

American Literature Booklist

English and Social Studies teachers around the country can share their best literature selections dealing with the Jim Crow period. This list will continue to grow as the site grows.

Books for Middle School Students

Bad Boy: A Memoir -- Walter Dean Meyers

This memoir is the author's childhood of growing up in Harlem in the 1950s. It highlights the author's experiences of growing up as a gifted black student. The author's realization about the inequalities that existed for African Americans during this period of time make for a great springboard for discussion among students about equality.

Would you like to
Add a Selection to
our Booklist?

Bud not Buddy -- Christopher Paul Curtis

Buddy is an orphaned African American boy growing up in the 1930s. He believes his father is a musician playing in blues band. Buddy finds all sorts of adventures during his quest to find his father.

I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This -- Jacqueline Woodson

This novel focuses on a friendship that develops between a black girl and a white girl. As the friendship develops, both girls experience racial opposition from their families. Throughout the story, these characters must deal with racial stereotypes that persist in American society. Despite these obstacles, the girls forge a friendship that transcends prejudice and discrimination.

The Other Side -- Jacqueline Woodson

This picture book is told from the perspective of two young girls, one black one white, divided from each other by a fence. Both of the girls' mothers warn their daughters about the dangers of crossing this divider. This is an excellent read aloud prompting a discussion on prejudice and discrimination with middle school students.

Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry -- Mildred Taylor

This is a book within a series that highlights an African American family living in the segregated south during the 1930s. Examining the effects of racism from the point of view of nine-year-old Cassie Logan, Cassie's family struggles to overcome the terror and threats posed by racist attacks. Other books in the series: *Let the Circle be Unbroken* and *The Road to Memphis*.

The Watsons Go to Birmingham 1963 -- Christopher Paul Curtis

In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, the Watson family of Flint, Michigan, finds itself immersed in the church bombings that occurred in Birmingham. This story brings home the human loss that happened during these tragic events. Teaching suggestions provided.

To Kill a Mockingbird -- Harper Lee

Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a southern lawyer's effort to defend a wrongly-accused African-American man in 1930s Alabama. This 41-year-old book is now considered to be a classic, but it has prompted controversy as well as praise since its first publication. For a comprehensive unit combining Jim Crow with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, [click here](#). For teacher reviewed external sites on Harper Lee and this novel, [click here](#).

White Socks Only -- Evelyn Coleman

Although this is a picture book, it serves as a read-aloud for teachers wanting to introduce students to the concept of segregation of the south. The narrator is a grandmother explaining her experiences with discrimination to her granddaughter.

Books for High School Students

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man -- James Weldon Johnson

Written in 1912, this book examines the life of a man born to an African American mother, and a white father. Raised in the North, he returns to the South as adult and faces its pervasive racism.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X -- Alex Haley and Malcolm X

Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, turned to a life of crime as a young man and was imprisoned where he came under the influence of the Black Muslim leader, Elijah Muhammad. His subsequent conversion to Islam and his rise from outlaw to one of America's most eloquent and fierce champions of equality and justice for black people is detailed in his classic autobiography. Malcom X was highly revered by African Americans who "believed that their destiny in America depended largely on a profound education in and commitment to the roots of their culture."--The Norton Anthology of African American Literature

The Best Short Stories by Black Writers: The classic anthology from 1899 to 1967 -- edited by Langston Hughes

"The short stories in this volume range from those of the first famous Negro writers in this genre, Charles W. Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar ... to the youngest contemporary writers of creative fiction, Ronald Milner, Robert Boles, and Alice Walker. Herein are all the noted names in American Negro writing, including Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Willard Motley, John A. Williams, Frank Yerby and James Baldwin."--Langston Hughes

Billy-- Albert French

This is a poignant, literally heartbreaking, novel that highlights racism during the 1930s in a small Mississippi town. In lyrical prose, Albert French creates an anonymous observer who speaks in the vernacular of the region, narrating a tragic and harrowing story of ten-year old Billy Turner, who is convicted of and executed for murdering a white girl in Banesh County, Mississippi, in 1937. *Billy* is about the deaths of two children, one girl, one boy, the girl's death an accident and the boy's murder a legal one, committed by the state. This book is excellent in its ability to capture the horrendous effects of racism on its victims and its perpetrators alike.

The Bluest Eye -- Toni Morrison

Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, becomes obsessed with the idea that blue eyes will make her pretty and engender the love of others. In this serious indictment of the way in which the Western ideal of beauty induces pathological self-hatred within the African- American community, Toni Morrison's prose, in this, her first novel, nevertheless, is luminous. Students will sympathize with the young female characters, especially the precocious narrator. For teacher reviewed external Web sites on Morrison and this novel, [click here](#).

A Colored Man's Journey Through 20th Century Segregated America -- Earl Hutchinson, Sr. with Earl Ofari Hutchinson

A privately published memoir of ninety-seven year old Earl Hutchinson provides a first-hand account of an ordinary citizen struggling to raise a family in spite of the obstacles of racism and oppression. To order this memoir, contact Middle Passage Press, Inc. 5517 Secrest Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90043.

Colored People -- Henry Louis Gates

A memoir of the early life of celebrated scholar and writer Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "gives us an indelible portrait of a vanished America. Born in 1950, he grew up in Piedmont (population 2,565), a West Virginia town perched on the side of a hill in the Allegheny Mountains. He was raised in a small, intimate, middle-class 'colored community.'

The Color Purple -- Alice Walker

"The storytelling style of *The Color Purple* makes it irresistible to read! By the end of the novel, we believe that this poor, nameless patch of land in the American South is really the world-and vice versa. Conversations between Celie and Shug have brought us theories of philosophy, ethics, and metaphysics--all with a world vision that seems more complete for proceeding from the bottom up."--Gloria Steinham.

The Good Negress -- AJ Verdelle

The Good Negress is a novel set in 1963. Young Denise Palms, raised in rural Virginia by her grandmother, rejoins her pregnant mother, new stepfather and two older brothers in Detroit. Denise, expected to cook and clean and take care of her mother's baby when it comes, finds herself in a dilemma when she meets teacher Miss Gloria Pearson who encourages her to "reach beyond her station" to educate herself, a goal that conflicts with her responsibilities at home. Torn between home and school, she fears becoming the "good little negress" that Miss Pearson warns might be her fate.

Holly -- Albert French

Holly is a beautiful and lyrical novel by French, this time a tale of forbidden love. Nineteen-year-old Holly R. Hill, a poor white girl, lives with her family in Supply, North Carolina, in 1944. Holly's chief concerns are clothes, worrying about her brother and her on-again, off-again fiancée, who are off fighting in the war; and agonizing over whether she should kiss the local heartthrob. Holly's prosaic existence deteriorates when, depressed about the possible dangers to the young men she cares about, she begins to spend time alone near the Back Land, where "the coloreds" live. There she meets Elias Owens, a young, handsome ex-soldier who is an aspiring painter and composer, and who is black. Their relationship, doomed from its inception, leads to inevitable tragedy. Young people will delight in this bittersweet story which is as much about friendship as it is of love and the consequence of defying the rules of the Jim Crow South.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings -- Maya Angelou

The first of Angelou's autobiography takes her from Stamps, Arkansas, to St. Louis, to California. Throughout her journey, young Maya comments on life for African Americans from the 1930s on, the inequities, the horrors, and the triumphs. The richness of the language and content promote much meaning and understanding of living in the Jim Crow years.

Invisible Man -- Ralph Ellison

The narrator searches for his identity as a black man living with other African Americans, and as a black man living among whites in a white-dominated society. The narrator recognizes that others' perception of him is shaped by their own experiences about life, rather than understanding him for his unique characteristics. For a biography on author Ralph Ellison, [click here](#). For a lesson on *Invisible Man*, [click here](#). For teacher reviewed external Web sites on Ellison and *Invisible Man*, [click here](#).

A Lesson Before Dying -- Ernest J. Gaines

In the 1940s, a young black man is sentenced to death for committing murder. The narrator, a young black teacher reluctantly agrees to help this convicted prisoner to "become a man" before that still endures long after the end of the Civil War. For teacher reviewed external Web sites on Gaines and this novel, [click here](#).

***Miss Cynthia* by Rudolph Fisher, *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston, and *High Yaller* by Rudolph Fisher**

Teaching suggestions provided.

***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass**

Teaching suggestions provided.

The Norton Anthology of African American Literature -- edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay

A definitive and invaluable source. "A dazzling and rich overview of the African American literary tradition, with the work of 120 authors from 1746 to the present, writing in all genres--poetry, short fiction, novels, drama, autobiographical journals, and letters (including the complete texts of eleven major works) such as "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch," by Richard Wright.

Passing -- Nella Larsen

This novel describes the story of an African American who is "passing" for a white woman in 1920. The protagonist deals with the dilemma of denying identity and heritage to attain status and equality in a discriminatory society. Student will easily identify with the concept of "becoming" someone else in order to fit in.

Selected Works by Richard Wright -- Nella Larsen

"Wright's understanding of African-American life is rooted in his southern background. His first book, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), is a collection of short stories that comes out of his understanding and knowledge of the meaning of being a young black male growing up in the South." *Black Boy* is his "autobiography," a lyrical account of his first sixteen years. "Though *Black Boy* differs in some important respects from his life, the "general tenor of the novel is true." (From *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris). For teacher reviewed external Web sites on Wright and his works, [click here](#).

Song of Solomon -- Toni Morrison

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, *Song of Solomon* is the story of Macon Dead Jr. (a.k.a. Milkman), whose family is the richest black family in a Midwestern town in the 1930s. Struggling to forge his own identity, he aligns himself with his best friend, Guitar, a violent militant who heads a secret society of secret avengers called the Seven Days. In the meantime he falls in love with and consorts with his cousin, and becomes the apprentice of Pilate, Hagar's mother. In the second half of the novel, he sets off for a southern town in search of gold, but he finds instead, evidence of his family heritage and the secret of "flying."

The Souls of Black Folk -- W.E.B. Du Bois

Black intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois, originally wrote this book in 1903. This book defines Du Bois's beliefs that African Americans should strive for intellectual excellence. Du Bois's beliefs contrast sharply with Booker T. Washington who advocated an accommodationist stance in the face of racial discrimination. This book reveals an important historical viewpoint in African-American history. To read a biography on Du Bois with accompanying lesson activity suggestions, [click here](#)

Their Eyes were Watching God -- Zora Neale Hurston

The protagonist in this novel is an African American woman living in the south during the 1920s. Hurston shows Janie to be a black woman who deserved the rights that should be awarded to all individuals regardless of color or gender. In this novel, Hurston depicts a realistic black life through the use of dialect and the incorporation of African American folk tales and idioms. To read a biography on Hurston, [click here](#). For teacher reviewed external Web sites on Hurston and this novel, [click here](#).

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