

# What is a “Classic”

AN EDUCATOR GUIDE

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#DISRUPTTEXTS

PENGUIN  CLASSICS

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Education

The question in literature about what makes a text a “classic” is no doubt a complicated one. For many scholars, teachers, and students, classic books have come to be synonymous with the “literary canon,” a body of literature some feel is essential reading as part of a person’s education.

As educators of color, we—Julia and Tricia—have wrestled with the term “classic,” even as we have both read and taught many works of literature that would be considered such. Although people of color comprise the global majority, and despite the historical fact that there exists a rich legacy of literary contributions by people of color in oral and written texts, many U.S. high school curricula tend to be focused on “Great Books” that center white, Eurocentric, and Western points of view.

There are implications when a text is bestowed the label of “classic,” especially depending on who is doing the bestowing. When I (Tricia) was in high school and college, I often looked to the Modern Library Association’s list of “100 Best Novels,” privately checking off which ones I’d read and which I’d add to my reading list. After all, I was taught that books that made such lists were the very best representations of literature in our collective culture. But as a daughter of Filipino immigrants, I also eagerly looked for books and authors that reflected or connected to my own life experiences.

Although I didn’t have the language or theory for it, I was looking for what Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop called “mirrors<sup>1</sup>,” books that could be a source of recognition and affirmation, books that could allow me to see myself and those similar to myself in any number of imaginative possibilities. So when I could not find a single mirror in the books my teachers gave



A classic is a book you think about even when you haven’t read it in a long time—parts of it continue to waft in the air around you always.

—Jacqueline Woodson



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1. <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

me, what else could I conclude except that people who looked like me—or who had experiences similar to my own or my ancestors—were not capable of writing “classics” or having lives worthy of representation in great literature?

It’s in this context that we acknowledge that applying the term “classic” to any book is not a neutral act. In fact, canon-making has been, at least in part, a colonial project. In the U.S., for example, some of the earliest schools were Indian Residential Schools, managed by the government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs. The schools’ expressed purpose was to separate Native and Indigenous children from their families and forcibly assimilate them into white, European culture. This cultural genocide included forbidding Native students from speaking their own languages and reading only books important to white Europeans, (namely, the Bible). Looking at curricula in many public schools today, one can easily see this colonial legacy, as white, Eurocentric literature still occupies a disproportionate amount of space in students’ educational lives in a country (and world) that is growing increasingly diverse.

And so the question cannot simply be what *makes* a classic, but also *who* makes one. Who decides? For centuries, canon-making has largely been the purview of the highest levels of academia. But every day in our classrooms, teachers and school leaders are also canon-makers. As those charged with helping to guide all of our students’ literacy and literary lives, we can choose to perpetuate a narrow curriculum that limits the voices and experiences of others, or we can expand and deepen our students’ experiences to include a more representative curation of literary voices.



At their best, classics become building blocks of who we are, a scaffolding for us to make sense of the world. But when classics fail us, they become stones around our necks, crooked lenses through which we see the complex world around us.

—Adib Khorram





I suppose the common idea of a 'classic' is a work which represents the 'best' writing of a certain generation in a particular geographical location and has therefore secured a place in the literary canon. However, it's impossible for me not to put sarcastic air quotes around the terms 'classic' and 'best' since there's an enormous degree of subjectivity there, as an historically homogenous group of gatekeepers have often falsely portrayed their own perspectives and tastes as objective measures of quality. With that said, I believe there certainly are powerful works that capture both the specific and universal in such a way that they resonate with readers for years to come. It's just that what's a 'classic' to one group of people or one person might not be to others.

—Randy Ribay



When we were first approached about writing educator guides for Penguin Classics, we asked several authors to share how they would define a "classic." Jacqueline Woodson defined a classic as "a book you think about even when you haven't read it in a long time—parts of it continue to waft in the air around you always." Similarly, Lilliam Rivera told us, "A classic is a book you return to again and again throughout different periods of your life. Each time you scan its pages, a new revelation is uncovered and your surroundings shift once again." For Anton Treuer, while a classic can offer "a window into a unique world, a mirror for the reader to look at their own, or both, it need not come from a Western view or be written in a Western language." Instead, he said, a classic is one that "speaks to our shared human yearnings, transcends socially constructed barriers, and transports the reader's imagination, emotion, and intellect." And, as Adib Khorram states so elegantly, "at their best, classics become building blocks of who we are, a scaffolding for us to make sense of the world."

While these authors' reflections illuminate the power that classics can have for readers, that power is not always positive. After all, as Khorram also pointed out, when classics fail us, "they become stones around our necks, crooked lenses through which we see the complex world around us." When asked about classics, Randy Ribay reminded us of the "enormous degree of subjectivity" in defining classics, "as an historically homogenous group of gatekeepers have often falsely portrayed their own perspectives and tastes as objective measures of quality." Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds urged us to think beyond the labels: "Kids learn to love literature when it's relevant to them. So let's stop worrying about whether a work is classic and start prioritizing stories that are relevant, so we inspire more kids to fall in love with reading and critical thinking."



**A classic is a book that speaks to the present times, even as the times change and you change with them.**

**—Namrata Tripathi**



**A classic is an imperfect, created, and beloved object—we turn to a classic to remind us to reach, to make, and to feel again.**

**—Min Jin Lee**



And since these educator guides are a project of Penguin Random House, we also asked members of their publishing team how they defined the term "classic." Elda Rotor, vice-president and publisher of Penguin Classics, shared that, for her, classics say something about "our relationship to the past." We appreciate this simple and powerful definition. Classics are books that we can return to in order to learn more about who or what has come before us and, in that looking back, we might discover more about ourselves and who we are now as we look forward.

Of course, we are currently in a moment of political and racial conflict in which that question—*Who are we now?*—becomes more urgent to ask and answer. An estimated 15 to 26 million people participated in recent Black Lives Matter protests, making them the largest civil rights protests in our nation’s history. As teachers, we need not ask ourselves what we would have done (or our students what they would have done) during the historic 1960s Civil Rights Movement. We need only to ask ourselves what we are doing right now as we grapple with our present moment.

No matter how we might define “classic,” if we read books from our past to better understand our present, then it’s imperative that the “classics” we turn to more accurately represent many voices and experiences, and not just from those who have always had power. Students of all backgrounds—and especially our students whose communities have been historically marginalized or erased—deserve to know that there exists a rich and deep literary legacy comprised of many diverse voices.



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—Lilliam Rivera



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A classic is a work of literature that offers a window into a unique world, a mirror for the reader to look at their own, or both. It need not come from a Western view or be written in a Western language, but it speaks to our shared human yearnings, transcends socially constructed barriers, and transports the reader’s imagination, emotion, and intellect.

—Anton Treuer





We don't teach kids music by focusing all their study only on opera. They learn best through music that is relevant to them. The relevance makes them love music, which then widens their scope and makes more music relevant and so on. It's the same with books. Kids learn to love literature when it's relevant to them. So let's stop worrying about whether a work is classic and start prioritizing stories that are relevant, so we inspire more kids to fall in love with reading and critical thinking.

—Brendan Kiely & Jason Reynolds



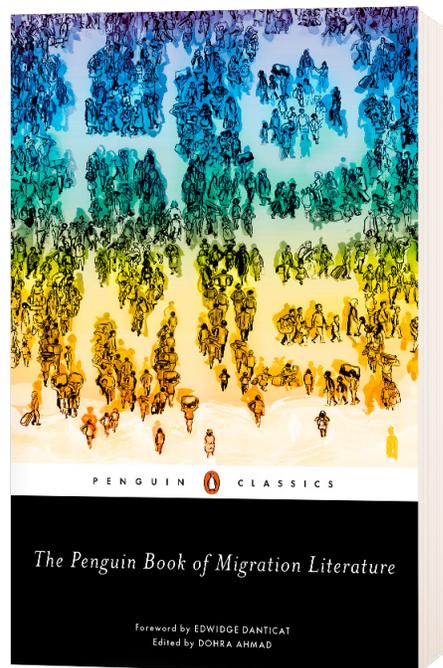
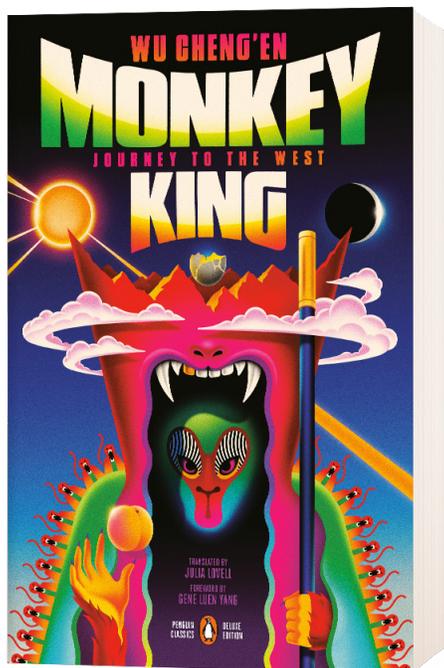
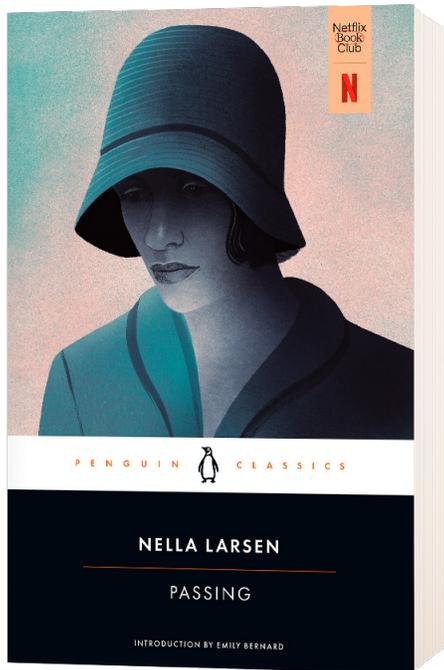
That, in many ways, it's been the authors occupying the margins of society who have pushed its boundaries to be more open, inclusive, and truly representative of the breadth and depth of human experience.

That Black and brown people, in particular, are not only capable of making great art, but have *always* made great art.

That each of us, and all of us, are worthy of being classic.

Penguin Random House Education, DisruptTexts, and Penguin Classics have partnered on the following four teachers guides.

The following four original educator guides, authored by the #DisruptTexts team, will be made available as free, downloadable educator resources on [PRHSecondaryED.com](https://prhsecondaryed.com). The guides will be for four Penguin Classics texts that have been overlooked in secondary classrooms and are representative of BIPOC communities, including:





**TRICIA EBARVIA** A co-founder of #DisruptTexts and co-founder/director of the Institute for Racial Equity in Literacy (IREL), Tricia Ebarvia advocates for literacy instruction rooted in equity and liberation through critical literacy. An educator with more than 20 years of classroom experience, she is currently the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at an independent school in Philadelphia. Previously, Tricia taught and served as department chairperson at a large public high school

where she taught courses in American literature, AP Language, and AP Literature. Tricia is a National Writing Project teacher consultant with the West Chester Writing Project and serves on the Advisory Board for the Center for Antiracist Education (CARE). She is the recipient of the 2021 Divergent Award for Excellence in Literacy Advocacy, as well as the NCTE High School Teacher of Excellence award. Tricia's work has been featured in various publications and academic journals and the author of a forthcoming professional book on anti-bias literacy instruction. Follow her @triciaebarvia and at [triciaebarvia.org](http://triciaebarvia.org)



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the Colorado Language Arts Society (a regional affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English). She holds a master's of education in secondary education curriculum and instruction from University of Phoenix, a master's in creative writing from Regis University and a masters in library and information science from the University of Denver (2023). Her forthcoming title *Liven Up Your Library: Design Engaging and Inclusive Programs for Tweens and Teens* will be available from ISTE publications in 2022. Learn more about Julia at [juliaetorres.com](http://juliaetorres.com)

## #DISRUPTTEXTS

#DisruptTexts is a crowdsourced, grassroots effort by teachers for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. It is part of our mission to aid and develop teachers committed to anti-racist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices.

## PENGUIN CLASSICS

For 75 years, Penguin Classics has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world, providing readers with a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. They focus on bringing together the best of the past and the future, using cutting-edge design and production, as well as embracing the digital age to create unforgettable editions of treasured literature.

## Education

Penguin Random House Education strives to inspire teaching and learning through outstanding books. It is part of Penguin Random House, the world’s largest trade book publisher, and is dedicated to its mission of nourishing a universal passion for reading by connecting authors and their writing with readers everywhere. The company, which employs more than 10,000 people globally, was formed on July 1, 2013, by Bertelsmann and Pearson; Bertelsmann is the full owner of the company. With more than 300 imprints and brands on six continents, Penguin Random House comprises adult and children’s fiction and nonfiction print and digital English- and Spanish-language trade book publishing businesses in more than 20 countries worldwide. With over 15,000 new titles, and more than 600 million print, audio, and eBooks sold annually, Penguin Random House’s publishing lists include more than 80 Nobel Prize laureates and hundreds of the world’s most widely read authors.

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