Books

12 novels that changed the way we live



Trisha Krauss for The Washington Post

By **Ron Charles**

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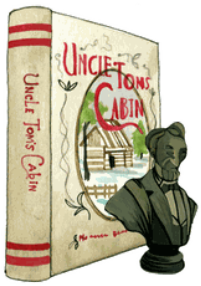
ur favorite novels leave a lasting impression, a sense of

O private awe that glows even after we've forgotten the details. In rare cases, we are bold to say, "That book changed my life." For me, the shortlist would include Anne Tyler's "Saint Maybe," John Updike's "Rabbit, Run" and Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead" — novels that fundamentally altered the way I think about myself.

But then there is another collection of novels — some great, some not so great — that appeared in just the right form at just the right moment to effect a measurable impact outside the literary realm. That influence is relatively rare. We are far more likely to be motivated by works of nonfiction, by information, by exposé. For a novel to refashion our social, economic or political lives requires a kind of mainstream popularity that few works of fiction attain. And even then, a novel's theme must be

powerful enough and singular enough to push a significant segment of the population in a particular direction. Fiction writers, for the most part, don't think in such polemical terms. But here are a dozen novels that — for better or worse — changed the way we live.



"Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly"

by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Just a few months after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe felt impelled to give her abolitionist ideals a fuller voice. "The time is come," she wrote to a newspaper editor,

“when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak.” She could not have imagined how much praise — and condemnation — her first novel would elicit. Begun in 1851 as a serial tale in a Washington, D.C., abolitionist newspaper, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” became the best-selling novel of the 19th century. The polemic melodrama’s depiction of Uncle Tom being beaten to death and Eliza running from her captors energized the abolition cause — and enraged the defenders of America’s “peculiar institution.” Frederick Douglass wrote, “Its effect was amazing, instantaneous, and universal.” Legend has it that when President Lincoln met Stowe, he said, “Is this the little woman who made this great war?” But no novel’s reputation has suffered such whiplash. Nowadays, the name “Uncle Tom” is used exclusively as a racial insult

suggesting sniveling complicity with one's oppressors.



"A Christmas Carol"

by Charles Dickens

When they hear that Charles Dickens invented Christmas, most scholars scoff, "Bah! Humbug." After all, Christians had been celebrating the birth of Jesus at least since the 4th century A.D. But after the Reformation, the holiday acquired a somewhat raucous — that is to say, *papist* — reputation. Puritans were particularly unmerry about Christmas celebrations. For a few decades in the 17th century, it was banned in Massachusetts. Dickens was already a famous writer when,

in 1843, he released a ghost story about Ebenezer Scrooge and his late-night transformation from skinflint to benefactor. The novella, with its sentimental depiction of Tiny Tim and the poor Cratchit family, was an immense bestseller. It ran through printing after printing and eventually launched Dickens on an exhausting schedule of public readings. The story didn't cause a wholesale revamping of the holiday — Clement Clarke Moore's poem "The Night Before Christmas" had appeared 20 years earlier — but Dickens helped cement a certain spirit in the popular imagination and focus attention on the holiday's more charitable and family-oriented traditions. When we think of Christmas now, it's largely through the frosted lens that he created.



“The Jungle”

by Upton Sinclair

In 1904, a young writer named Upton Sinclair began interviewing people in and around Chicago meatpacking stockyards. With an assignment from a radical newspaper, he intended to expose the exploitation of laborers and rouse a complacent nation to change. His tragic tale about a Lithuanian immigrant roused the nation, all right, but not entirely as he’d intended. The story’s disgusting portrayal of unsanitary conditions in the meatpacking plant turned America’s stomach. (Even if you’ve never read “The Jungle,” you probably know this line: “A man had fallen

into one of the rendering tanks and had been made into pure leaf lard.") The public demanded action. President Theodore Roosevelt launched investigations into the Chicago stockyards that quickly confirmed that the conditions were "revolting" and "dangerous to health." In 1906, Roosevelt wrote to Congress: "I urge the immediate enactment into law of provisions which will enable the Department of Agriculture adequately to inspect the meat and meat food products entering into interstate commerce." The Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act passed later that year. "The Jungle" was an international bestseller, but Sinclair remained disappointed that the plight of American laborers remained essentially unchanged: "I aimed at the public's heart," he said, "and by accident I hit it in the stomach."



“Go Ask Alice”

by Anonymous

By 1971, the Summer of Love had kindled a panic about the destructive effects of narcotics, and President Nixon declared a “War on Drugs.” Adding fuel to the fire, that same year, an anonymous diary was published called “Go Ask Alice,” a title plucked from Jefferson Airplane’s druggy anthem “White Rabbit,” which was drawn from Lewis Carroll’s trippy satire “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.” The book describes a teenage girl’s quick and deadly addiction to LSD. A Mormon therapist named Beatrice Sparks was the probable author — she died in 2012 — but the story’s fraudulent

provenance didn't blunt its popularity. "Go Ask Alice" became a sensational bestseller and a controversial text of the anti-drug crusade. (Raised as a Christian Scientist, I was terrified by *everything* in "Go Ask Alice": the drugs, the sex, even the bell bottoms.) Proponents claimed the book — often banned in schools — effectively scared kids away from dangerous substances. But it probably did as much to inflame America's hysterical attitudes about psychotropic drugs, which blotted out rational discussion and encouraged decades of destructive and counterproductive legislation.

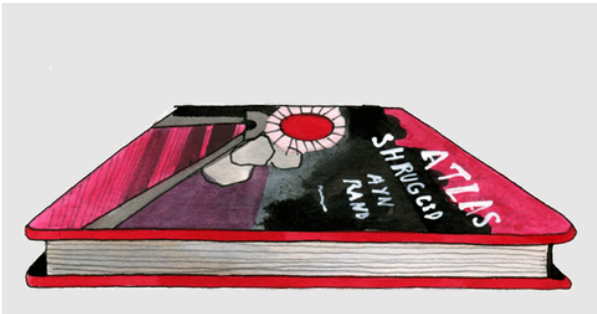


"The Fire in the Flint"

by Walter White

White is remembered today as the man who led the NAACP through the Depression and into the postwar era. But before rising to that position, he pursued dangerous investigations of lynchings in the South. The child of former slaves, he could pass for Caucasian, which sometimes allowed him undercover access to deadly conspiracies against black Americans. In 1924, drawing on what he'd observed, he published his first novel — written in just 12 feverish days — called "The Fire in the Flint." The story is about a black doctor who opens a practice in Georgia and imagines that he can deftly negotiate the racist tensions in his hometown. But after being drawn into a conflict involving sharecroppers and the Ku Klux Klan, he is murdered. The novel's dramatic portrayal of lynching aroused considerable passion, praise and, of course, censure. Southern reviewers condemned it as a gross

exaggeration, but White countered that he knew of many cases “far more terrible than anything that is pictured in my novel.” W.E.B. Du Bois said “The Fire in the Flint” offered a “stirring story and a strong bit of propaganda against the white Klansman.” The novel not only sparked national outrage against racial violence at a crucial moment in the Klan’s ascendancy, it made White a literary celebrity and electrified his advocacy for anti-lynching legislation.



“Atlas Shrugged”

by Ayn Rand

In the 1950s, a young Alan Greenspan began attending gatherings in the New York apartment of a Russian

immigrant named Ayn Rand. While debating the principles of enlightened self-interest with the members of this heady “collective,” Rand was completing her last novel, “Atlas Shrugged.” It’s a mammoth story about the struggles of brilliant industrialists in an America set on crushing businesses with regulation. Since it was published in 1957, “Atlas Shrugged” has sold millions of copies and occupied a singular position in American politics, a field not generally known for its attention to novels. While some conservatives condemn Rand’s atheistic philosophy, “Atlas Shrugged” has become a bible for a certain segment of the Republican Party that hears in it a rousing articulation of unencumbered liberty. Greenspan, who chaired the Federal Reserve for almost 20 years, called Rand “a stabilizing force” in his life; Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas praised “Atlas Shrugged” for its

“scathing criticisms of the dangers of centralized government”; and former House Speaker Paul Ryan once told the Weekly Standard, “I give out ‘Atlas Shrugged’ as Christmas presents.”



“The Grapes of Wrath”

by John Steinbeck

As America fights the coronavirus and its collateral economic damage, the possibility that haunts us is the Great Depression. And most of us envision that horror as described in “The Grapes of Wrath.” Published in 1939, when the country was still crippled by poverty, John Steinbeck’s novel about a

family of migrant farmers grew from his reporting for the San Francisco News. The book, which won a Pulitzer Prize, was condemned for its socialist sympathies and even banned in some parts of the country. But Eleanor Roosevelt was an early defender who called reading it “an unforgettable experience” that reminded her “of the love ‘that passeth all understanding.’” Within months of its publication, Congress held hearings on wages and farm regulations. But the novel’s legacy is even more enduring: The Joads’ desperate trek from Oklahoma to California cemented in Americans’ minds the trauma of personal helplessness, capitalist brutality and political incompetence that continues to motivate Washington’s fiscal responses today. What is the $2 trillion Cares Act signed into law in late March but an extraordinary promise that America will never sink into that slough of despair again?

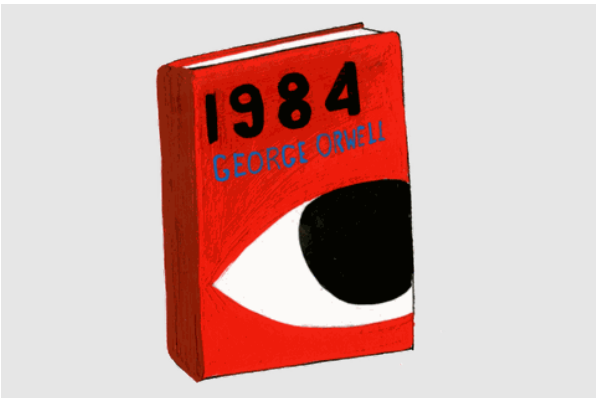


“To Kill a Mockingbird”

by Harper Lee

Attorneys have not fared well in literature. Dick the Butcher, one of the rebels in “Henry VI, Part 2,” famously suggests, “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” Dickens came close with his sharp satire in “Bleak House.” But legal practitioners finally won a reprieve in 1960 with the publication of “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Harper Lee’s debut novel about an Alabama family during the Depression became one of the most beloved books of all time — and at the moral center of that story stands the narrator’s father, Atticus Finch, attorney at law. Thoughtful, principled

and profoundly sympathetic, Gregory Peck — I mean, *Atticus* — bravely defends a black man in a racially charged rape case. No other novel has determined the career path of so many people in one field. Even in the undrained swamp of Washington, D.C., ask a group of attorneys what first inspired them to study law, and you're likely to hear it was reading "To Kill a Mockingbird." In 2010, the editors of the American Bar Association journal called Atticus "a legal deity" and said he "represented both an image lawyers crave and a standard that intimidates them."



“Nineteen Eighty-Four”

by George Orwell

A few years after World War II, as the Soviet Union emerged as a major world power, George Orwell published a dystopian novel called “1984.” It’s set in a future England subsumed within Oceania, which is ruled by Big Brother, the figurehead of an all-powerful Party. The story describes the terrifying ordeal of Winston Smith, a re-writer of official history in the Ministry of Truth. Though largely inspired by the horrific abuses of Soviet communism, Orwell was also thinking of England’s propaganda division during the war. Readers all over the world quickly recognized that “1984” exposes the function of totalitarianism wherever governments cling to power by generating fear, distorting facts and repressing objective analysis. And Orwell’s focus on the use of

new surveillance technologies continues to look eerily prescient. Most important, though, no other novel has sent so many significant terms into our common language. For decades, “doublethink,” “Newspeak,” “thoughtcrime” and even “Orwellian” have served as critical labels to expose and denounce distortions promoted by politicians and business leaders. Alas, as recent events have demonstrated, even America’s widespread appreciation for “1984” cannot inoculate the country from a personality cult devoted to “alternative facts.”

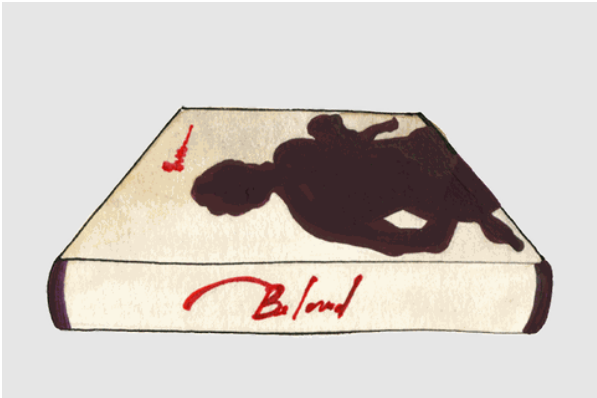


“The House of God”

by Samuel Shem

In the early 1970s, when Stephen Bergman graduated from Harvard Medical School and began working as an intern at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, he was horrified by what he witnessed and by what he endured. In 1978, “The House of God,” his first autobiographical novel, written under the pseudonym Samuel Shem, exposed the traumatic demands of medical training and the chaotic disarray of treatment in the United States. In a story that’s simultaneously shocking, comic and heartbreaking, the protagonist, Dr. Roy Basch, is quickly stripped of his innocence as he learns that a distressing number of medical interventions are actually deleterious to patients’ health. Everything about the way interns are trained appears counterproductive, designed not to educate but to exhaust and discourage. In his introduction to the 1995 reprint edition, John Updike wrote that “The House of God”

“does for medical training what ‘Catch-22’ did for the military life — displays it as farce, a melee of blunderers laboring to murky purpose under corrupt and platitudinous superiors.” Some older doctors initially denounced the novel, but it became a cult classic among medical students and is now credited with spurring long-needed changes in treatment and training.



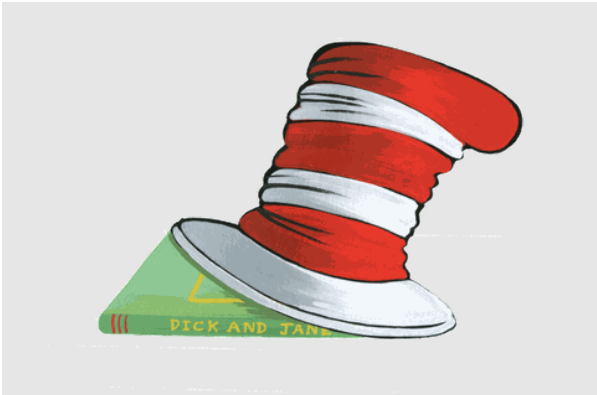
“Beloved”

by Toni Morrison

“I never thought I had the emotional resources to deal with slavery,” Toni Morrison once said. “There was some deliberate, calculated survivalist intention to forget

certain things." But she was haunted by an old newspaper story about Margaret Garner, an African-American woman who killed her daughter to keep the child from being dragged back into slavery. Inspired by that tragedy, Morrison — the granddaughter of a slave herself — in 1987 published "Beloved," and "certain things" could never be forgotten again. The greatest American novel of the 20th century, "Beloved" remade the history of our national literature. Its most profound impact, though, was to shatter the lingering mythology of antebellum honor and gentility. More powerfully than any work of history could, "Beloved" plumbed the humanity of enslaved people and exposed the moral and physical obscenity of this system. After "Beloved," it became that much more untenable to cling to bloodless arguments about states' rights or to defend the sanctity of Confederate statues.

A few years after the novel was published, Morrison lamented that there were no suitable memorials — not even a “small bench by the road” — to mark the lives of slaves. “And because such a place doesn’t exist,” she said, “the book had to.” In response to that comment, in 2006, the Toni Morrison Society began placing benches “at sites commemorating significant moments, individuals, and locations within the history of the African Diaspora.” There are now 26 benches around the world.



“The Cat in the Hat”

by Dr. Seuss

Okay, not really a *novel*, but good enough if you’re between

3 and 103. To fully appreciate how alarming Dr. Seuss once sounded, remember what kids had been reading in school since the Depression: “See Dick. See Jane. See Dick and Jane bore kids to tears.” But the work of Theodor Geisel — his real name — was loud, even naughty. In 1957, when the jaunty cat burst in on that cold, cold, wet day with lots of good fun that is funny, it was clear that children’s literature would never be the same. Using fewer than 250 different words, Dr. Seuss told a story that was witty and genuinely surprising. If schools were slow to trade in Dick and Jane for Thing One and Thing Two, parents weren’t. Dr. Seuss went on to publish dozens of picture books that sold hundreds of millions of copies. Looking back at “The Cat in the Hat,” Geisel said, “It’s the book I’m proudest of because it had something to do with the death of the Dick and Jane primers.” That sounds a bit, well, *murderous*, but what would

YOU do if your mother asked YOU?

Illustration by Trisha Krauss for The Washington Post. Art direction and design by Audrey Valbuena.

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