.”

Leon Garfield treats kids as adults immersing them in the frightening, stinking world of the 18th century underclass with travelling actors (*Devil in the Fog* 1966), highwaymen (*Black Jack* 1968) and, in *Smith*, criminals. The stories bring home the harsh realities of life for the poor in the period; the dialogue and the descriptive details engage and excite. The novel begins with the eponymous Smith, a tough little street kid, out pick-pocketing for the day. He stumbles into the wrong street at the wrong time and witnesses the murder of an old man, whose pocket he has just picked. Smith wants to find the meaning of the document he took from the old man's pocket but he cannot read and thus is unable to decipher it. His quest leads to encounters with the sinister wooden-legged Mr. Black, into thieves' dens and dingy taverns. Later, Smith thwarts a coach robbery and saves the life of Mr. Mansfield, a wealthy blind gentleman, who takes him home to "give him a better life." Can Smith escape his past? Funny and heartbreaking, *Smith* is one of my favourite fictional characters.

Leon Garfield (1921 -1996) was born Brighton, Sussex. He started writing his vivid historical novels for children while working as a biochemical laboratory technician at the Whittington Hospital. He wrote more than thirty books, and scripted Shakespeare: The Animated Tales for television.

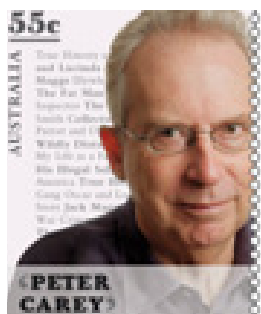
War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy (1869) (Richard Pevear's translation) **'Well, Prince, Genoa and Lucca are now no more than private estates of the Bonaparte family.'**

I like the modern way the opening plunges us into the middle of a conversation as if we are eavesdropping at the party. Tolstoy understands the psychology of his characters and gives them depth and credibility. Natasha Rostov is a spirited but naive girl yet by the end of the book she is a rather matronly homebody: I'm not quite sure what Tolstoy was saying about women here - he wasn't known for his feminist sympathies - but you can get so swept up in the story, so compelled, that you don't stop to analyse. I started reading this because I felt I should, then found I could not put it down (although I confess to skim-reading some of the detailing of battle manoeuvres of the massed armies of Napoleon.) I stayed up nearly all night to finish it. It is probably the best love story I have ever read.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) Born into an aristocratic Russian family in the pre-revolutionary world of serfs and czars, Tolstoy studied many languages, debauched with other young nobles, served in the Crimean War and travelled through the Caucasus studying peasant life. In 1878, he published Anna Karenina, with help from Sophia, Countess Tolstoy, his long-suffering wife who had thirteen children and was probably relieved when in later life he found religion and gave up most things.

Bliss by Peter Carey (1981)

"Harry Joy was to die three times, but it was his first death which was to have the greatest effect on him, and it is this first death which we shall now witness."



A man believes he has a perfect, suburban life, a career in advertising, wonderful children, loving wife until he suffers a massive heart attack and 'dies' for a few seconds. When he comes round, his life has been turned upside down when he realises that he is seeing everything with fresh eyes. It's the ultimate mid-life crisis. He rapidly concludes that he has woken up in hell as he discovers vile truths about his previous existence. It is a deeply dark comedy with a wonderfully romantic edge which is very me. I rather like reading about character's lives being in turmoil so it makes my own somewhat chaotic life as single parent and writer seem calm and well-organised by comparison. It is a novel that challenges conventional goals as Harry realises just how much he has been part of the rat race and what's really important in life. I love Carey's intense and bizarre imagination in this book, which is a contrast to later, historically based books like The True History of The Kelly Gang, though he was probably captivated by some of the quirky oddities in Ned Kelly's life.

Peter Carey (1943 -) was born in Australia. He was a student at Geelong Grammar School — after Rupert Murdoch had graduated and before Prince Charles arrived. In 1961 he studied science for a single unsuccessful year at Monash University, then got a job with an advertising agency. He read Faulkner, Joyce, Kerouac and began writing. He remained in advertising, gradually phasing it out until he moved to New York in 1990, where he teaches creative writing and wins Booker Prizes.



Danusia Iwasko, an Irish-Polish co-production, was destined to become a theatre director and playwright. With a keynote eclecticism, she has chosen a classic, an autobiography and a seminal work on acting theory and technique.

The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

"In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since."

This is my all time favourite classic. It's set just after the First World War, as the Depression starts to take hold of America. It's a time of great contrasts, extremes of poverty and excess which comes across in the novel through the constant flow of freeloaders at Gatsby's mansion, and the actions and desires of the secondary characters. Jay Gatsby is a wonderful, complex man and a character with twenty-first century relevance. His belief that he will get what he wants, or rather who he wants, and nothing and no one will stop him, is so of our time. Nowadays, ironically, he might be seen as one of life's "winners", with our current obsession with winners and losers, but when I first read it in the 80's he struck me as a sad, misguided individual, destined for a lonely, unsatisfying life. Fitzgerald's prose is beautiful, by turn simple and exact, deep and subtle. A truly great book.



F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896 – 1940) Often seen as the ultimate American novelist, Frances Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St Paul, Minnesota and started writing in the First World War, because he feared he would not survive. Though thought of as fabulously rich, it was only towards the end of his life that he made megabucks writing for the movies. An alcoholic, he actually wrote sober, and was a meticulous reviser. The ultimate schism with his mentally ill wife Zelda came when he accused her of stealing his material. An interesting charge, considering Fitzgerald's retort to critics of his concern with love and success: "But, my God! it was my material, and it was all I had to deal with." Who owns the copyright on shared experience? He died aged 44 of a heart attack, considering himself to be a failure.

Freedom in Exile by The Dalai Lama (2008)

"I fled Tibet on 7th March 1959."

My second choice is the Dalai Lama's autobiography, the story of how an ordinary little boy was destined to become one of the world's most important leaders and the harsh reality of the impact on Tibet of Chinese Communism. It is, of course, full of humour and wisdom. The Dalai Lama's capacity for compassion is awe-inspiring; his combination of great spiritual insights with a sense of fun and a keen wit is uplifting. He has such an importance to millions of people yet never seems to take himself seriously or stand on his dignity. His life has also been a thriller with his night-time flight from his enemies, a marathon journey across mountain ranges. The book gives you a first hand account of this true Tibetan monk's extraordinary life.



Lhama Dhondrub, The Dalai Lama (1935-) Born to a peasant family in Tibet, Lhama Dhondrub was soon recognized as the 14th Dalai Lama or 'Ocean of Wisdom' in Mongolian. He trained as a monk becoming the head of the Tibetan government in their fight against the occupying forces of China whilst still a teenager. Since 1959, the Dalai Lama has been the leader in exile and in 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Respect for Acting by Uta Hagen [1973]

"We all have passionate beliefs and opinions about the art of acting."

My third book reflects my love of theatre and play writing. It is a book that I would recommend for anyone who wants to write for theatre or film and television. Hugely influential throughout the world, this book is the summing up of Ute Hagen's theories and practices for teaching actors. Ute came from the Method school of acting but brings her own unique insights and exercises to the craft. Her book teaches us how as actors and writers we can create a real and believable world. It has been instrumental in helping me create dramas around different issues, often with non-professionals using impro, and develop my own ways of working and teaching in the theatre. Fantastic.



Ute Hagen (1919 - 2004) Born in Germany and raised in Wisconsin, she studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London and became an award-winning stage actor. In 1957, she began teaching at the Herbert Berghof (her late husband) Studio in New York City's Greenwich Village. She was still appearing Off Broadway in *Collected Stories* at the age of 79.



Simona Sideri has Italian parents, a Dutch childhood and an English education which gives her a love of pasta, radical causes and English literature which, coupled with a career in children's publishing, informs her book choices.

Wise Children by Angela Carter (1991)

"Why is London like Budapest?"

A. Because it is two cities divided by a river.

Good morning! Let me introduce myself. . My name is Dora Chance. Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks."

This tale of elderly twin chorus girls, Dora and Nora, living in Brixton is Carter's last novel and draws on all her signature themes of gender, family, sex and scandal in a make-believe world, a world of fickle fame. It opens on the twins' 75th birthday, which is, coincidentally or not, the same as Shakespeare's - 23rd April - and explores the complicated world of their extended theatrical family through Dora's memories. Like all Carter's fictional worlds, it is populated by freaks who are more real and often more sympathetic than so-called normal people. The story leaps from one crazy situation to another but she tells a great story with women at the centre. Carter is an unsurpassed magic realist often fearlessly re-examining folk and fairy tales through uncompromising feminist eyes. 'Forbidden' topics such as pornography, sexual fetish, rape, incest, and cannibalism are Angela's meat and drink; she embraces anarchy and champions the weak and disadvantaged. A brave writer.



Angela Carter (1940 - 1992) was born in Sussex, read English at the University of Bristol, then lived much of her life around Streatham, south London. She wrote prolifically publishing her first novel, *Shadow Dance* in 1966. Two of Carter's works, *The Magic Toyshop* and *The Company of Wolves* were made into films, and many of her short stories have been interpreted for the stage. As Roz Kaveney puts it, Carter's oeuvre is "a cabinet of bright curiosities ... a perpetual source of righteous thinking." She died of lung cancer at the age of 52.

Alanna: The First Adventure. The Song of the Lioness series by Tamora Pierce (1983)

"That is my decision; we need not discuss it," said the man at the desk.

Tamora Pierce does many of the things Angela Carter does except she is writing for girls, just when their personalities are forming, and providing them with strong female characters. She's created a fantasy land called Tortall full of kings, knights, baddies and sorcerers, with evil cities, and inhospitable deserts populated by nomads. It's a sort of Middle Ages but with magic, talking animals and so on. The story is always fast and furious, but most interesting is her powerful female heroine, an excellent fighter, good leader and loyal friend. Alanna is a stubborn tomboy who wants to be a knight so disguises herself as her twin brother, who detests fighting and wants to be a wizard anyway. Brave and resourceful, she learns to fence, ride and fight in order to achieve her dream. A great teenage girl role model.



Tamora Pierce (1954 -) born in Pennsylvania, as a child she was fascinated by *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and began to write herself, focussing on creating her own imaginary lands and, what other fantasy novels failed to include: teenage female warriors. She lives in Manhattan.

The Wolves of Willoughby Chase series by Joan Aiken (1962)

“It was dusk - winter dusk. Snow lay white and shining over the pleated hills, and icicles hung from the forest trees.”

Thus begins this tale of roaming wolves and bleak landscapes. This is an exciting historical series with a twist as, in this world, James II has never been deposed, though good kind James III is under constant threat from Hanoverian and Burgundian plotters. Aiken has created a hyper-Dickensian version of the 19th century, which sucks in the reader. There is a Channel Tunnel through which ravaging wolf packs from Europe have invaded; London is populated by duchesses and hackney cabs; volcanoes and tidal waves beset the land. Its intrepid heroine, Bonnie, left alone in Willoughby Chase by her parents who have gone to sea, falls into the clutches of the wicked Miss Slightcarp. Will she ever free Willoughby Chase from this evil governess who is more merciless than the howling wolves? Bonnie's adventures are inspirational for young female readers and there's her friend, Simon, the gooseboy, for the lads. Check the delightful, child-friendly website <http://www.joanaiken.com>



Joan Aiken (1924–2004) was born in Rye, Sussex, into a literary family. She began writing at the age of five and her first collection of stories, *All You've Ever Wanted* was published in 1953. She wrote over a hundred books (including *The Way to Write for Children*) and in 1999 she was awarded an MBE for her contributions to children's literature.



Anthony Cox has lived and worked in Japan and France; he loves learning new languages, reading about history and trying to write thrillers, hence his book selection.

Coming Up For Air by George Orwell (1939)

“The idea really came to me the day I got my false teeth.”

I love the way the story takes us from a middle-aged man's dentures and ends with machine guns spitting from windows. George “Fatty” Bowling is an insurance salesman, with a wife he does not love and two children he finds annoying. He wins some money on a horse and decides to spend it on a nostalgic trip to places where he spent his childhood, which allows Orwell, via his main protagonist, to reflect on the events of the previous decade. Set shortly before the Second World War, Orwell exposes the means adopted by government to persuade the populace to go to war. It's Orwell's only novel written in the first person and more of a memory play and prophetic fantasy, than a work of social realism. It's a novel of ideas focusing on the radical changes experienced in England in the first four decades of the twentieth century—and the frightening changes still to come. It feels like a prequel to 1984.



Eric Arthur Blair (1903 –1950) better known as George Orwell, is most famous for the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the satirical novella *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), an account of his experiences as a volunteer on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. He has contributed the terms ‘Orwellian’ and ‘Big Brother’ —now bywords for any totalitarian or manipulative social phenomenon —to the English vernacular though he must turn in his grave if he watches Channel 5!

Out by Natsuo Kirino [1997]

“She got to the parking lot earlier than usual. The thick, damp July darkness engulfed her as she stepped out the car.”

Four ordinary housewives, working in a box lunch factory, are pushed by circumstances to extreme and bloody action. One of them, Yayoi Yamamoto, is married to Kenji, an abusive layabout who fritters away her salary and their meagre savings in a

clandestine baccarat room while showering a prostitute with unrequited love. Yayoi cracks and murders Kenji and turns to her co-workers to help her dispose of the body. Kirino pulls no punches in her graphic and gory descriptions of the process. The women fall foul of Satake a psychotic mobster, who gets blamed for the murder. He is the most sympathetic male character in the novel; he stabs a woman to death while having sex with her in a gruesome flashback, which says a lot about the tone of the book. I like the vivid recreation of the dark side to Japanese society: debt, domestic and gangster violence and desperation. Kirino uses the framework of the plot to hang a commentary on the role of women in Japanese society. A lurid, grisly, preposterous crime thriller with a difference written in functional prose with occasional flashes of lyrical, very Japanese, poesy.



Matzo Kirino 桐野 夏生, (1951 -) born in Kanazawa is a prolific writer who began her career as a romance novelist and morphed into 'The Queen of Japanese Crime,' with her unique brand of sexually uncompromising, ultra-violent thrillers: she says there was no market for romantic fiction in Japan. Her favourite Western writer is Flannery O'Connor.

The Outsider by Albert Camus (1942) Joseph Laredo translation

"Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegraph from the home. 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday."

This is a novel I read and re-read as a teenager in the original French. Its theme is alienation. Set in Algeria during the period of French colonisation, the story follows a pied noir called Meursault, a young clerk, in the days around his mother's funeral. We share his thoughts and witness his dramatic journey from a state of estrangement with himself and society to self-discovery. The novel plays with notions of truth, personal and consensual. Meursault is not condemned to death for killing an Arab, after a day in the hot sun, but because he will not play the game; he will not tell a lie. Lying is not only saying what isn't true: It is also saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels. Everyone does it, every day, to make life simpler. But Meursault doesn't want to make life simpler. He says what he is and refuses to hide his feelings. For example, he is asked to say that he regrets his crime, in time-honoured fashion and replies with fatal honesty that he feels more annoyance about it than true regret. This nuance condemns him; its brutal honesty threatens society. *L'Étranger* came top in an academic study naming the books young men found most influential (young women chose *Jane Eyre*).



Albert Camus (1913 – 1960) writer and 'absurdist' philosopher, born into a French settler pied-noir family Algeria. In 1949, Camus founded the Group for International Liaisons within the Revolutionary Union Movement in opposition to aspects of André Breton's Surrealist movement. In 1957, Camus became the first African-born writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature: He died in a car accident two years later.

