

100 MUST-READ

# CLASSIC NOVELS



NICK RENNISON



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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is not intended to provide a list of the 100 ‘best’ novels ever published. Given the sheer range of ‘classic’ fiction and the unpredictability of individual taste, any such definitive list is an impossibility. It may just be possible to agree on the indisputable greatness of a handful of novels (*War and Peace* is an example), although even then the chances are that there will be a few maverick voices raised in opposition, but a longer list is bound to cause debate. In the end, my choice was guided by the title of the book. I have chosen 100 books to read which I think will provide some sense of the enormous range of fiction, from the adventures of a would-be knight errant in 17th-century Spain to the narrative of an alienated man’s crimes in 20th-century Algeria, that can be described as ‘classic’.

The entries are arranged A to Z by author. They describe the plot of each title (while aiming to avoid too many ‘spoilers’), offer some value judgements and say something briefly about the author’s place in the history of literature and/or their other works. I have noted significant film versions (with dates of release) where applicable, followed by ‘Read On’ lists comprised of books by the same author, books by stylistically similar writers or books on a theme relevant to the main entry. I have

also included a number of 'Read on a Theme' lists which are scattered throughout the text after appropriate titles. The symbol » before an author name (e.g. » Charles Dickens) indicates that one or more of their books is covered in the A to Z author entries.

Although the blurb-writers of many modern novels would have us believe otherwise, an instant classic is pretty much a contradiction in terms – part of the process by which a book attains classic status involves the passage of time. In picking a list of classics, some kind of cut-off date is needed. In a sense, any date selected (1939? 1945? 1960?) would be an arbitrary one, but I decided eventually on 1950. It is a conveniently rounded figure and it means that the passage of more than a half a century has provided time for a variety of assessments of a particular work to be made and its merits as a potential 'classic' to be widely discussed. All the books chosen were published before that date. (The date attached to each first choice book in the guide refers to the first publication of the novel in book form.) All books in the Read on a Theme menus were also published before 1950 but, in the Read Ons to individual entries, I have allowed myself to choose titles that first appeared after 1950 as well as before.

Most authors receive one entry only. The original intention was to have 100 authors and 100 books but it soon became clear that this was impractical. How can the richness and variety of authors like Dickens, Dostoevsky and Hardy be represented by only one book? How can *Anna Karenina* be included in a list of 100 must-read classics and *War and Peace* be excluded? Or vice versa? Yet, if every masterpiece by a dozen or so writers were to be included, there would be room for very few other authors. In the end, I decided (again, more or less arbitrarily) that the most any author could have would be two titles.



I have ignored the constraints of the title in one instance only. It seems to me that Chekhov is, indisputably, one of the greatest, most insightful and most humane writers of fiction in history, but his fiction consists almost exclusively of short stories. His early narrative, *The Shooting Party*, is a novel by most definitions of the word but it is not his best work and it seemed to me perverse to choose it in preference to the short stories. In the end I decided to stretch a point and include his *Selected Short Stories* among the 100 Must-Read Classic Novels.



# INTRODUCTION

What is a classic? Is it, as the dictionary defines it, ‘a standard work, one of established excellence and quality’? Was the American critic Alfred Kazin right (if a bit pompous) when he described a classic as ‘a book that survives the circumstances that made it possible yet alone keeps these circumstances alive?’ There are, thankfully, other definitions available. For some of us, a classic is simply a fat book we’ve taken on holiday and not read. It may come in various versions. There is the Russian version, which contains so many characters with so many names, some of which seem to be arbitrarily interchangeable, that the reader’s head is spinning after a couple of chapters. There is the French version which is always about adultery. There is the English version, often written by a severe-looking Victorian gentleman with the kind of beard in which birds can nest unnoticed. Whatever the version, we have all had the experience of packing a hefty Penguin Classic in our suitcase, virtuously intent on polishing off » Proust or *War and Peace* on the beach, only to return with the book and its pages scarcely disturbed. More than a hundred years ago, » Mark Twain wrote that, ‘A classic is something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read.’ His words, often enough, still hold true today.

For the book snob, a classic means something else. It's a weapon that he (and it's usually he) can wield in the war to prove that he's cleverer than everyone else. With that sneer that says, 'Surely you must have read that, haven't you?' forever on his face, he's always several steps ahead of the rest of us. The book snob has read *Don Quixote* four times, twice in the original Castilian. He's ploughed his way through *Moby Dick* and *The Brothers Karamazov* without skipping the dull bits. He knows classics in languages like Serbo-Croat and Farsi which we didn't know even possessed classics. It's little use trying to compete with him. Even if, by some small miracle, we have read *War and Peace* on the beach and want to boast about it, the book snob thinks it's much over-rated and prefers an earlier novel by »» Tolstoy that has only ever been translated once, in 1903, and has been out of print since »» Graham Greene was in short trousers.

For the literary academic, on the other hand, the classic represents a job opportunity. All those novels that are set on literature courses throughout the land need a full-scale critical apparatus to support them. They need introductions and notes and plot summaries and character analyses. These are not books that can be just read. They require experts to guide us through them. When »» Dickens writes about a one-legged man, it is assumed that we would be lost without extensive footnotes which chronicle the history of the wooden leg from Roman times to the Victorian era, describe methods of amputation in 19th-century England, list the other uniped characters in Dickens's novels and speculate wildly about the psychological meaning of the author's interest in limb loss. There is no shortage of assistant lecturers in literature and cultural studies prepared to step up to the mark and provide them.

This book has been compiled with a different view of ‘classics’ in mind. These are books that don’t always need scholarly introductions. They don’t always need to be supported by a vast scaffolding of notes and references. We shouldn’t try to read them as an act of masochistic duty on some Mediterranean beach nor use them as gambling chips in a game of literary oneupmanship. Books like *War and Peace*, *Great Expectations* and *Madame Bovary* (all included in this guide) deserve to be read because they are at least as vivid and exciting and entertaining as the most contemporary of bestsellers and usually more so.

I have tried to make the selection of 100 titles as interesting and varied as I could. There are some books and authors that selected themselves. What guide to classic fiction could possibly exclude Tolstoy or Dickens or » George Eliot? Or » Jane Austen, » Thomas Hardy and » James Joyce? However, compiling a list of 100 books allows plenty of scope for more unusual and less well-known titles and writers. » Halldór Laxness, » Sigrid Undset and » Italo Svevo may not be household names, even in literary households (although two of them were awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature), but they are all, in my opinion, great writers and I have taken the opportunity to include novels by them in the book. There is also a tendency to believe that a ‘classic’ must necessarily be gloomy and tragic in its subject matter. Comic fiction is often seen, by its very nature, to be somehow lightweight. Looking through the list, there is certainly quite a high proportion of novels that look at life with an unflinching awareness of all its miseries, failures and disappointments. However, I see no reason why the brilliance of great comic writing should not be acknowledged and authors like » Stella Gibbons, » P.G. Wodehouse and » Flann O’Brien, in my opinion, more than deserve the status of classics.

In the end, I return to the argument of an earlier paragraph. The best classics shouldn't be slightly scary cultural monuments which, as Twain claimed, everybody wants to have read but nobody wants to read. All the books in this guide, in their very different ways, are worth reading because, as the best fiction should do, they continue to provide exciting ways of entering the emotional experience of a vast range of people from all sorts of countries, backgrounds, periods of history and kinds of society. Whether the world they open up is Russia in the 19th century, Bath in the Regency era, Dublin on 16 June 1904, the American Deep South after the Civil War or London in the 1930s, they give us the pleasures of empathy and enlightenment that good fiction always offers. They provide an enlargement of the necessarily narrow horizons of our own small lives.

# A-Z OF ENTRIES

## **LOUISA MAY ALCOTT (1832–88) USA**

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### LITTLE WOMEN (1868)

The daughter of Bronson Alcott, a renowned American educationalist, Louisa May Alcott published more than two hundred books but is largely remembered for just one – *Little Women*. Following the fortunes of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy March, the daughters of an army chaplain in the American Civil War, the book records both the everyday pleasures and the trials and tribulations of their lives. Would-be writer Jo has the excitement of getting a story published. The wealthy Mr Laurence and his grandson Laurie become close friends of the family. Laurie's young tutor falls in love with Meg. A telegram arrives with the bad news that Mr March is hospitalized in Washington DC and Mrs March, partly financed by money from the sale of Jo's hair, is obliged to travel there to look after him. As the girls, based on Alcott and her own sisters, progress from teenage years to young womanhood, they face further crisis and tragedy. The saintly Beth contracts scarlet fever while visiting sick neighbours and, as the other girls grow up and face the challenges of work and romance, she has to battle with terminal illness. In later life, Alcott wrote in her journal that she was 'tired of providing moral pap for

the young' and published a number of novels which attempted to deal with what she saw as more adult themes, but *Little Women* survives and thrives nearly a century and a half after it was first published precisely because it is much more than just a simplistic morality tale. The novel is set very firmly in the place and period in which it was written – readers can learn much about the social history of mid-19th-century America from reading *Little Women* – but it has a universality that transcends both.

🎬 **Film version:** *Little Women* (starring Elizabeth Taylor as Amy and June Allyson as Jo, 1949); *Little Women* (with Winona Ryder as Jo, 1994)

### 📖 **Read on**

#### *Little Men*

Geraldine Brooks, *March* (a modern Pulitzer Prize-winning novel which takes the father of Alcott's March family as its central character); Susan Coolidge, *What Katy Did*; Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Little House on the Prairie*



## JANE AUSTEN (1775–1817) UK

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### EMMA (1816)

Young, well-off and spoiled, Emma Woodhouse is complacently convinced that she knows what is best for everyone, particularly in matters of the heart. Her matchmaking skills are largely directed towards her young, amiable and innocent *protégée* Harriet Smith, whom Emma decides would be ideally matched with the clergyman, Mr Elton. Elton, however, has other ideas and, despising Harriet for her lack of social status, he has his eye on Emma herself. Emma plays with the idea of being in love with Frank Churchill, recently arrived as a visitor in her village, but her real, unrecognized feelings are for the sympathetic and warm-hearted local squire, George Knightley who watches her attempts to shape other people's lives with a mixture of affection and irritation. As Emma's assorted schemes collapse in embarrassment and, occasionally, distress, she is forced to acknowledge that she knows less about herself and about other people than she once believed she did. 'Three or four families in a country village,' Jane Austen wrote in a letter to one of her relatives, 'is the very thing to work on.' It was the world which she knew intimately herself. Born in a Hampshire village where her father was rector, she spent most of her life in the midst of her family either there or at Chawton, another village in Hampshire, or at Bath. Although she had several suitors, she never married. She died of Addison's disease in Winchester at the age of only 41. All this might suggest that, as a novelist, she worked on a restricted canvas. *Emma*, as much as any of her novels, shows that there is far more to Jane Austen than the image of a rural spinster implies. Her tough-minded

realism about human motivation and self-deceit, about the manoeuvrings of the marriage market and the institution of the family give her works a sharpness and a truthfulness all their own.

🎬 **Film versions:** *Emma* (starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Emma, 1996); *Clueless* (a version of the story updated to 1990s Beverley Hills, 1995)

### 📖 **Read on**

*Mansfield Park*; *Persuasion*

Joan Aiken, *Mansfield Revisited*; Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women*

## PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (1813)

Jane Austen began writing *Pride and Prejudice*, then entitled *First Impressions*, when she was in her early twenties but it was rejected by a publisher and only finally appeared, in a much revised form and under a new title, in 1813. The book focuses on the Bennet family of mother, father and five nubile daughters, thrown into confusion by the arrival of two rich and unattached young men in the neighbourhood. Charles Bingley leases Netherfield, a house close to the Bennet residence and stays there together with his friend Fitzwilliam Darcy. During visits exchanged between the two houses, Bingley falls in love with the eldest Bennet daughter, Jane, while Darcy and Elizabeth, the second eldest, circle one another warily. Witty, clever and ironic, Elizabeth is intrigued by Darcy but dislikes his apparent coldness and arrogance and is prejudiced against him by stories she hears from others. At different times throughout the novel, misunderstandings, social snobbery and self-will conspire to keep both Jane and Bingley and Darcy and

Elizabeth apart. But true love finally triumphs. A supporting cast of characters, often richly comic, orbits the central figures of Darcy and Elizabeth. The ill-matched relationship between the ironic, detached Mr Bennet and his gushing, silly wife is beautifully observed. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a splendidly self-satisfied and snobbish representative of everything that is bad about the aristocracy. Mr Collins, the clergyman and toady to Lady Catherine, unwittingly reveals himself in his true colours during the memorable scene in which he proposes marriage to Elizabeth. *Pride and Prejudice* has long been Jane Austen's most popular novel and, with its clear-eyed portrait of the ways in which society's conventions dictate the shifting patterns of the relationships between the men and women in it, it is one of the greatest comedies of social manners in English literature.

🎬 **Film versions:** *Pride and Prejudice* (starring Greer Garson as Elizabeth and Laurence Olivier as Darcy, 1940); *Pride and Prejudice* (Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth, Colin Firth as Darcy, 1995, TV); *Pride and Prejudice* (Keira Knightley as Elizabeth, Mathew Macfadyen as Darcy, 2005)

### 📖 **Read on**

#### *Sense and Sensibility*

» Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*; Alison Lurie, *Only Children*; Emma Tennant, *Pemberley* (a sequel, published in 1993); Joanna Trollope, *Other People's Children*; Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*

## READONATHEME: THREE OR FOUR FAMILIES IN A COUNTRY VILLAGE

- » Jane Austen, *Emma*
- » Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*
- Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*
- F.M. Mayor, *The Rector's Daughter*
- Barbara Pym, *Some Tame Gazelle*
- Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*
- » Anthony Trollope, *Framley Parsonage*

## HONORÉ DE BALZAC (1799–1850) France

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### EUGÉNIE GRANDET (1833)

Balzac began his career as a novelist with pseudonymously published historical novels in imitation of » Sir Walter Scott but, as he turned to fiction with a contemporary setting, he gradually evolved a grandly ambitious plan to write a series of novels which would provide a panoramic portrait of French society in the first half of the 19th century. *La Comédie Humaine* (*The Human Comedy*), as he entitled the whole project, was never finished but, even so, it runs to more than 90 individual but interconnected works of fiction which together include thousands of characters. *Eugénie Grandet*, one of the earliest novels in