

**L**ITERATURE ALLOWS US to experience unfamiliar worlds and lives: we immerse ourselves in the stories of characters from other countries and other eras, and we walk in the shadows of those experiencing triumph or tragedy on scales we can only imagine. But great novels can also illuminate the shared experience of being human. If we're fortunate enough to spend a considerable number of years on the planet, almost all of us experience childhood, first love, a life of work, the search for a mate (or for mates), family, aging, and, finally, death.

With these broad commonalities in mind, we're launching a new series of Life Stages features, selecting books on a particular time or aspect of all of our lives. We begin with "Coming of Age"—the transition from childhood to adulthood—from naïveté to maturity and understanding. We focus on contemporary writers from the mid-20th century on, and we divide our selections by decades in the last century to show both the commonality of the joys, pains, and challenges of growing up as well as the experiences particular to a place or an era. We stayed away from books written primarily for teens. Our selections are by no means comprehensive; we present some beloved classics as well as novels that, though timeless in their depiction of childhood or adolescence, have been overlooked in recent years.

## Early 20th Century

### *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943)

By Betty Smith

Few coming-of-age novels have withstood the test of time like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, a poignant, sometimes humorous, and always brutally honest look at immigrant squalor in the first and second decades of the 20th century. Francie Nolan, born into a poor Austrian-Irish-American family in Brooklyn, yearns for the American Dream as she reflects on her sweet but alcoholic father, her hardworking mother, and her school friends and navigates the daily challenges she strives to overcome. This timeless young adult and adult novel, the classic immigrant tale, shocked—and then quickly endeared itself to—readers when it was first published.



### *Daddy Was a Numbers Runner* (1970)

By Louise Meriwether

Twelve-year-old Francie Coffin, raised during the depth of the Depression in Harlem, faces the struggles of most adolescent girls. Raised in a loving but disintegrating family, she must also come to terms with her neighborhood's many challenges: a brother in a gang; racial discrimination; poverty; and the advances of lascivious men. Although she repeatedly finds her dreams destroyed, Francie also finds love, friendship, and hope—despite being black and female in America. This is a tender, though tough, autobiographical novel, filled with pain and humor.

# Coming of Age

## The Great Depression

### *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)

By Saul Bellow

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

"I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate. . . ." Thus opens Bellow's classic bildungsroman featuring the carefree, introspective, destitute, and later somewhat self-made Augie March. During the Depression, Augie makes himself useful by taking on eccentric jobs and fitting himself into others' aboveboard adventures as he pursues an elusive, alienating American Dream. This compelling, vivid first-person picaresque novel follows Augie from boyhood to manhood as he searches for his place in the world.



## Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953)

By James Baldwin

In this semiautobiographical novel, John Grimes, a 14-year-old African American boy in 1930s Harlem, navigates between his mother and her abusive and hypocritical preacher husband Gabriel, whom he detests. He dreams only of escaping his oppressive life. Then, he experiences a spiritual and moral awakening one evening in a storefront church—but not without an accompanying rage and despair. A landmark book when it was published more than a half century ago, the novel spans a single day but uncovers many layers of the family’s tortured history and their inescapable climate of hatred and racism.

## World’s Fair (1985)

By E. L. Doctorow

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

Nine-year-old Edgar Altshuler, a young Jewish boy living in the Bronx during a time of economic depression and imminent war, equates the promise of his youth with the 1939 World’s Fair, a sign of progress and prosperity. Told in nostalgic flashbacks by an adult Edgar and interspersed with narratives by his mother and brother, this apparently simple story about one boy’s adventures, traditions, fears, hopes, and daily life offers great insight into both the era and one boy’s slow loss of innocence. Perhaps autobiographical, this novel is for young adults and adults alike.

## To Kill a Mockingbird (1960)

By Harper Lee

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is as much a classic coming-of-age tale as it is a riveting look at Depression-era race, class, and justice in the small Southern town of Maycomb, Alabama. It follows Scout Finch, her brother, Jem, and their father, Atticus, as the latter defends a black man accused of raping a white woman. The trial doesn’t occupy the novel’s center stage; rather, that honor belongs to Scout and Jem, as they plot ways to find out more about Boo Radley, a mysterious neighbor. But the trial catapults the siblings into an understanding of their unjust society and a rapid destruction of innocence and acknowledgment of the flaws—and promises—of human nature.

See also Tony Earley’s *Jim the Boy* (2000), a novel about a 10-year-old boy who comes of age in North Carolina during the Great Depression.

## 1940s and World War II

### A Separate Peace

By John Knowles (1959)

◆ RICHARD AND HINDA ROSENTHAL FOUNDATION AWARD

◆ WILLIAM FAULKNER AWARD

At a New Hampshire prep school in 1942, teenage roommates Gene and Finny—the former an intellectual introvert, the latter a charismatic daredevil—form a friendship and a secret society based on a dangerous ritual. But when Gene mistakes their camaraderie for rivalry, violence and betrayal threaten the very foundation of their youth. This classic tale of male adolescence and of innocence tested—and ultimately lost—was banned in schools as late as the 1980s for its “dangerous elements.” Today, however, *A Separate Peace* is considered a timeless story of one boy’s attempt to come to terms with his deeds.

### The Chosen (1967)

By Chaim Potok

In 1940s Brooklyn, just as news of the Holocaust reaches the United States, Danny Saunders, the brilliant 15-year-old son of a Hasidic rebbe, hits a line drive during a baseball game toward Reuven Malter, a Modern Orthodox Jew. The ball shatters Reuven’s glasses and sends him to the hospital. Thus begins the unlikely friendship between the two boys as they navigate through adolescence, family conflicts, their fathers’ religious differences, and their own crises of faith. A warm, wise novel relevant to readers of all persuasions, its main message is one of love and redemption. Also by the author: *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), which follows a boy’s evolution as an artist and a Jew.

### Martha Quest (1952)

(The Children of Violence series)

By Doris Lessing

In the first of Doris Lessing’s Children of Violence novels, Martha Quest is, in many ways, a typical teenage girl. But in other ways, her independent streak sets her apart. Set in the British colony of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) on the eve of World War II, the novel explores timeless themes: racism, gender stereotypes, religious prejudices, and imperialism. Yet it is Martha’s internalization of these matters that gives this novel such resonating power. As she embarks on an independent path to right the injustices she witnesses around her, Martha struggles with her own idealism, principles, and consciousness—with sometimes tragic results.

### The Power of One (1989)

By Bryce Courtenay

Looking back as an adult, Peekay (Afrikaans for “Pisshead”) relates his youth in South Africa during the 1930s and



# LIFE STAGES

1940s. He describes his lonely childhood during World War II, when, at age five, he is shipped off to boarding school and is ridiculed by Dutch Boer students for his English heritage. Then, through a Boer, Peekay discovers his love of boxing—and vows to become the world’s welterweight champion. With racism and apartheid as backdrops, this semiautobiographical novel (Courtenay was born in South Africa and learned boxing as a means to stay alive) is by turns witty and melodramatic, suspenseful and exotic, as it charts one boy’s violent transition to manhood and empowerment.

## Atonement

By Ian McEwan (2001)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS’ CIRCLE FICTION AWARD

Not all is what it appears in this literary confession, an exploration of the nature of writing as much as a haunting and psychologically astute coming-of-age novel. Precocious 13-year-old Briony Tallis, an upper-middle-class girl living on her family’s estate in interwar England, witnesses what she believes to be a sexual act between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallis’s charwoman. When her cousin is assaulted later that night, Briony’s active imagination takes over, and her testimony sends Robbie to prison and, later, to the battlefields of World War II. Briony gradually seeks atonement as she struggles for forgiveness. (★★★★★ Summer 2002)

## Red Sky at Morning (1968)

By Richard Bradford

During World War II, Josh Arnold’s family relocates from Mobile, Alabama, to the family’s summer home in the largely Hispanic village of Corazon Sagrado, New Mexico. When his father, a shipbuilder, joins the Navy, Josh takes his place as head of the household. With the help of classmates, a disreputable artist, and a former bully, Josh slowly transitions from a naïve young teenager into a capable adult. This novel, narrated over the course of a year, is a sentimental, bittersweet, and humorous portrayal about the clash and mesh of cultures and the changes that come with the passage of time. Josh’s personal growth often reads as an allegory to the pains of a postwar America.

## The Member of the Wedding (1946)

By Carson McCullers

Twelve-year-old Frankie Adams, a tomboy in the American South, feels disconnected from the world, though she tries to understand the war being waged around her. When her older brother marries, she naïvely believes that she’ll join her brother and his bride in their new life. “They are the we of me,” she says. But that’s just the start of Frankie’s hot and

disappointing Georgia summer. Her mother is dead; her only friends are her ill younger cousin John Henry and the family’s black maid Berenice. When their threesome—the only place where Frankie feels she belongs—is tragically broken, Frankie must learn to grow up.

## Bless Me, Ultima (1972)

By Rudolfo Anaya

♦ PREMIO QUINTO SOL NATIONAL CHICANO LITERARY AWARD

In this heartwarming novel set in Guadalupe, New Mexico, in the 1940s, Aunt Ultima, a *curandera* (healer), comes to stay with seven-year-old Antonio Márez, who has never been able to reconcile his father’s cowboy upbringing with his mother’s farming village and his father’s desire for Antonio to become a vaquero with his mother’s wish that he join the Catholic priesthood. With Ultima’s guidance, Antonio starts to understand the power of moral and religious independence. A coming-of-age tale from the Hispanic perspective, *Bless Me, Ultima* is the first in a trilogy, followed by *Heart of Aztlán* (1976) and *Tortuga* (1979).

## Postwar America: 1950s

### The Cheerleader (1974)

By Ruth Doan MacDougall

In this painful, bittersweet, and honest view of growing up in the 1950s, when “parking” and pajama parties were the norm, teenagers Snowy and her friend Puddles try out for the cheerleading team—a sure source of popularity. Snowy, a typical teenager, deals with friendships, the desires of boys, and the difficulties of high school expectations as she experiences the joy and pain of the transition from childhood to young womanhood. Sequel: *Snowy* (1993) chronicles Snowy’s next 30 years as she and her friends cope with college, marriage, and careers.

### The Catcher in the Rye (1951)

By J. D. Salinger

“If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them.” Few names are as recognized as that of Holden Caulfield, a confused, disillusioned 16-year-old expelled from prep school who, over two days, searches for truth from the “phoniness” that surrounds him. A classic novel





of alienation, few books offer more compelling insight into teenage angst, rebellion, and sexuality.

### All the Pretty Horses (1992)

**The Border Trilogy Volume 1**

By Cormac McCarthy

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

◆ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD

McCarthy's epic *The Border Trilogy*, which tells the story of cowboys who, in the mid-20th century, try to recover the romantic, mythic version of the American West, exposes the dark, violent underbelly of the region. After his grandfather dies, 16-year-old John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins ride their horses from Texas to Mexico in 1949. On their way south, they pick up a 14-year-old sharpshooter, leading to harrowing adventures with corrupt Mexican officials, bandits, and the harsh desert landscape. But it is Grady's arrival on a vast ranch and his romance with the daughter of a rich Spanish hacendado that turn this coming-of-age tale into an ultimately tragic and profound meditation on life and death.

### The Risk Pool (1988)

By Richard Russo

Russo's viciously funny literary canvas is the small, blighted upstate New York town where the adults remain stuck in dead-end jobs and from which the youth hope to escape. It's not surprising, then, that Ned Hall dreams of leaving 1950s Mohawk, a dying, blue-collar town (featured in Russo's first novel *Mohawk* [1986]). Ned starts life rather auspiciously as an altar boy, but things go downhill from there. When his father, a loutish man of bad habits, whisks Ned away from his mentally ill mother, the bewildered boy finds himself living in a filthy downtown apartment; by age 12, he has become a petty thief and card shark. But there's hope for him yet.

### A Boy's Own Story (1982)

By Edmund White

In this poetic—some might call it “wordy”—novel, an unnamed teenage boy narrates his struggles with a distant father, a self-absorbed mother, a cruel sister, and his own efforts to come to terms with his sexuality. The boy is no saint—his selfishness reminds many readers of Holden Caulfield—but his gay awakening within an unreceptive culture resonates with insight. His story continues in the next two books in White's autobiographical trilogy.

## The Sixties

### Crazy in Alabama (1993)

By Mark Childress

◆ NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK OF THE YEAR

In the summer of 1965, at the height of the civil rights movement, everybody went crazy in Alabama—or so it seemed. This wise, tender, and hilarious novel, which centers on 12-year-old orphan Peejoe Bullis, explores nationwide social turmoil and family upheaval. Peejoe's Aunt Lucille, on her way to Hollywood after poisoning her husband (and depositing his severed head in Tupperware), leaves him to deal with a racially motivated murder. Peejoe, who narrates the summer's events from the perspective of an adult, reflects on the tumultuous racial conflict, his childhood, and the understanding he later realized as an adult.

### Portnoy's Complaint (1969)

By Philip Roth

Roth doesn't paint the prettiest picture of coming of age in the 1960s—but he does offer a realistic, albeit dark, portrait of the angst and contradictions of the turbulent decade and its sexual revolution. Alexander Portnoy, the son of Jewish immigrants living in New Jersey, recounts to his psychoanalyst his strained relationship with his family—his critical father, his neurotic mother, and their dreams for their son. Portnoy—by his own admission “a lust-ridden, mother addicted young Jewish bachelor”—focuses on perverse sexual fantasies to override his feelings of shame. But in his heart-wrenching, hilarious confession, it's debatable whether Portnoy ever truly grows up.

## The Seventies

### Ellen Foster (1987)

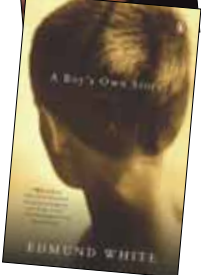
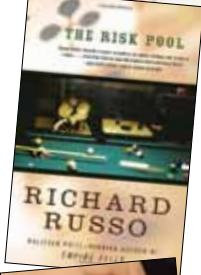
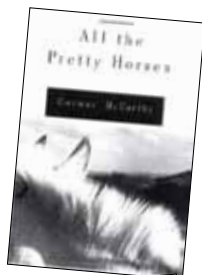
By Kaye Gibbons

Eleven-year-old Ellen Foster, an old soul (she calls herself “old Ellen”), shuttles from one relative to the next after her suicidal mother dies and the court removes her from the hands of her abusive father. The novel takes place in the Southern backwoods, and, like other child heroes (*Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Holden Caulfield*, and *Huck Finn*), Ellen learns to rise above her rotten circumstances by using her own pluck and wit. Sequel: *The Life All Around Me by Ellen Foster* (★★★ Mar/Apr 2006)

### The Little Friend (2002)

By Donna Tartt

Donna Tartt is best known for *The Secret History* (1992), her novel about intellectually arrogant youth at a New England boarding school. Here, in this book about race and class, she explores how knowledge and guilt destroy



the innocence of youth. When nine-year-old Robin Cleve Dufresnes is found hanging from a tree in his backyard in Mississippi, the unsolved crime destroys his family. Years later, in the early 1970s, one of the surviving siblings, the cunning 12-year-old Harriet, determines to solve the mystery of her brother's death and help heal her family. Her accusations, however, lead her into mortal danger and into a frightening adult world.

## Breath

By Tim Winton

◆ MILES FRANKLIN AWARD

In the 1970s, Brucie "Pikelet" Pike, a teenager bored with life in his small Australian mill town, and his best friend Ivan "Loonie" Loon, do little more than swim in a nearby river until they meet Sando, an older man and a once-legendary surfer. For Sando, surfing has become a way to commune with nature, and Pikelet and Loonie quickly become his disciples, testing their limits at every turn. But Sando's strange wife isn't quite as impressed with her would-be guru of a husband, and soon both sexual and emotional entanglements complicate all of their relationships. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2008)

## The Eighties

### The House on Mango Street (1984)

By Sandra Cisneros

◆ AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

In the Latino quarter of Chicago, 12-year-old Esperanza Cordero writes poems and stories that reflect her bittersweet experiences growing up in the barrio. The novel, comprised of vignettes sometimes no more than a few paragraphs long, charts Esperanza's maturing life over the course of a year: her friendships, her changing body, her first crush, and her devastating sexual assaults. Above all, Esperanza hopes to escape Mango Street, and she uses writing as an emotional path to adulthood. *The House on Mango Street*, though criticized by some for its positive view of assimilation, was nonetheless prominent in helping to facilitate dialogue about race and gender issues in the 1980s.

### Black Swan Green (2006)

By David Mitchell

In 1982, in Black Swan Green, a village in western England, 13-year-old Jason Taylor comes of age. Over the course of a year, he navigates a sea of bullies, words with the letter *n* (because of his stammer), and Margaret Thatcher's reign. Narrated in episodic chapters that are, by turns, exhilarating, nostalgic, and heartbreaking, Jason tells of smashing and hiding a family heirloom; searching for an ancient Roman tunnel; witnessing the slow disintegra-

tion of his parents' marriage; and wandering into a gypsy encampment. He also tastes his first kiss and learns crucial survival skills among experiences of teenage pain, guilt, and joy. (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2006)

### Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985)

By Jeanette Winterson

◆ WHITBREAD AWARD FOR FIRST NOVEL

When Jeanette is adopted by fundamental Christian evangelists, she grows up believing that her destiny is to become a missionary. Yet as an adolescent, Jeanette's love for a girl her own age overshadows her love of religion. As her mother's close-minded circle tries to exorcise her lesbian tendencies and fallen state, Jeanette attempts to reconcile her religious beliefs with her sexual preferences. Semiautobiographical and beautifully written, this witty, heartbreaking, and brave story exposes some hard truths about fundamentalism, middle-class life in the Midlands of England, and the convictions adolescents must defend.

### The Last Samurai (2000)

By Helen DeWitt

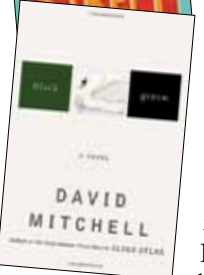
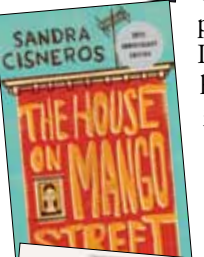
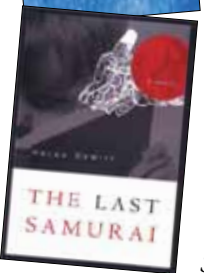
American expatriate Sibylla Newman, an eccentric single mother living in 1980s London, cultivates her only son, Ludo (the product of a one-night stand), into an extraordinary scholar. By age four, he is reading Greek—and soon after he has mastered advanced mathematics. As a father substitute, Sibylla offers Ludo Kurosawa's film *The Seven Samurai*, which she hopes will satiate her son's paternal longings and guide his moral development. Instead, the film inspires him to search, at age 11, for his genetic father as well as other father figures. But in his bittersweet, often profound work about life's possibilities, Ludo discovers that the perfect father may not, perhaps, exist.

## The Nineties

### Rule of the Bone (1995)

By Russell Banks

Bone, the aimless narrator, opens his story by admitting that life "got interesting you might say the summer I turned fourteen and was heavy into weed but I didn't have any money to buy it with so I started looking around the house all the time for things I could sell but there wasn't much." Previously molested by his stepfather, Bone thus begins his descent into criminality. As he leaves his upstate New York town to track down his real father in Jamaica, he slowly gains insight into the trials of imminent adulthood. About fear, desperation, and loneliness, *Rule of the Bone* offers a raw, visceral glimpse of one teen's slow understanding of responsibility.





## The Way I Found Her (1997)

By Rose Tremain

Lewis Little, a precocious 13-year-old, is far from excited when he and his mother leave England to spend the summer in Paris, where his mother decides to take a rush job translating romance novels. But then he meets the flamboyant Valentina Gavril, his mother's 41-year-old expatriate Russian employer, and he becomes instantly smitten. When Valentina suddenly disappears, it is Lewis, not his mother, who imagines the worst—and he immediately sets out to find her. About the loss of innocence and the sudden immersion into a not-so-admirable adult world, *The Way I Found Her* is an interior work and a novel of ideas, one that successfully delves into the psychology of an adolescent.

## Purple Hibiscus (2003)

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE

Kambili Achike, a 15-year-old privileged Nigerian girl, grows up sheltered in a country run by a brutal dictatorship and in a home lorded over by her father, a successful factory owner who outwardly lives the life of a pious Catholic and philanthropist but inwardly exerts tyranny over his household. When Kambili and her brother, Jaia, visit their loving aunt, they experience freedom for the first time. But tragedies loom not too far in the future. Adichie, a MacArthur Genius Award author, has written a harsh, beautiful novel about family, country, faith, and the difficult transition to adulthood. Also by the author: *Half of a Yellow Sun* (★★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2006) and *The Thing Around Your Neck* (★★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2009).

## 2000-Present

### The Story of Edgar Sawtelle (2008)

By David Wroblewski

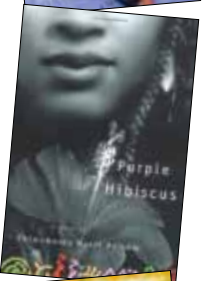
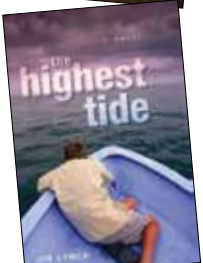
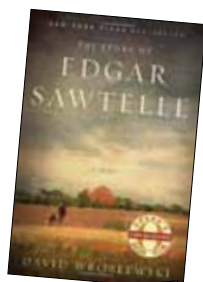
In the Wisconsin woods, the Sawtelle family breeds a (fictional) variety of dog. Remarkably clever, these dogs make the perfect companions for the young mute, Edgar Sawtelle. Life on the farm becomes complicated, however, with the arrival of Claude, Edgar's estranged uncle. Though at first charming, Claude soon shows unmistakable signs of malice. When his brother (Edgar's father) dies under mysterious circumstances and Claude begins to woo Edgar's beloved mother, it becomes evident that something is rotten in the state of Wisconsin. Before the novel is over, 14-year-old Edgar will face ghosts, revenge, and the joys and sorrows of caring for man's best friend. (★★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2008)

## The Highest Tide (2005)

By Jim Lynch

Miles O'Malley, a sensitive, precocious 13-year-old and a fan of Rachel Carson, has taken to hanging out on Washington's Puget Sound shore, looking at unusual sea finds and listening to the sounds of nature. One night, he discovers a giant squid—in fact, a sensational squid that garners a ton of media interest and turns Miles into something of a celebrity. There's also a subsequent encounter with a cult, a possible parental divorce, an age-appropriate, hormone-drenched romance, and a complicated, touching relationship with a psychic named Florence. Lynch has mastered the voice—and emotions—of a teenage boy. (★★★★★

SELECTION Nov/Dec 2005).



## The Near Future ...

### A Clockwork Orange (1962)

By Anthony Burgess

In a dismal dystopia, Alex, a violent juvenile delinquent with a penchant for classical music, is sentenced to 14 years in prison after his friends betray him. When he volunteers to participate in a state-sponsored psychological rehabilitation program, he turns into a model citizen—but he suffers the consequences of his previous reckless lifestyle. A disturbing, dystopian work when it was published (and revolutionary for its invented teen slang), *A Clockwork Orange* asks questions about the value of choice.

### Lord of the Flies (1954)

By William Golding

During World War III, a plane evacuating a group of British schoolboys is shot down over a tropical island. Once stranded, the boys attempt to organize themselves to survive—but they soon descend into savagery. The novel was written during the early years of the cold war, and, with its unnamed time and place, the events, Golding suggests, could occur anywhere.

## And Also: Oldies but Goodies

**A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN** (1917) | James Joyce

**WINESBURG, OHIO** (1919) | Sherwood Anderson

**DEMIAN** (1919) | Hermann Hesse

**OF HUMAN BONDAGE** (1915) | W. Somerset Maugham

**THIS SIDE OF PARADISE** (1920) | F. Scott Fitzgerald

**ON THE ROAD** (1951) | Jack Kerouac ■