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I asked our community which works of literature were must-reads for high schoolers or their top picks. The more things change, the more they stay the same. The final cut of our list of indispensable high school reads—culled from reader comments—is dominated by perennials like George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. The five most popular entries were all published within 15 years of each other, and none were published later than Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird in 1960. Only three of the works on the list could be considered recent, appearing within the last 20 years: Stephen Chbosky's epistolary novel The Perks of Being a Wallflower (1999); Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir Persepolis, about growing up during the Iranian Revolution (2000-03); and Cormac McCarthy's brutal, dark novel The Road (2006). The specter of World War II, with its themes of totalitarianism, social fragmentation, mass surveillance, and the decline of individual freedom, looms over many of the novels.

Dystopian novels form a major category: Orwell's Animal Farm, William Golding's allegory The Lord of the Flies, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, Kurt Vonnegut's absurdist comedy Slaughterhouse-Five, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, and McCarthy's The Road join Nineteen Eighty-Four here. Thinking back on my days as a high school English teacher, it feels like I missed an opportunity to teach dystopia as a theme. There's a wealth of material to draw from—and it's both high quality and accessible to a broad range of high school readers. A recurring pedagogical issue emerged as teachers joined the conversation: How should educators balance challenging books—works by Shakespeare, for example—with the students' desire for choice? How can teachers ensure rich, shared learning opportunities without putting their students off reading forever? These aren't idle concerns. If your goal is to nurture a lifelong love of reading, the dramatic reliance on the classics appears to be catastrophic. You can read some devastating contemporary dystopian novels in a matter of hours, while it takes weeks to read Shakespeare. But if you're looking for a book that will challenge your students' thinking, there are few better choices than the classics. They offer a unique perspective on the world we live in today, and they provide a window into the minds of some of the greatest writers in history.

My freshmen English classes many years ago, and got the same dispiriting response. Almost none of my incoming freshmen had finished a book in the previous three years. For an approach to balancing student choice with curated texts, read Brian Stzabnik's recent Edutopia post "Igniting a Passion for Reading." "I. To kill a MockingbirdHarper Lee's seminal coming-of-age story set in the fictional southern town of Maycomb, Alabama. Primary themes of interest to high schoolers: racial injustice, moral and spiritual growth, courage and integrity, innocence and experience.2. Nineteen Eighty-FourGeorge Orwell's vision of a totalitarian future, not long after the Atomic Wars have reduced the geopolitical map to three superstates: Eurasia, Oceania, and Eastasia. Primary themes of interest to high schoolers: totalitarianism and state power, surveillance, individual freedom, the nature of truth, the power of propaganda, the cult of personality.3. The Great GatsbyF. Scott Fitzgerald's lyrical, Jazz Age novel about the idealist James Gatsby—and the nature of the American Dream. Primary themes of interest to high schoolers: the Jazz Age, the American Dream, wealth and class, idealism.12. The Blue EyeToni Morrison's story of Pecola Breedlove, a young, often-abused African American girl who dreams of having blue eyes—a tangible sign of acceptance in a world dominated by white conceptions of beauty and belonging. Primary themes of interest to high schoolers: identity, race and racial injustice, the effects of abuse, beauty and ugliness, insanity.13. Of Mice and MenJohn Steinbeck's story of an unlikely—and tragically failed—friendship between two men of remarkably different intellectual abilities. Primary themes of interest to high schoolers: friendship and loyalty, cruelty and mercy.14. MacbethShakespeare's portrait of an ambitious Scottish warrior who wants to be king—and is doomed to murder to achieve his goal. 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"Inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum." "There are problems with teaching only classics—the stories are overwhelmingly told from a white and/or male perspective, and more needs to be done to diversify that," writes eighth-grade English teacher Christina Torres. "In addition, there's merit in introducing our students to more recent literature." This year, we circled back and asked our community a version of the same question—What novels do you wish you could've read in high school?—but this time we specified that titles must have been published within the last decade. Hundreds of responses flooded in, and the contrast to six years ago was stark. Nominations were diverse, representing a broad range of topics, themes, genres, and author identities, as well as a wide variety of characters and experiences—queer protagonists and protagonists of color, characters with differing abilities, and fictional roles representing a refreshing spectrum of body sizes and shapes. The Hate U Give, by Angie Thomas, was a clear standout, earning the most votes and thus the number one spot on our list. Some authors were multiple winners: Jason Reynolds's Long Way Down and All American Boys made the cut, and Nic Stone's Dear Martin and its sequel Dear Justyce were both favorites, but we selected only one for inclusion in the top 25. While fiction titles represent the lion's share of the final list, a number of memoirs and autobiographies made the grade, including Malala Yousafzai's I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban and the comedian and late-night host Trevor Noah's Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood. 1. The Hate U Give Angie Thomas's emotionally wrenching debut novel finds Starr, an African American teen, torn between the affluent, predominantly white school she attends and the impoverished neighborhood where she lives. The fatal shooting of her childhood best friend by a police officer shatters her equilibrium, forcing her to choose where she stands. Primary themes of interest to high school students: identity, race and racial injustice, grief and loss, activism. 2. Educated: A Memoir Tara Westover's story of growing up alongside—and eventually growing beyond—her decidedly iconoclastic family of Mormon survivalists in rural Idaho is an autobiographical paean to the transformative power of education. Primary themes of interest to high school students: autonomy, family dynamics, learning and education, loneliness and isolation. 3. Dear Martin Author Nic Stone drops readers deep into the life of her 17-year-old main character, Justyce, who suddenly finds himself on the wrong side of an unprovoked, racially charged encounter with a police officer. Primary themes of interest to high school students: privilege, friendship, race and racial injustice, discrimination, the criminal justice system. 4. The Poet X Elizabeth Acevedo's National Book Award-winning novel-in-verse tells the story of Xiomara Batista, a 15-year-old Dominican-American girl living in Harlem who discovers that slam poetry unlocks answers to questions about her religion, her mother, and her identity and greater purpose in life. Primary themes of interest to high school students: sexuality, self-acceptance, family dynamics. 5. Long Way Down Jason Reynolds, author of Ghost and Ain't Burned All the Bright, thrusts readers inside an elevator alongside 15-year-old protagonist Will Hollomon, who has about 60 seconds to make one of the hardest decisions of his life. Primary themes of interest to high school students: justice, grief and loss, family dynamics. 6. Refugee Three refugee children—each living in separate parts of the world during different time periods, from Nazi Germany to Syria in 2015—fight to escape the violence of their home countries in Alan Gratz's timely and moving work of historical fiction. Primary themes of interest to high school students: warfare, family dynamics, trauma, the experiences of refugees. 7. Homegoing The Ghanaian American novelist Yaa Gyasi traces the impact of the Gold Coast's slave trade on the lives of two African stepsisters and several generations of their descendants. Primary themes of interest to high school students: slavery and human rights, identity, race and racial injustice, family dynamics, oppression, trauma. 8. Firekeeper's Daughter Witnessing a murder launches Angeline Bouley's protagonist Daunis—a Native teen torn between her white and Ojibwe culture—into an FBI investigation where she must go undercover in search of the truth. Primary themes of interest to high school students: family dynamics, addiction, risk-taking, authority. 9. All The Light We Cannot See Set during World War II, this is Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning tale of two teenagers—a blind French girl on the run and a German boy forced to join the Nazi army—whose separate lives ultimately converge. Primary themes of interest to high school students: warfare, grief and loss, disability, power and conformity. 10. Beartown Author Fredrik Backman investigates the ripple effects of a sexual assault, committed by the star athlete, on a small hockey town in rural Sweden. Primary themes of interest to high school students: justice, trauma, power and conformity. 11. I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter A tragic accident causes Erika Sánchez's main character, Julia, to reflect on the perceived image of her "perfect" sister, Olga—as well as the secrets she may have been hiding. Primary themes of interest to high school students: grief and loss, perfectionism, mental health, sexuality, identity. 12. Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption Bryan Stevenson's memoir details his work at the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization providing legal counsel to the wrongfully convicted, as well as those without the funds for effective representation. Primary themes of interest to high school students: the criminal justice system, race and racial injustice, poverty, trauma. 13. Patron Saints of Nothing In Randy Ribay's National Book Award finalist, 17-year-old Jay Requero leaves the University of Michigan and returns to his extended family in the Philippines when he learns that his cousin was recently murdered there—all the while secretly planning to investigate the crime. Primary themes of interest to high school students: grief and loss, culture and identity, the criminal justice system, truth and justice. 14. The Invention of Wings Set in the antebellum South, Sue Monk Kidd's novel explores the meaning of freedom to two girls from vastly different backgrounds—Sarah, a white girl of means, and Handful, a slave gifted to Sarah on her birthday. Primary themes of interest to high school students: friendship, slavery and human rights, race, privilege. 15. The Midnight Library What if you could read your way into another story of your life? In Matt Haig's charming fantasy novel, 35-year-old Nora Seed peruses the books in an infinite library and discovers that each magical volume gives her a glimpse into a life she might have led. Primary themes of interest to high school students: identity and purpose, mental health, fantasy. 16. The Nickel Boys In this Pulitzer Prize winner, Colson Whitehead's main character, Elwood Curtis, experiences firsthand the horrors of a juvenile reformatory called the Nickel Academy—based on the real-life Dozier School for Boys, a now-closed reform school in Florida with a 111-year history of abusing students. Primary themes of interest to high school students: activism, trauma, abuse, race and racial injustice. 17. The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row Convicted of a crime he did not commit, Anthony Ray Hinton relates the story of his 30 years on death row. Cowritten with Lara Love Hardin, the memoir reveals not only how he managed to survive but also how he ultimately found his way to joy. Primary themes of interest to high school students: race and racial injustice, redemption, innocence and guilt, the criminal justice system. 18. The Tattooist of Auschwitz Inspired by true events, this is Heather Morris's heart-wrenching World War II tale about Lale Sokolov, a Jewish man who—forced to work at Auschwitz as a serial number tattooist—falls in love with an imprisoned woman as she waits to be branded. Primary themes of interest to high school students: warfare, race and racial injustice, the power of love. 19. Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood Comedian and political commentator Trevor Noah's memoir mines his experiences as a mixed-race child in apartheid South Africa—a period during which the Immorality Act of 1927 outlawed interracial relationships, ostensibly making Noah's very existence a crime. Primary themes of interest to high school students: identity and purpose, race and racial injustice, oppression. 20. I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban Written by the world's youngest Nobel Prize laureate, Malala Yousafzai's memoir tells the story of her fight for the rights of young girls and women in Pakistan—despite an assassination attempt that gravely wounded her in 2012, when she was only 15 years old. Primary themes of interest to high school students: activism, women's rights, learning and education. 21. The Marrow Thieves Cherie Dimaline's book is a dystopian vision of a bleak, postapocalyptic world in which humans have lost the ability to dream—except for North America's Indigenous population, who are hunted for their bone marrow, which holds the key to a cure. Primary themes of interest to high school students: trauma, the climate crisis, family dynamics, oppression. 22. Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe In this novel set in 1987, author Benjamin Alire Sáenz traces the story of two Mexican American boys, Aristotle and Dante, who could not be more different but form a bond that makes them confidants—and gives them the courage to share life-changing secrets. Primary themes of interest to high school students: identity and purpose, sexuality, self-acceptance, trauma. 23. Sing, Unburied, Sing: A Novel Jesmyn Ward's dark but lyrical tale follows a Mississippi family on a road trip haunted by ghosts of the past and present. Primary themes of interest to high school students: race and racial injustice, identity and belonging, mortality. 24. The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives In this journalistic piece of nonfiction, author Dashka Slater reveals the complexities of what transpired between two teenagers on a bus in Oakland, California—Sasha and Richard—and the aftermath that ultimately transformed two families. Primary themes of interest to high school students: gender and sexuality, race, discrimination, the criminal justice system. 25. The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet Adapted from his podcast of the same name, John Green's humorous collection of 44 essays covers topics ranging from the computer-generated velociraptors in the movie Jurassic Park and sunsets to air conditioners and penguins—rating them all on a five-star scale. Primary themes of interest to high school students: the human condition, mental health, humor and absurdity, the climate crisis. Literacy English Language Arts 9-12 High School