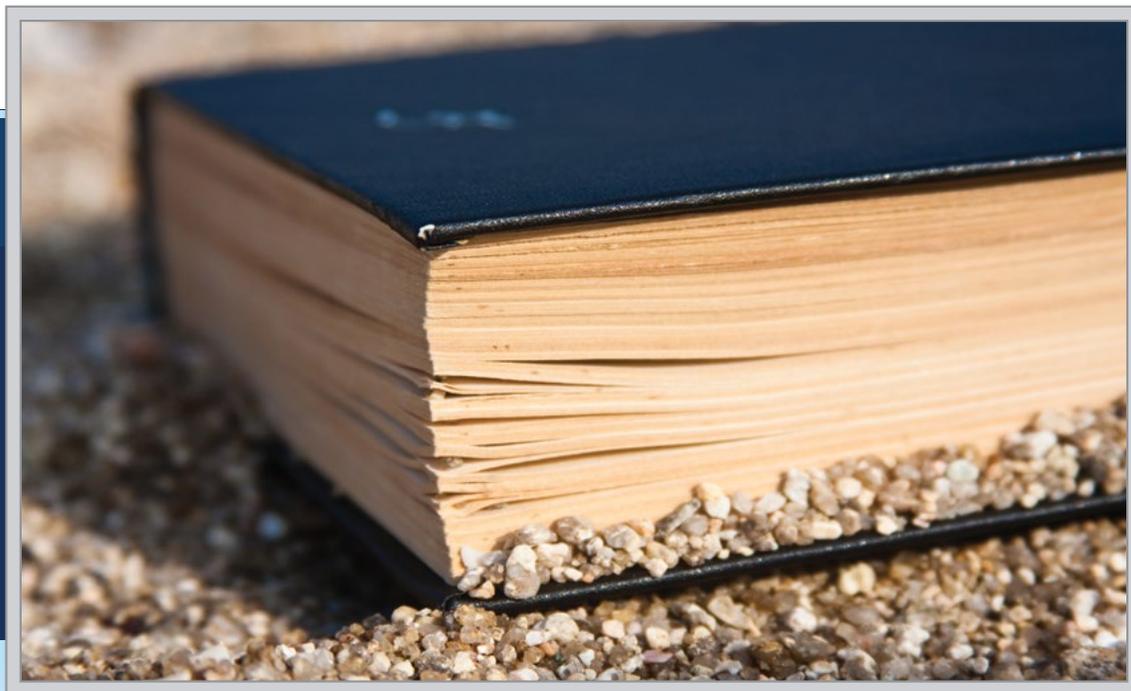


# BEACH BOOKS: 2014-2016

What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?



Executive Summary of a report by  
the National Association of Scholars  
February 2016



The full 200-page report is available at  
[www.nas.org/beachbooks](http://www.nas.org/beachbooks)

## Contents

2	Quick Takes
4	Introduction
4	How Common Reading Programs Work
5	Progressive Politics and Bland Books
9	Peddling the Books
10	The Books
13	Analysis: The Status Quo
14	Conclusion
15	Recommendations
17	Recommended Books

## QUICK TAKES

### The Findings

College common reading programs are:

1. **Dominated by Mediocre, New Books.** Most common readings are recent, trendy, and intellectually unchallenging books.
2. **Predominantly Progressive.** The assigned books frequently emphasize progressive political themes—illegal immigrants contribute positively to America, the natural environment must be saved immediately—and almost never possess subject matter disfavored by progressives.
3. **Meant to Build Community.** Colleges see their common readings more as exercises in community-building than as means to prepare students for academic life.
4. **A Homogeneous Market.** A profitable common reading genre has emerged, in which publishers and authors market a homogenized product to a highly predictable market of college selection committees. Students are the captive readership of this market.
5. **Enduringly Popular.** A significant minority of colleges abandon their common reading programs each year, but so far they have been replaced by other colleges starting new common reading programs.

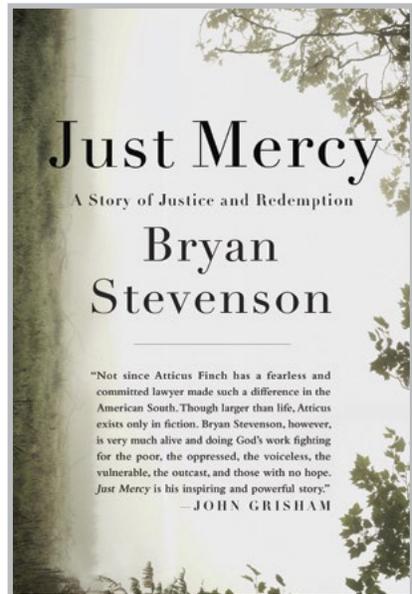
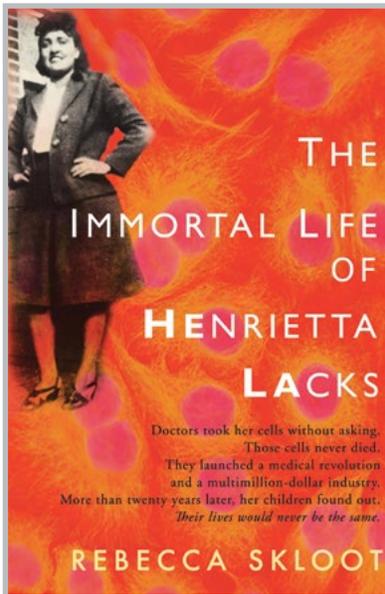
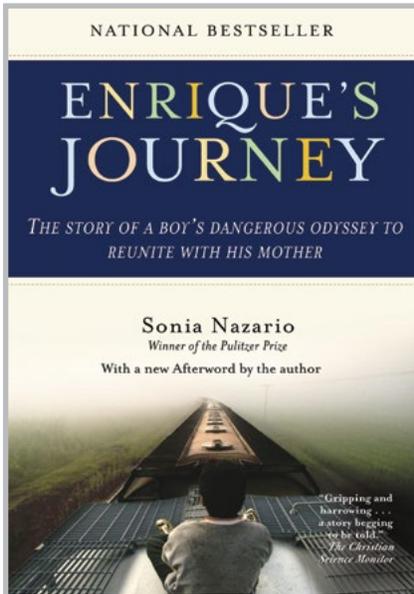
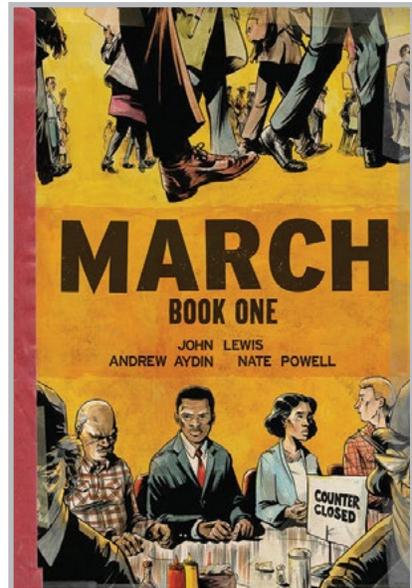
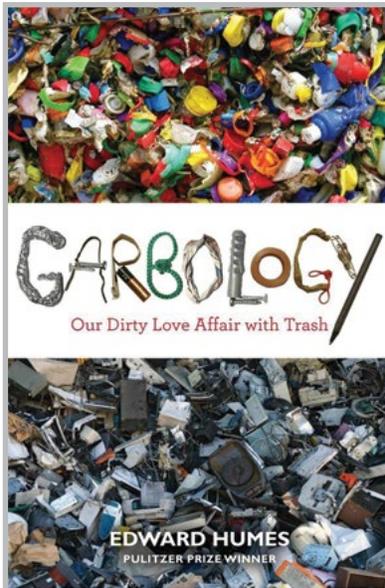
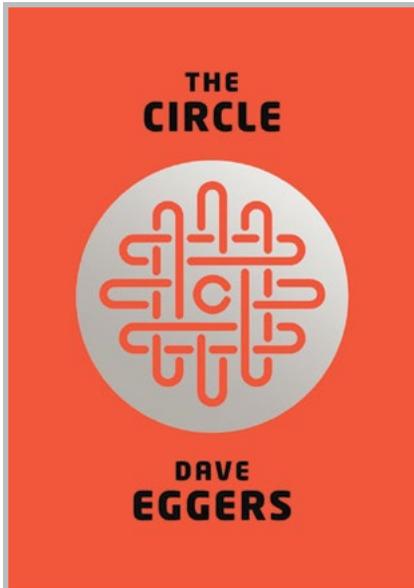
### The Facts

1. **Recent:** More than half of common reading assignments (58% in 2014, 60% in 2015) were published between 2010 and the present. Only 12 assignments out of 738 (1.6%) were published before 1900, and another 5 (0.7%) between 1900 and 1945.
2. **Nonfiction:** 71% of assignments in 2014 and 75% of assignments in 2015 were memoirs, biographies, essays, and other non-fiction.

3. **Author Speaking:** In 2014, 53% of colleges with common reading programs hosted personal appearances by the authors, and in 2015, 54% of colleges with common reading programs had author appearances.
4. **Not Mandatory:** In 2014, 29% of colleges required students to read their common reading. In 2015 the figure was 28% of colleges.

### The Characteristics

1. **Almost No Classics:** Only a scattering of colleges assigned works that could be considered classics. With few exceptions, the hundreds of common reading programs across the country ignored books of lasting merit.
2. **Civically Engaged:** Common readings are overwhelmingly chosen to foster civic engagement; they scarcely mention the complementary and equally valuable virtues of the disengaged life of the mind. They give no sense of why or how college differs from the world outside, and why those differences are valuable.
3. **Nothing Foreign:** Classics in translation were nearly absent—and so was anything modern in translation. Even common readings about foreigners generally were written in English, not translated from a foreign language.
4. **No Modern Classics:** Even in confining themselves to living authors, common reading programs neglect some of the best ones, such as Martin Amis, Wendell Berry, J. M. Coetzee, Annie Dillard, Alice Munro, V. S. Naipaul, Philip Roth, Wole Soyinka, and Tom Wolfe.
5. **A Narrow, Predictable Genre:** The common reading genre is *parochial, contemporary, commercial, optimistic, juvenile, obsessed with suffering, and progressive.*



**Six of the most popular common readings.**

Cover images: Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (2013); Edward Humes, *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair With Trash* (2012); John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, *March: Book One* (2013); Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother*. (2006); Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010); Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014).

## INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of American colleges and universities assign a summer reading to entering freshmen—usually one book, which the students are asked to read outside their courses. For many students, this is the only book they will read in common with their classmates.

Most colleges see the key purpose of a common reading program as fostering community on campus and student activism in the world. Many also say that common reading sets academic expectations, begins conversations, and encourages critical thinking, but these goals

are meant to be achieved within the matrix of community and activism. What kind of books do colleges assign? The common reading genre is *parochial*, *contemporary*, *commercial*, *optimistic*, *juvenile*, *obsessed with suffering*, and *progressive*. Colleges rarely assign classic texts.

Our study of common readings covers more than 350 colleges and universities for the academic years 2014-2015 and 2015-16.

## HOW COMMON READING PROGRAMS WORK

Colleges generally give students—freshmen or the entire community—one book in their common reading programs. Students are supposed to read the book over the summer so that they can discuss it during orientation.

It isn't easy to set up or maintain a common reading program. The College of William and Mary just began one in 2015, and getting the program up and running involved the Dean's Office reading lists of common readings assigned at other universities; five separate deans reading and approving the final selection; arranging with Vintage Books to publish a new print run of the book; arranging a three-person faculty panel on the book in September; and adding questions to the students' orientation survey to elicit their feedback on the program. The purchase and mailing alone of the common reading cost more than \$18,000.<sup>1</sup>

Some colleges encourage faculty to teach the common reading in their courses; others incorporate it into required first-year courses.



Joshua Davis, *Spare Parts: Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream* (2014), cover image.

Most colleges don't integrate common reading into their regular curricula, but a few schools model how it can be done.

### Program Goals

Common reading programs aim to familiarize new students with how college students think, read, discuss, and write. They are meant to establish academic standards—and to establish a sense of community among students, both with other students and with the faculty. How well they do either of these things is open to question, but for most of the programs the emphasis falls on community building over academic preparation. Common reading programs are also meant to inculcate institutional identity and institutional goals—under which cover progressive tenets such as *diversity* and *sustainability* often creep in. Books are selected to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, both to satisfy the varieties of student taste and disciplinary interest and so as to get as broad an institutional “buy-in” as possible from the administration and the faculty. The basic rationale, however, is that if students can be brought to care enough about a book to read it, and even think it's interesting enough to talk about with their friends, they might also care enough about college to make a real go at their education.

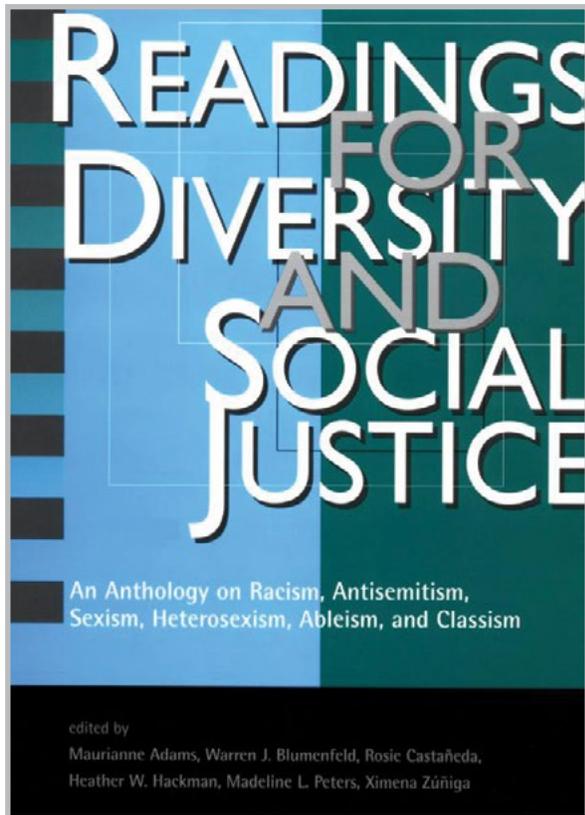
## PROGRESSIVE POLITICS AND BLAND BOOKS

*Community, academic expectations, conversation, social activism, and thoughtfulness* are among the top stated goals of common reading programs.<sup>2</sup> These objectives largely subsume an academic experience to extra-academic aims.

These keywords telegraph the content of those goals: all save *academic expectations* are the euphemistic jargon of the left. For instance, Salem State University (Massachusetts) desires “thoughtful discussion of ideas”; in 2015 it chose Joshua Davis' soft-sell for amnestying illegal immigrants, *Spare Parts: Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream* (2014).<sup>3</sup> Common reading programs state their goals with words that make a leftward skew in the book selections just about a sure thing.

These basic programmatic goals have been elaborated by a constellation of other words and phrases that largely partakes of progressive jargon as well: *active citizenship, awareness, biodiversity, civic engagement, community service, critical thinking, diversity, engaged, equity, ethics, inclusion, injustice, intercultural understanding, local talent, meaningful, multiple disciplinary application, perspectives, powerful, readability, relevant, responsibility, sensitivity, shared experience, social justice, social responsibility, timely, and tolerance*. (Critical thinking, ethics, and tolerance are not monopolies of any political party, and they should be part of a college education. What we note and critique here is the use of this hijacked vocabulary to forward progressive political projects.) These

Common reading programs state their goals with words that make a leftward skew in the book selections just about a sure thing.



Maurianne Adams, et al., *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice (Third Edition)* (2013), cover image.

programmatic keywords generally reinforce the leftward skew in the content of book selections.

In 2015, Webster University (Missouri) provided what may be the clearest example of this process. The Webster selection committee chose its reading

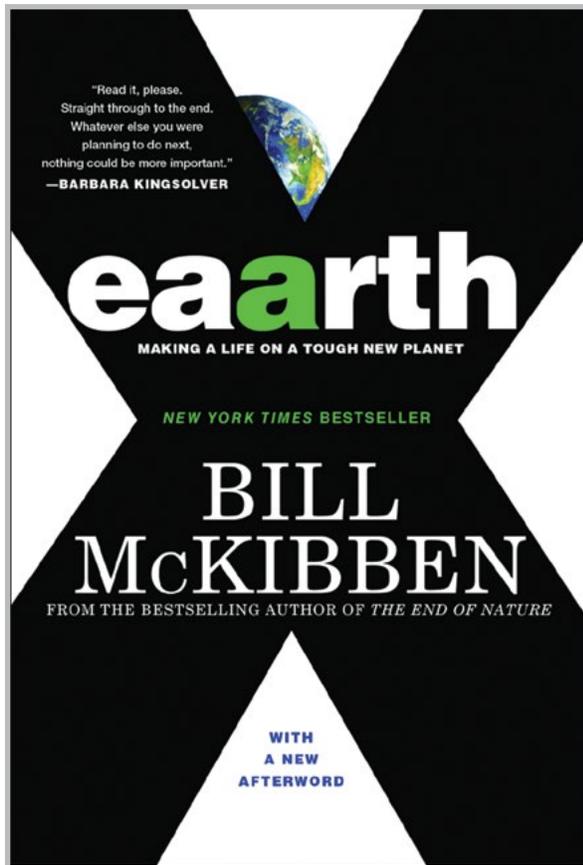
with the intention of raising awareness and encouraging discussions that will enhance our students' critical thinking skills and intercultural competence, helping us all to be more engaged global citizens. By exploring these readings, we hope to promote a society in which citizens challenge injustice and value diversity and inclusion.

The book it chose was the anthology of *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*.<sup>4</sup>

These programmatic keywords reinforce other skews. The calls for *civic engagement*, *community service*, *relevance*, and *responsibility* filter out books concerned with the disinterested life of the mind. The demand for a reading that is about something in the world leads to endless memoirs and works of popular nonfiction concerned with life beyond the college walls. Even a memoir such as Liz Murray's *Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard*, whose point is the value of going to college, is entirely about the struggle to get to Harvard, and not the character of her life once she has arrived.

### Timely Propaganda

Common reading choices continue to reflect the issues of the day. The sharp rise of selections on African American themes in 2015-16 coincides with the Ferguson protests and the ensuing Black Lives Matter campaign; and it is doubtful that, absent Ferguson, Augustana College (Illinois), Hampshire College (Massachusetts), and Norfolk State University (Virginia) all would have decided in 2015 to assign James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. The campaign to amnesty illegal immigrants likewise has produced a sharp uptick of books on themes of immigration, particularly illegal immigration. The popularity of Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* (6 selections in 2014-15 and 5 in 2015-16) evidently derives from this campaign. The rise of the transgender movement, with its insistence on contingent sexuality, probably inspired a faint echo in Bluffton University's (Ohio) choice of Marge Piercy's *He, She, and It*, a 1991 novel on a woman who falls in love with a cyborg.



Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (2010), cover image.

### Barriers to Choosing Better Books

Common readings generally are chosen by oversized committees with few English professors on them, and tasked to select a book for its broad appeal as much as for its quality. The University of Cincinnati's 21-person Common Read Committee considered 150 books and narrowed the pool down to 6 finalists before finally settling on *The Other Wes Moore* for 2015-16 and *A Deadly Wandering* for 2016-17.<sup>5</sup> Committees at Pacific Lutheran University (Washington), Southern Methodist University (Texas), and University of Virginia School of Engineering & Applied Science are smaller but still bulky with 15 members each.<sup>6</sup>

The common readings that emerge from these committees usually are homogeneous and bland. The desire to appeal to incoming students who have rarely if ever read an adult book on their own also leads selection committees to choose low-grade "accessible" works that are presumed to appeal to "book virgins." Since common reading programs are generally either voluntary or mandatory without an enforcement mechanism, such "book virgins" have to be wooed with simple, unchallenging works.<sup>7</sup>

### Diversity-Defined and Sustainability-Sponsored Readings

A significant number of books are chosen by the academy's diversity offices: the Diversity Cabinet co-sponsors the common reading at the University of New Orleans, the Diversity Council co-sponsors at Corning Community College (New York), and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion co-sponsors at Bunker Hill Community College (Massachusetts).<sup>8</sup>

The sustainability programs are not yet institutional sponsors of common readings, but their influence can be seen in the uptick of sustainability themes for common reading programs. The University

The desire to appeal to incoming students who have rarely if ever read an adult book on their own also leads selection committees to choose low-grade "accessible" works that are presumed to appeal to "book virgins."

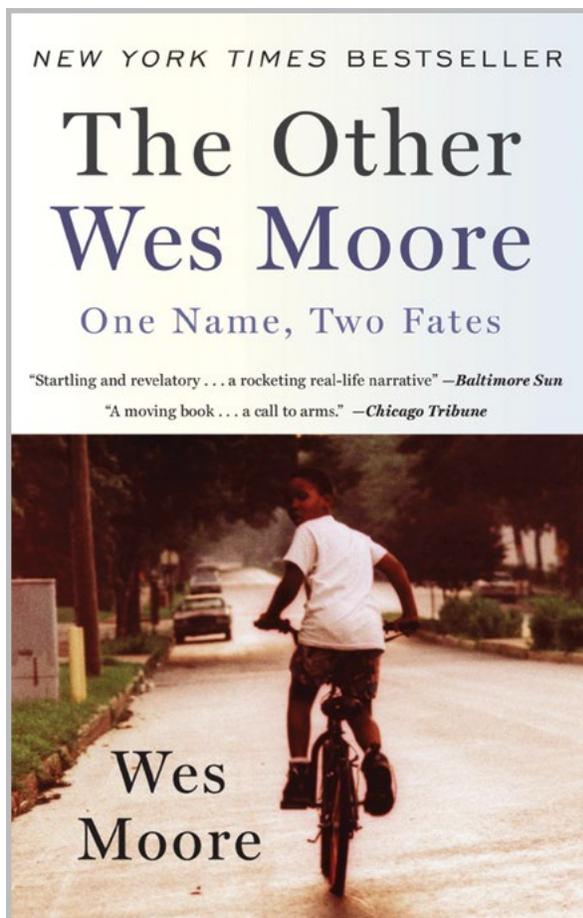
of Tennessee's student-led fossil fuel divestment campaign began in January 2013,<sup>9</sup> but surged in popularity after incoming students read the 2013-14 common reading, Bill McKibben's *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, and heard McKibben speak on campus.<sup>10</sup>

### The Other Wes Moore

Wes Moore's *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010) is by far the most frequently assigned book of the last two years, with 17 assignments in 2014-15 and 16 in 2015-16. This memoir of the contrasting fates of two Wes Moores—both born African American and poor in Baltimore,

both flirting with criminality in their youth, but one redeemed to become a military officer and a Rhodes Scholar and the other imprisoned for life for felony murder—rings the changes of the common reading genre. A recently published memoir of African American experience, emphasizing poverty, family dysfunction, and crime, with a nod to the positive value of African tradition, *The Other Wes Moore* is an uplifting account of triumph over adverse circumstance that lets us know that there but for fortune go you and go I, and that it takes a community to raise a man properly. Also, the author is available for campus visits.

*The Other Wes Moore* is popular in proportion to its soft edges: the anodyne message is that we should care and do something about the problems of African Americans in inner cities, but the policy recommended is left vague—although it acts as background music for the de-incarceration movement. The contrast between the two Wes Moores is presented as one between the different amounts of support from friends and family that the two Wes Moores received growing up, but the memoirist can also be read as a latter-day Horatio Alger, a traditionally American hero who picks himself up from poverty by pluck and perseverance. Our memoirist has succeeded as warrior, scholar, and public servant: he is an impeccably admirable paratrooper, Rhodes Scholar, and Foreign Service Officer. Blending themes of communalism and individual striving, presenting a well-rounded hero whom the reader cannot help but admire, informing the reader of an American problem that calls for action, *The Other Wes Moore* understandably has great appeal to common reading selection committees, but is an utter cliché.



Wes Moore, *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010), cover image.

## PEDDLING THE BOOKS

Publishers have found clever ways of capitalizing on the common reading trend and making colleges loyal customers of the services they provide. Publishers' advertising materials delineate the genre's characteristics.<sup>11</sup> Penguin Random House's *2015 First Year & Common Reading* catalog informs the reader that "Many of our authors are also available to visit college campuses as part of a first-year program." Discussion guides and customized versions of the books are also available, among other services.

Meanwhile, the Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau is there to make sure that there are no difficulties involved in arranging the author's campus visit:

We handle booking travel, creating an itinerary for the campus visit, and working with the author to tailor the content of the lecture for your campus. During the entire planning process, one of our 16 full-time lecture agents will be personally assigned to your event, serving as a dedicated liaison between you and the author and guaranteeing a successful, worry-free event.<sup>12</sup>

The publishers do all they can to make the selection of a common reading—under their own imprint—effortless.

Publishing companies believe they know the taste of common reading selection committees: politically progressive, juvenile, and contemporary. The best way to illustrate their conception of this taste is by extract. Here are two

first-page common reading advertisements from major publishers.

### Random House Academic Service Newsletter, "December 2015 – First-Year & Common Reading"<sup>13</sup>



**Becoming Nicole**  
The Transformation of an American Family  
By Amy Ellis Nutt

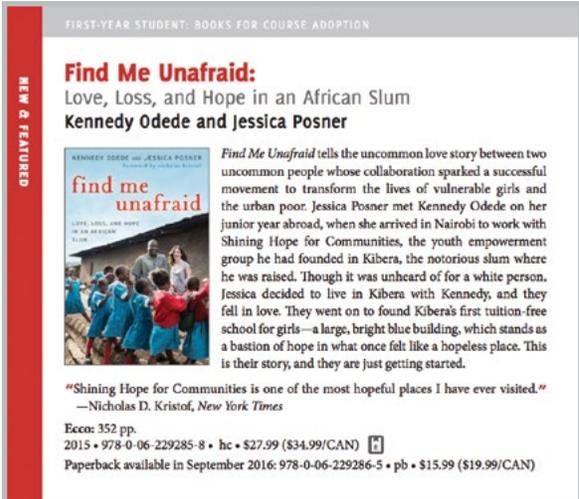
Random House | Hardcover | 10/20/2015  
978-0-8129-9541-1 | 304 pages | \$27.00

The inspiring true story of a transgender girl, her identical twin brother, and an ordinary American family's extraordinary journey to understand, nurture, and celebrate the uniqueness in us all, from the Pulitzer Prize-winning science reporter for *The Washington Post*.

"*Becoming Nicole* is a miracle. It's the story of a family struggling with—and embracing—a transgender child. But more than that, it's about accepting one another, and ourselves, in all our messy, contradictory glory." —Jennifer Finney Boylan, co-chair of GLAAD and author of *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*

Click here to read an essay by Wayne Maines, father of Nicole Maines.

### HarperCollins, First-Year Student 2015-2016<sup>14</sup>



FIRST-YEAR STUDENT: BOOKS FOR COURSE ADOPTION

**NEW & FEATURED**

**Find Me Unafraid:**  
Love, Loss, and Hope in an African Slum  
Kennedy Odede and Jessica Posner

*Find Me Unafraid* tells the uncommon love story between two uncommon people whose collaboration sparked a successful movement to transform the lives of vulnerable girls and the urban poor. Jessica Posner met Kennedy Odede on her junior year abroad, when she arrived in Nairobi to work with Shining Hope for Communities, the youth empowerment group he had founded in Kibera, the notorious slum where he was raised. Though it was unheard of for a white person, Jessica decided to live in Kibera with Kennedy, and they fell in love. They went on to found Kibera's first tuition-free school for girls—a large, bright blue building, which stands as a bastion of hope in what once felt like a hopeless place. This is their story, and they are just getting started.

"Shining Hope for Communities is one of the most hopeful places I have ever visited."  
—Nicholas D. Kristof, *New York Times*

Ecco: 352 pp.  
2015 • 978-0-06-229285-8 • hc • \$27.99 (\$34.99/CAN)   
Paperback available in September 2016: 978-0-06-229286-5 • pb • \$15.99 (\$19.99/CAN)

### The Campus Speaker Craze

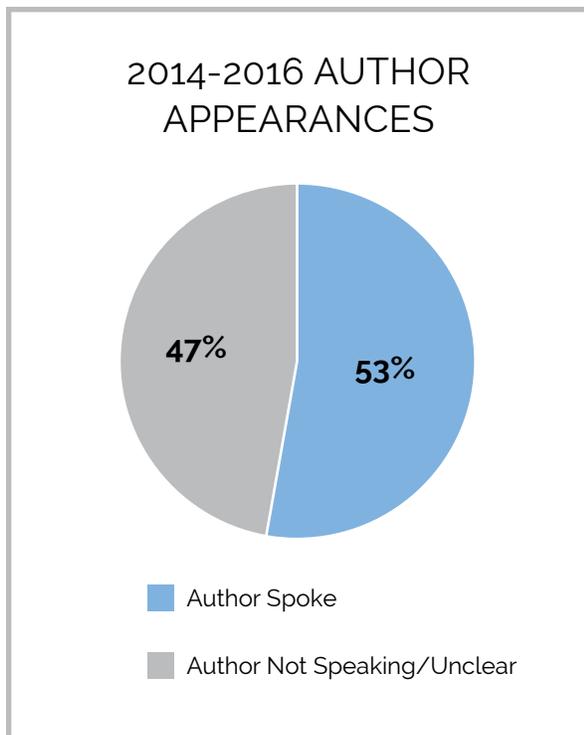
Many common reading programs specify in their selection criteria that the book's author should be living and available for a campus appearance. Colleges frequently bring the authors to campus, usually for a convocation speech at the beginning

of the freshman year or for a separate appearance in the fall.

**Dave Eggers, 2014 Boston College Academic Convocation<sup>15</sup>**



In 2014-15 at least 53% of colleges had author speeches, and in 2015-16 at least 54% of colleges had author speeches.



## THE BOOKS

Our analysis of the books assigned as common reading in 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 tracks which books were most widely-assigned, as well as their publication dates, genres, main subjects, and additional themes.

### Most Widely-Assigned Books

All the most-widely assigned books have been published since 2006. All are memoirs and nonfiction, save for Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) and Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013).

### Books Younger than the Students

Very few of these books are older than the students.

The majority of common reading selections have been published since 2010, and the vast majority since 1990 (the large majority of college students were born after that year.<sup>16</sup> In 2014-15, only 20 out of 377 assignments (5%) were published before 1990; in 2015-16, only 22 out of 361 assignments (6%) were published before 1990.

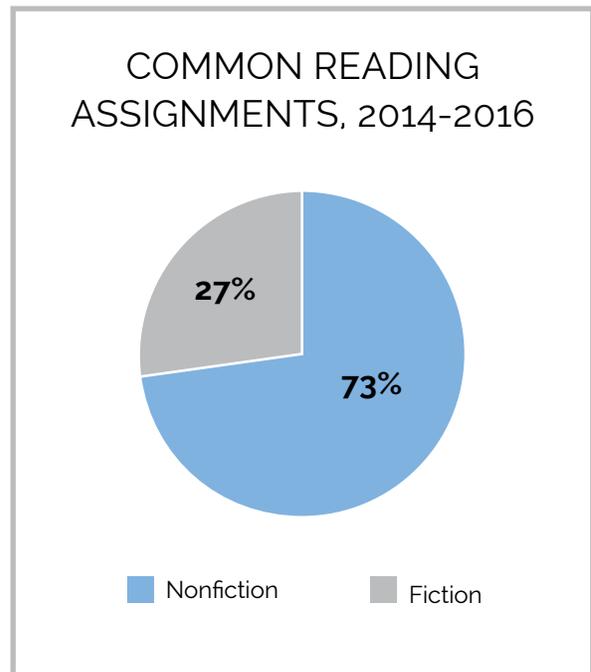
### Predominantly Non-Fiction

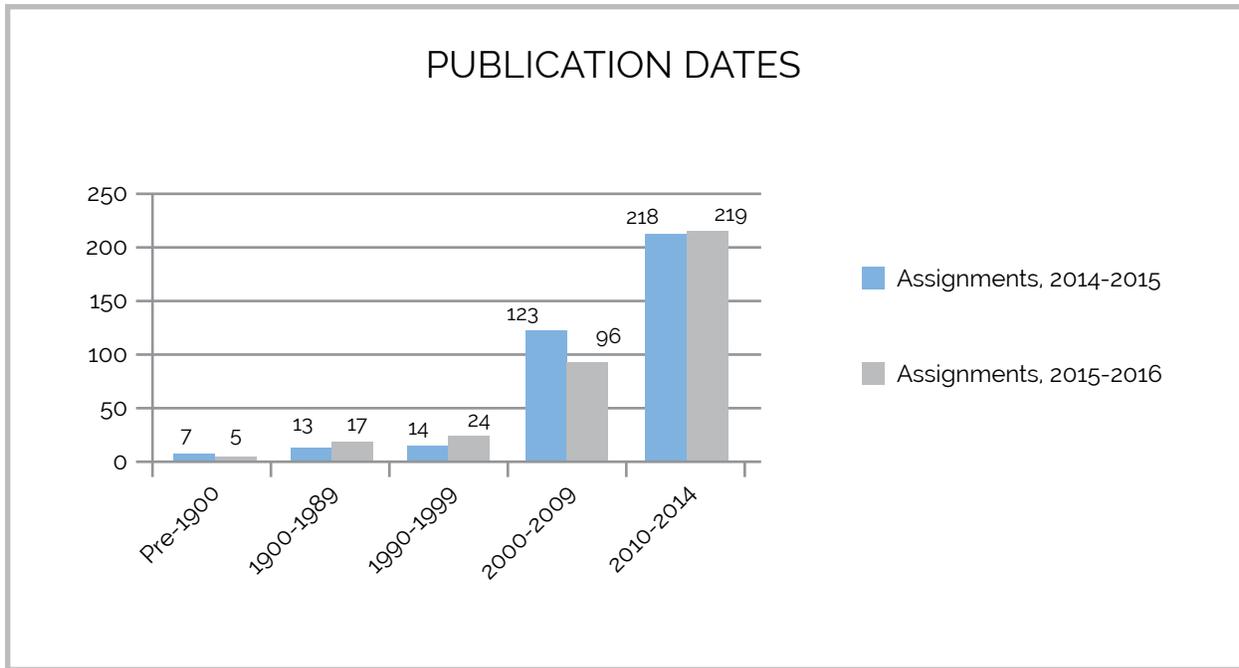
We classify common reading by genre: article, biography, epic poem, fairy tale, memoir, newspaper, nonfiction, novel, play, poetry, and short stories. Biography, memoirs and nonfiction together made up 268 out of 377 assignments (71%) in 2014-15, and 247 out of 361 assignments (74%) in 2015-16.

## TOP BOOKS FOR COMMON READING

2014-2015		2015-2016	
Book	Times Assigned	Type	Times Assigned
<i>The Other Wes Moore</i>	17	<i>The Other Wes Moore</i>	16
<i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i>	8	<i>Just Mercy</i>	14
<i>Ready Player One</i>	7	<i>The Circle</i>	6
<i>The Circle</i>	7	<i>March: Book One</i> or <i>March: Book One</i> and <i>March: Book Two</i>	6
<i>Enrique's Journey</i>	6	<i>Enrique's Journey</i>	5
<i>I Am Malala</i>	6	<i>Garbology</i>	5
<i>Orange Is the New Black</i>	6	<i>Outcasts United</i>	5
<i>This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women</i>	6	<i>The Good Food Revolution</i>	5
		<i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i>	5
		<i>Whistling Vivaldi</i>	5

Genre	Assignments 2014-15	Assignments 2015-16
Article	0	1
Biography	27	20
Epic Poem	1	1
Fairy Tale	0	1
Memoir	111	117
Newspaper	1	1
Nonfiction	130	130
Novel	91	75
Play	6	5
Poetry	1	5
Short Stories	9	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>361</b>





### Racism: The Most Popular Subject Two Years in a Row

We divided the common readings into 30 subject categories and assigned each book up to two categories.

The most popular subject categories in 2014-15 were:

- Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery (41)
- Immigration (39)
- Crime and Punishment (39)
- Drugs/Poverty (38)
- Philosophy/Religion/Spirituality (36)
- Animals/Environmentalism/Nature (31)

In 2015-16, the most popular subject categories were:

- Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery (64)
- Crime and Punishment (53)
- Family Dysfunction/Separation (40)

- Animals/Environmentalism/Nature (36)
- Drugs/Poverty (35),
- Philosophy/Religion/Spirituality (34)
- Immigration (32)

### Most Popular Themes: African American and Adolescent Protagonists

We have also recorded 21 further themes prominent among these assignments. Many common readings discuss books of which a **film or television version** exists, an increasing number are **graphic novels** or memoirs, many have a **protagonist under 18** or are simply **young-adult novels**, and a significant number have an association with **National Public Radio (NPR)**. We have also included **Hurricane Katrina**, the **Iraq War**, and the **Vietnam War** as themes, since they seem to be popular subjects among common reading selections. In brief, the themes register the common reading genre's obsession with race, its infantilization of its

students, its middlebrow taste, and its progressive politics. In 2014-15, the most popular themes were African American (61), Film/Television version exists (27), Protagonist Under 18 (25), African (23), and Latin American (23). In 2015-16, the most popular themes were African American (99), Protagonist Under 18 (36), Latin American (30), Film/Television version exists (15), African (13), and Muslim-American (13).

College reading committees overwhelmingly select books that align with the liberal and progressive worldview that pervades academia.

## ANALYSIS: THE STATUS QUO

Colleges presume students regard reading as a strange and difficult activity, to which they must be introduced with careful thought and great caution. Since these colleges usually do not dare to enforce consequences for not reading the books, they instead have to allure the students with the sweetener of easy, exciting reading. The colleges therefore tend to assign no-fuss digestibles—memoirs and nonfiction, young adult books, science fiction, and comic books, books with young protagonists and books where the students might already have seen the movie, and affirming books that make the students feel good about themselves and what they can do with their college education.

Mission statements for common reading programs further limit the selected texts. Common reading

programs that require *an author available for a campus visit* have to select a recent work, and probably from an author associated with a book publisher specializing in the commercial genre of common reading books. The desire to create *community* limits the common readings to the most anodyne of topics, excludes any intellectual topic interesting enough to be controversial, and has a marked tendency to redefine *community* around a shared catechism of belief rather than around a shared love of inquiry into truth. The emphasis on fostering non-academic values such as *community*, *civic engagement*, and *social justice* leads to selecting books that emphasize collective effort for non-academic pursuits rather than the solitary disengagement that is a fundamental component and delight of the life of the mind. College, this sort of common reading tells the incoming student, is a place to indulge a jolly, earnest desire to change the world for the better—and nothing more.

The endless emphasis on suffering rather than on achievement is a peculiar tic of the common reading genre. A gruesomely large number of memoirs assigned as common readings display protagonists with missing limbs, stories of war are more likely to tell of wounds than of valor, and mental or physical dysfunction recurs as a subject again and again. While suffering is often the predicate of achievement, the emphasis on suffering is remarkably large.

College reading committees overwhelmingly select books that align with the liberal and progressive worldview that pervades academia. The urge for consensus and soft edges makes most common readings cautiously liberal; a significant minority

are daringly progressive; books that challenge the liberal worldview in any fashion are few and far between.

Finally, college reading committees are predictable in these preferences just summarized. Predictability is best measured by the common reading genre, with a marketing language and a range of books designed to appeal to the committees. Publishers know college reading committees so well that they can sell books to them, by the thousands, along with well-packaged author visits. The common reading committees are supposed to choose a book that makes students think as individuals—but they think in so standardized a manner themselves in choosing books that they have reduced themselves to the consumers of an equally standardized product in the marketplace.

The common reading genre, in sum, is *parochial, contemporary, commercial, optimistic, juvenile, obsessed with suffering, and progressive*. Not every selected text embraces all these categories—a few escape all of them—but these adjectives define the characteristic common reading. It is a gateway to becoming a reader of middlebrow best sellers, but not an introduction to the life of the mind.

## CONCLUSION

Common reading selection committees would do well to choose older or classic books more often, expect their students to read mature books, and select students who can meet those expectations. They would also do well to exercise independent judgment rather than simply rewarding publishers for their effective marketing. Of course we would be

The characteristic common reading is a gateway to becoming a reader of middlebrow best sellers, but not an introduction to the life of the mind.

delighted if common reading selection committees chose from the list of books we recommend. Even if they will not adopt our standards, each committee should develop its own, unique taste, and thereby model for its students how to be thoughtful, individual readers rather than consumers.

Common reading programs can achieve the substance of their existing goals—to introduce students to college expectations, to improve their writing, to create a sense of college community that in turn encourages students to stick with the colleges in which they enroll—while also choosing better, more challenging, and more intellectually diverse books. If common reading programs would push themselves even a little bit beyond the common reading genre’s current boundaries, the effects would be wonderful indeed.

*The full 200-page Beach Books report contains a longer analysis of common reading programs and books; appendices listing which college assigned which books; a section of “honorable mentions” highlighting colleges that chose good books; and longer lists of recommended books, with rationales. The full report is available both as a PDF file at [www.nas.org/beachbooks](http://www.nas.org/beachbooks) and in print.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

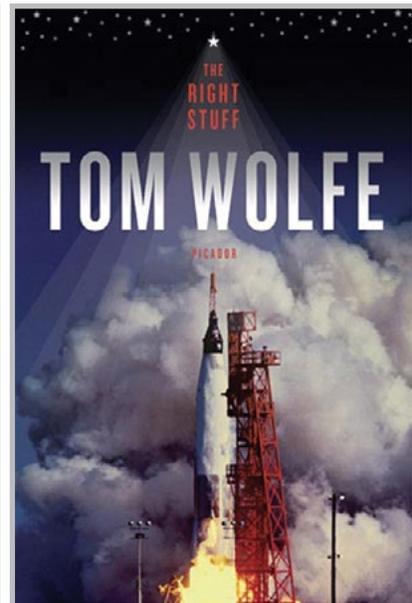
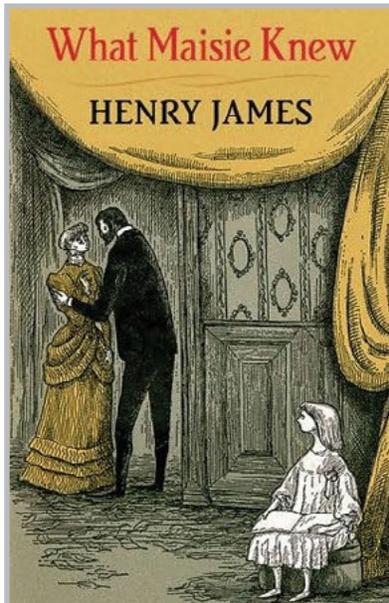
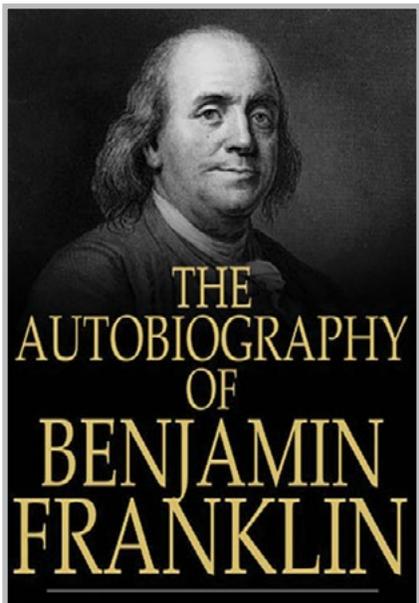
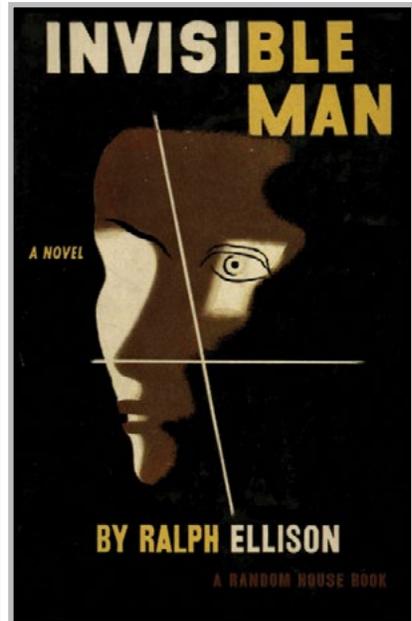
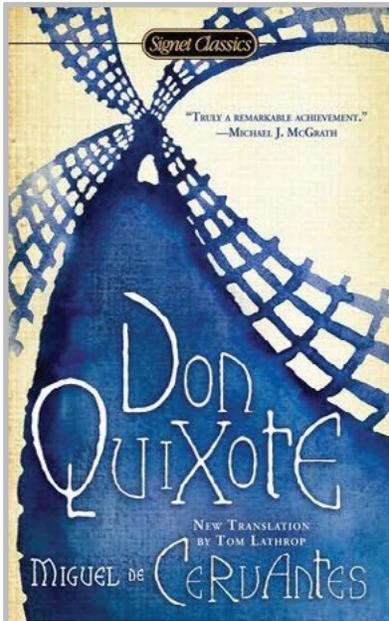
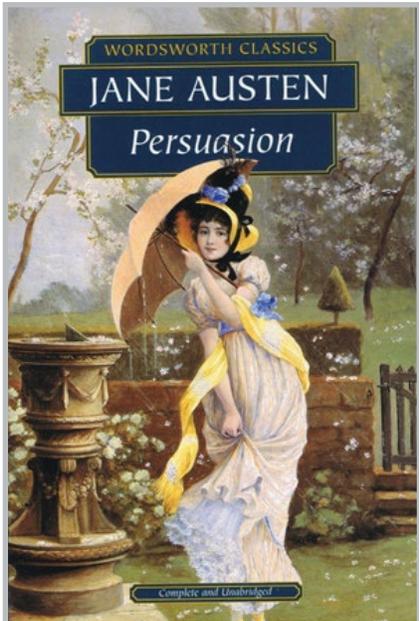
The National Association of Scholars believes that at a time when true core curricula have largely disappeared, a common reading can provide at least an abbreviated substitution. To increase the odds that a common reading assignment will have these effects, we repeat 11 recommendations for book selection criteria from our last report, and add 10 new ones.

The 11 recommendations we repeat are:

1. Seek diversity—the intellectual kind.
2. Seek books that are neither too long nor too short.
3. Seek texts that are a bit over students' heads, but not so far that they are beyond reach.
4. Seek works that are not contemptuous of humanity or dyed in profound cynicism.
5. In fiction, seek works with elegance of language, a degree of complexity, and moral seriousness.
6. In nonfiction, seek works that argue important ideas lucidly and writers who take their craft seriously.
7. Pay deliberate attention to important books from earlier eras.
8. Consider that the book you choose will be a public representation of the college's academic reputation.
9. All members of the committee should read the books they weigh as finalists for selection.
10. Consult with others who read widely and well and who are intimately acquainted with good books.
11. Consult outside sources, such as the Modern Library's list of 100 Best Novels and 100 Best Nonfiction.

We now add 10 further recommendations:

12. Alter common reading mission statements to excise all non-academic goals.
13. Appoint small common reading committees composed only of faculty committed to reading.
14. Don't choose a book for its subject matter, since books chosen on those grounds are usually dull, poorly written, and undistinguished.
15. Cultivate impartiality in judging offensiveness.
16. Choose books for adults, not books for children.
17. Assign multiple readings—perhaps a classic and a modern book that share a subject matter.
18. Consider choosing local readings, having to do with the institution or the locale of a college.
19. Consider choosing translated readings; the English language is a small part of the world.
20. Integrate summer readings with actual courses; give students a test that will affect their grades.
21. Tighten college admission standards so as to select students able and willing to read a challenging book.



**Six recommended books.**

Cover images: Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1817); Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605); Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (1952); Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (1791); Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (1897); Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (1979).

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS

**60 Recommended Books Appropriate for Any College Common Reading Program**

Edwin Abbott Abbott – *Flatland* (1884)

Chinua Achebe – *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

James Agee – *A Death in the Family* (1957)

Kingsley Amis – *Lucky Jim* (1954)

Louis Auchincloss – *The Rector of Justin* (1964)

Augustine – *Confessions* (398 A.D.)

Jane Austen – *Persuasion* (1817)

F. Bordewijk – *Character: A Novel of Father and Son* (1938)

John Bunyan – *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)

Pedro Calderon de la Barca – *Life is a Dream* (1635)

Albert Camus – *The Plague* (1947)

Willa Cather – *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)

John Chadwick – *The Decipherment of Linear B* (1958)

Joseph Conrad – *Under Western Eyes* (1911)

James Fenimore Cooper – *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826)

Charles Darwin – *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839)

Charles Dickens – *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842)

Ralph Ellison – *Invisible Man* (1952)

Shusaku Endo – *Silence* (1966)

Desiderius Erasmus – *The Praise of Folly* (1509)  
*Everyman* (C. 1500)

David Hackett Fischer – *Washington's Crossing* (2004)

Benjamin Franklin – *Autobiography* (1791)

Nathaniel Hawthorne – *The Blithedale Romance* (1852)

William Least Heat-Moon – *Blue Highways* (1982)

Ernest Hemingway – *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952)

Zora Neale Hurston – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Jane Jacobs – *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

Henry James – *What Maisie Knew* (1897)

Rudyard Kipling – *Kim* (1901)

Arthur Koestler – *Darkness at Noon* (1940)

Sinclair Lewis – *Babbitt* (1922)

Abraham Lincoln – *Selected Speeches and Writings* (1832-1865, Published in this volume in 2009) (Selections)

Federico García Lorca – *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936)

John Stuart Mill – *On Liberty* (1869)

Molière – *Tartuffe* (1664)

Michel de Montaigne – *An Apology for Raymond Sebond* (1580-1595)

Reinhold Niebuhr – *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944)

George Orwell – *Homage to Catalonia* (1938)

Francis Parkman – *The Oregon Trail* (1847)

Plato – *Apology of Socrates and Crito* (C. 399-387 B.C.)

Plutarch – *Parallel Lives* (Second Century A.D.) (Selections)

Alexander Pope – *Essay on Criticism* (1711)

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962)

William Shakespeare – *Julius Caesar* (C. 1599)

William Shakespeare – *Richard III* (C. 1592)

William Shakespeare – *Henry V* (C. 1598)

George Bernard Shaw – *Major Barbara* (1905)

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (C. 1350-1400)

Wallace Stegner – *Angle of Repose* (1971)

Robert Louis Stevenson – *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892)

Mark Twain – *Life on the Mississippi* (1883)

Voltaire – *Candide* (1759)

Robert Penn Warren – *All the King's Men* (1946)

James D. Watson – *The Double Helix* (1968)

Walt Whitman – *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892)

Oscar Wilde – *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

Tom Wolfe – *The Right Stuff* (1979)

*The Book of Job* (C. 1000 B.C.)

*The Book of Ecclesiastes* (C. 970-930 B.C.)

Jaroslav Hasek – *The Good Soldier Svejk and his Fortunes in the World War* (1923)

Herman Melville – *The Confidence-Man* (1857)

John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852)

Eugene O'Neill – *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941-1942)

Gary Rose, Ed. – *Shaping a Nation: 25 Supreme Court Cases* (2010)

Robert Skidelsky – *John Maynard Keynes 1883-1946: Economist, Philosopher, Statesman* (2005)

Stendahl, *The Red and the Black* (1830)

Barbara Tuchman – *The Guns of August* (1962)

Virgil – *The Aeneid* (19 B.C., Fagle's Translation, 2006)

Edmund Wilson – *To the Finland Station* (1940)

## 20 Recommended Books for More Ambitious College Common Reading Programs

Jacques Barzun – *Berlioz and his Century: An Introduction to the Age of Romanticism* (1950)

Harold Bloom – *The Western Canon* (1994)

Benvenuto Cellini – *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* (1558-1563)

Miguel de Cervantes – *Don Quixote* (1605)

Whittaker Chambers – *Witness* (1952)

James Gould Cozzens – *Guard of Honor* (1948)

Alexis de Tocqueville – *Democracy in America* (1838)

Fyodor Dostoevsky – *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

George Eliot – *Middlemarch* (1871-1872)

Mouloud Feraoun – *Journal, 1955-1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War* (1962)

## Endnotes

- 1 Courtney Langley, "William & Mary Launches First Common Book for Freshmen," *William & Mary News & Media*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.wm.edu/news/stories/2015/william--mary-launches-first-common-book-for-freshmen.php>.
- 2 Ashley Thorne, Marilee Turscak, and Peter Wood, *Beach Books: 2013-2014. What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?* (National Association of Scholars, 2014; <https://www.nas.org/images/documents/NAS-BeachBooks.pdf>), pp. 21-22.
- 3 Salem State University, "First Year Reading Experience (FYRE)," <http://www.salemstate.edu/fyre/>.
- 4 Webster University, "Common Reading Program Launched in First Year Seminars," August 24, 2015, <http://news.webster.edu/academics/2015/common-reading-first-year-experience.html>.
- 5 University of Cincinnati Center for First Year Experience & Learning Communities, "The Next Common Read," [http://www.uc.edu/fye/center/communications\\_publications/FYUpdatehome/fye-lc-update-2014-2015/nextCR.html](http://www.uc.edu/fye/center/communications_publications/FYUpdatehome/fye-lc-update-2014-2015/nextCR.html).
- 6 Pacific Lutheran University First Year Experience Program, "Common Reading Selection Process," <https://www.plu.edu/first-year/common-reading/selection-process/>; Southern Methodist University Office of the Provost, "2015 Common Reading Committee Members," <http://www.smu.edu/Provost/CommonReading/Committee>; University of Virginia School of Engineering & Applied Science, "Common Reading Experience," <http://www.seas.virginia.edu/acad/cre/>.
- 7 Thorne, Turscak, and Wood, *Beach Books: 2013-2014*, pp. 27-30.
- 8 Bunker Hill Community College, "One Book Program," <http://www.bhcc.mass.edu/onebook/>; Corning Community College, "One Book One College: No Impact Man," <https://www.corning-cc.edu/one-book-one-college-no-impact-man>; The University of New Orleans, "Common Read Program," <http://www.uno.edu/fye/common-read.aspx>.
- 9 UT Coalition for Responsible Investment, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/UTCoalition/timeline>.
- 10 "Noted Environmentalist, Author Bill McKibben to Speak Monday," *Tennessee Today*, August 15, 2013, <http://tn-today.utk.edu/2013/08/15/noted-environmentalist-author-bill-mckibben-speak-monday/>.
- 11 HarperCollins, *First-Year Student 2015-2016*, <http://files.harpercollins.com/HarperAcademic/FirstYearStudent1516.pdf>; Knopf Doubleday, *First-Year & Common Reading*, <https://www.randomhouseacademic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Knopf-Doubleday-First-Year-and-Common-Reading-2015-2016.pdf>; Macmillan, *Books for the First Year Experience*, <http://us.macmillan.com/static/macmillanacademic/Macmillan2016FYECOMMONREADINGBOOKS.pdf>; Simon & Schuster, "Freshman Year Reading," <http://pages.simonandschuster.com/freshmanreading>; Yale University Press, *Freshman Reading*, <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yup-books/OnlineCatalog.asp?catalog=3254795>.
- 12 Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau, "Planning First-Year Reading Programs," September 29, 2015, <http://www.prhspeakers.com/first-year-reading-programs>.
- 13 Random House Academic Service Newsletter, "December 2015 – First-Year & Common Reading," [http://view.email.randomhouse.com/?j=fe9415727563027a71&m=fe9713707566037575&ls=fe1a1078726206747d1479&l=ff64157570&s=fe4d1378736d007a7317&jb=ffca11&ju=fe5d-1379756605797210&Ref=Email\\_B2B\\_2015-12-22&r=0](http://view.email.randomhouse.com/?j=fe9415727563027a71&m=fe9713707566037575&ls=fe1a1078726206747d1479&l=ff64157570&s=fe4d1378736d007a7317&jb=ffca11&ju=fe5d-1379756605797210&Ref=Email_B2B_2015-12-22&r=0).
- 14 HarperCollins, *First-Year Student 2015-2016*, <http://files.harpercollins.com/HarperAcademic/FirstYearStudent1516.pdf>.
- 15 *Front Row*, "First Year Academic Convocation 2014 with Dave Eggers," <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/egggers/>.
- 16 In fall 2012, students 25 and older were approximately 15% of degree-seeking undergraduates. Devon Haynie, "10 Colleges With the Most Older Students," *U. S. News & World Report*, January 7, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/the-short-list-college/articles/2014/01/07/10-colleges-with-the-most-students-25-and-over>.

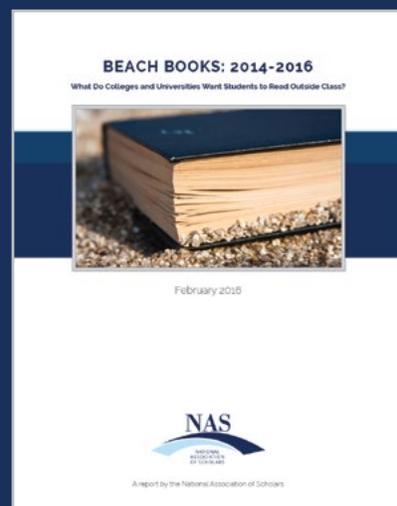
## MORE FROM THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS

The full text of *Beach Books: 2014-16*, along with shorter commentary and research, is available at [www.nas.org/beachbooks](http://www.nas.org/beachbooks). It is also available in print.

*Beach Books: 2014-16* is the fifth report in NAS's annual series, beginning in 2010, tracking the hundreds of college and university "common reading" programs across the United States and the one book each school assigns to new students over the summer.

The NAS regularly publishes commentary and research on higher education. Our previous reports include

- *Inside Divestment* (2015), a study of the fossil-fuel divestment movement on campus.
- *Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism* (2015), a critical report on the campus sustainability movement.
- *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* (2013), the first top-to-bottom examination of a contemporary liberal arts college.
- *Recasting History* (2013), a detailed study of freshman history courses at the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University.
- *A Crisis of Competence* (2012), a survey of politicization in the University of California.



### ABOUT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS

The National Association of Scholars is a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education.

We uphold the standards of a liberal arts education that fosters intellectual freedom, searches for the truth, and promotes virtuous citizenship.

We expect that ideas will be judged on their merits; that scholars will engage in disinterested research; and that colleges and universities will provide for fair and judicial examination and debate of contending views.

We publish reports and commentary on a number of topics related to higher education; they can be found at our website, [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org).



National Association of Scholars  
8 W. 38th St. Suite 503, New York, NY 10018  
Phone: 917-551-6770 Email: [contact@nas.org](mailto:contact@nas.org)  
Website: [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org)