



A Depression-Era Reading List

BY REBECCA FOSTER

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), one of the most famous works penned during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, John Steinbeck writes: “The fields were fruitful, and starving men moved on the roads.” The Great Depression, which lasted roughly between 1929 and 1941, seems somewhat familiar from the perspective of our recent Great Recession: poverty, political corruption, conflicts between workers and managers, and the collapse of the financial sector. “The bank is something more than men, I tell you,” wrote Steinbeck almost 80 years ago. “It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it.” This dark period in history caused great depression—both economic and psycho-

logical—and the incineration of the stock market cauterized the national mood, yielding an era of cynicism, exhaustion, and despair.

We have chosen some representative works of fiction published during the Depression, followed by some of our favorite contemporary novels that return to that time for inspiration. A few nonfiction books add in historical context. Together these works reflect on the causes of the Depression, the ways in which Americans battled through it, and the wide range of personal experiences. For a very different article on the Great Depression, published just after the Great Recession, please see our May/June 2009 issue.

CONTEMPORANEOUS ACCOUNTS

The Big Money

By John Dos Passos (1936)

The Big Money is the final volume of the U.S.A. trilogy, an experimental series narrating the three decades leading up to the the Stock Market Crash of 1929. (Previous two books: *The 42nd Parallel* [1930] and *1919* [1932].) The novels combine four different narrative strands. The first focuses on 12 main characters from childhood onwards—including newspaperman Fainy McCreary, socialite Eleanor Stoddard, pilot Charley Anderson, and actress Margo Dowling—and explores how World War I and the economy shaped the characters' everyday lives. The other threads include Dos Passos's autobiographical stream-of-consciousness, "The Camera Eye"; "Newsreels" with headlines and extracts from Chicago and New York City newspapers; and minibiographies of historical figures. *The Big Money*, which veers toward the Crash of 1929, explores how success and greed lead to moral decline.



Ask the Dust

By John Fante (1939)

The Italian American Fante's best-known novel is the third in a semiautobiographical quartet. *Ask the Dust* focuses on Arturo Bandini's struggles



to publish his first novel. Arturo lives in a residential hotel in a rough area of Depression-era Los Angeles. One day he meets a Mexican waitress, Camilla Lopez, at Columbia Buffet and falls head over heels in love with her. Camilla, however, is in love with her colleague, Sam, who detests her. As Camilla's instability gradually comes to light and a breakdown lands her in a mental hospital, Arturo strives to do all he can to save her, even if it means sacrificing his hard-won career. Charles Bukowski cited *Ask the Dust* as an inspiration for some of his poems.

Now in November

By Josephine W. Johnson (1934)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

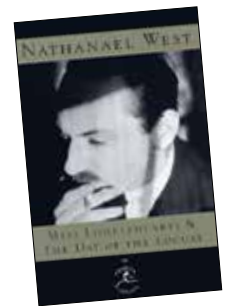
Missouri-born Johnson was just 24 when *Now in November*, her first novel, was published. The middle Haldmarne daughter, Marget, looks back at a grueling decade of life on her family's farm in an unspecified region of the Dust Bowl. Her father was unsuited to the work; she and her mother, her half-feral older sister, and her younger sister struggled with the household. All three sisters fell in love with Grant Koven, the 30-something neighbor hired to help their father with hard labor. As drought settled in, the fear of losing everything seized their community. There was nowhere to turn for help: nature seemed indifferent, and the Church looked after only its own members. Marget skips around in time, her fragmentary style illuminating her family's tragic struggle, as the burden of debt and nature's vagaries threatened to tear them apart.



Miss Lonelyhearts

By Nathanael West (1933)

Male advice columnist "Miss Lonelyhearts" (who is never given any other name) writes for the *New York Post-Dispatch*. His letters come from a pitiable cross-section of humanity: the abused, the downtrodden, the unloved. In his role of confessor to the suffering, his boss notes, he's one of "the priests of twentieth-century America." Unsurprisingly, all these secondhand woes written by the likes of "Desperate" and "Disillusion-with-tubercular-husband" start to get him down, and the idealistic Miss Lonelyhearts turns to drink and womanizing. This powerful novella rivals *The Great Gatsby* in its exploration of a greatly disillusioned Depression-era America. West used letters from a friend, who wrote an agony column for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, as the inspiration for this bleakly humorous and powerful novella, and published it in the same year that the national unemployment rate reached its highest level.



Further Reading

MILDRED PIERCE | JAMES M. CAIN (1941)

TOBACCO ROAD | ERSKINE CALDWELL (1932)

THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY? | HORACE MCCOY (1935)

COME BACK TO SORRENTO | DAWN POWELL (1932)

CALL IT SLEEP | HENRY ROTH (1934)

OF MICE AND MEN | JOHN STEINBECK (1937)

THE GRAPES OF WRATH | JOHN STEINBECK (1939; ♦ PULITZER PRIZE)

THE DAY OF THE LOCUST | NATHANAEL WEST (1939)

NATIVE SON | RICHARD WRIGHT (1940)

MODERN TAKES

The Truth According to Us

By Annie Barrows (2015)

Layla Beck, a spoiled senator's daughter, is sent to Macedonia, West Virginia, during the sweltering summer of 1938, with the task of documenting the town's history at its sesquicentennial for the WPA. Layla boards with siblings Felix and Jottie Romeyn, whose father ran the American Everlasting Hosiery Company until a fire destroyed it 20 years before. Felix's 12-year-old daughter, Willa, who narrates most of the novel, intends to get to the bottom of things. What really happened during that factory fire, and why are the Romeyns still snubbed around town? Has her divorcé father turned to bootlegging? The letters Layla sends and receives during her stay in Macedonia reveal the struggles of everyday life. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2015)



Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe

By Fannie Flagg (1987)

We know you've all probably read this one, but we've only mentioned it once all these years, so here we go! Every week, middle-aged housewife Evelyn Couch visits nursing home resident Ninny Threadgoode, 80, to hear her stories about growing up on the outskirts of Birmingham, Alabama. Here in Whistle Stop, Ninny's sister-in-law, Idgie, ran a café with Ruth in the 1930s. They served up Southern food, coffee, and plenty of gossip—with the occasional murder to discuss. Past and present intermingle through Ninny's memories, while Evelyn looks for inspiration after her children leave home. Themes of homosexuality, racism, and the search for purpose nestle in a cozy book that has become a reader favorite and was made into a 1991 movie starring Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy.



Over the Plain Houses

By Julia Franks (2016)

◆ SOUTHERN BOOK PRIZE

Irenie Lambey longs for their teenage son to get an education and hopes the appearance of USDA agent Virginia Furman, sent to help “modernize” households in their

North Carolina town, can provide a valuable opportunity for him. However, Irenie's harsh husband, Brodis, a logger-turned-fundamentalist preacher, cares more about his boy's soul than his mind, and he is not as impressed with Virginia's independent life as Irenie is. On nighttime walks, Irenie stores up artifacts and memories in a cave—desperately trying to have a life larger than what her husband controls—but he assigns sinister motives to her nocturnal wanderings. Believable use of dialect and strong characterization of the mountain people enliven this debut novel set in 1939.



Water for Elephants

By Sara Gruen (2006)

◆ ALA ALEX AWARD

Jacob Jankowski, a 23-year-old veterinary student at Cornell during the Depression, plans to join his father's practice. That dream shatters, however, when Jacob's parents die in a car accident. Aimless and broke, Jacob boards a train that happens to house a shabby circus; soon he starts working for the circus's animal trainer, August Rosenbluth, and develops a fondness for Rosie the elephant. A love triangle develops between August, August's wife, Marlena, and Jacob, who recalls his experiences decades later from his nursing home. Gruen has done her research on the period, in particular its traveling shows, and fills Jacob's story with entertaining details. The popular 2011 movie version starred Robert Pattinson, Reese Witherspoon, and Christoph Waltz. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2006)



I Will Send Rain

By Rae Meadows (2016)

In 1934, the Bell family is trying to decide whether to stay on their farm in Mulehead, Oklahoma. They moved here from Kansas in search of prosperity, but with the Dust Bowl destroying the wheat crop, it seems like it's time to move on. Patriarch Samuel has been dreaming about rain. As he becomes more religious, he starts interpreting the drought as divine punishment and builds an ark to survive an imminent flood. His wife, Annie, meanwhile, is tempted by the wooing of the local mayor. Samuel and Annie's daughter, Birdie, 15, has her own secret romance, and their mute son, Fred, has dust pneumonia. Reminiscent of Steinbeck's



work, Meadows's tender fourth novel shines in its depiction of grim privations and the struggle for survival.

The Well and the Mine

By Gin Phillips (2008)

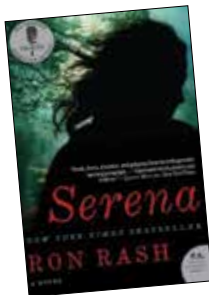
Phillips's debut novel takes place in Carbon Hill, Alabama, where the Moore family is weathering the Depression more successfully than many because they grow their own food; Albert also has steady work at the local mine. The novel moves freely between the first person perspectives of Albert and his four family members: his wife, Leta; his teenage daughter, Virgie; his nine-year-old daughter, Tess, and his young son, Jack. Albert's mine is segregated, so his black friend, Jack, works in a different section. When Tess sees a woman throwing her infant into a well, no one believes her—until a small corpse is recovered. Virgie and Tess decide to investigate. *The Well and the Mine* is a suspenseful tale of a community in desperate straits.



Serena

By Ron Rash (2008)

Returning to North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains with his bride, Serena, in 1929, George Pemberton prepares to build a logging empire, but he is met at the train station by Rachel Harmon, a servant pregnant with his child, and her outraged, drunken father. Serena Pemberton, however, is no shrinking violet. The daughter of a Colorado timber baron, she goads George into fighting, and killing, Mr. Harmon. Soon, she is personally overseeing crews of burly, bad-tempered loggers, ruthlessly determined to clear the Pembertons' land by any means necessary before the federal government can seize it for a national park. When Serena discovers that she is infertile, she turns her rage on Rachel. (★★★★ May/June 2009)



Further Reading

- SAINT MAZIE** | JAMI ATTENBERG (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2015)
- MODERN GIRLS** | JENNIFER S. BROWN (2016)
- MRS. BRIDGE** | EVAN S. CONNELL (1959)
- THE PERSIAN PICKLE CLUB** | SANDRA DALLAS (1996)
- NORTH RIVER** | PETE HAMILL (2007)
- ORPHAN TRAIN** | CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE (2013)
- UNDER A DARK SUMMER SKY** | VANESSA LAFAYE (2015)
- OH MY STARS** | LORNA LANDVIK (2005)
- TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD** | HARPER LEE (1960)
- BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES** | PAULE MARSHALL (1959)
- THE LOST MOTHER** | MARY MCGARRY MORRIS (2004)

WORK LIKE ANY OTHER | VIRGINIA REEVE (2016)

SEA GLASS | ANITA SHREVE (2002)

MARY COIN | MARISA SILVER (★★★★ May/June 2013)

NONFICTION

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

By James Agee and Walker Evans (1941)

This groundbreaking book grew out of an article Agee intended for *Fortune* magazine about three poor tenant-farming families in the South, to whom he gave the pseudonym the the Ricketts family, the Woods family, and the Gudger family. Evans, a government photographer, joined the assignment in 1936. Agee confounded expectations for a journalistic study: his literary style and his mixture of approaches—everything from a list of the meager contents of a sharecropper's cabin to impassioned arguments against the system that traps people in poverty—represented a whole new way of reporting. His vivid scene setting and storytelling, with occasional references to himself to express his guilt over his own privilege and his “spying,” bring a hot, dusty Alabama summer to life.



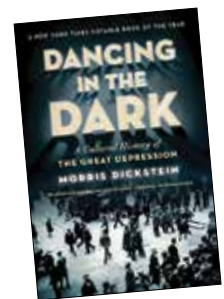
Dancing in the Dark

A Cultural History of the Great Depression

By Morris Dickstein (2009)

◆ AMBASSADOR BOOK AWARD FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

Dickstein examines the forces that “kindled America's social imagination” during the Great Depression. Far from stifling the creative impulses of American artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, and actors, the Depression, he says, “bound people together in a collaborative effort to interpret and alleviate their plight.” The names are familiar: Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant, Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, James Agee and Walker Evans, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Tess Slesinger, John Steinbeck, Aaron Copland, Woody Guthrie, and Clifford Odets—just to scratch the surface. Dickstein sets this cast of artists against the backdrop of the 1929 Stock Market Crash, the Dust Bowl, unprecedented unemployment, and FDR's New Deal to illustrate the resilience and optimism that characterized one of the darkest times in American history. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2009)



Little Heathens

Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression

By Mildred Armstrong Kalish (2007)

For Kalish, life on an Iowa farm in the throes of the country's worst economic crisis turned out a whole lot better than one might expect. Taken in as a young girl by her grandparents after her father was banished for mysterious reasons (his name was never mentioned again within the family, nor does the author make much of that fact), Kalish was buoyed by the companionship, guidance, and rock-ribbed Midwestern values of teachers, siblings, and community. Recipes and advice on a variety of activities—from skinning a rabbit to making headcheese (“scrub the [pig’s] head until ... pink and clean”)—round out, with a contagious nostalgia, Kalish’s paean to her happy childhood. (★★★★★ **SELECTION** Mar/Apr 2008)



Further Reading

THE BOYS IN THE BOAT: NINE AMERICANS AND THEIR EPIC QUEST FOR GOLD AT THE 1936 BERLIN OLYMPICS | DANIEL JAMES BROWN (★★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2013, ♦ WASHINGTON STATE BOOK AWARD FOR HISTORY/GENERAL NONFICTION, 2014)

NOTHING TO FEAR: FDR'S INNER CIRCLE AND THE HUNDRED DAYS THAT CREATED MODERN AMERICA | ADAM COHEN (★★★★★ Mar/Apr 2009)

THE WORST HARD TIME: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THOSE WHO SURVIVED THE GREAT AMERICAN DUST BOWL | TIMOTHY EGAN (★★★★★ **SELECTION** Mar/Apr 2006; ♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD)

HALL OF MIRRORS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION, THE GREAT RECESSION, AND THE USES—AND MISUSES—OF HISTORY | BARRY EICHENGREEN (2015)

THE GREAT CRASH 1929 | JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH (1954)

AMERICA 1933: THE GREAT DEPRESSION, LORENA HICKOK, ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, AND THE SHAPING OF THE NEW DEAL | MICHAEL GOLAY (2010)

COLOSSUS: HOOVER DAM AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY | MICHAEL HILTZIK (★★★★★ Sept/Oct 2010)

THE LITTLE GIRL WHO FOUGHT THE GREAT DEPRESSION: SHIRLEY TEMPLE AND 1930S AMERICA | JOHN F. KASSON (★★★★★ July/Aug 2014)

THE FOOD OF A YOUNGER LAND: THE WPA'S PORTRAIT OF FOOD IN PRE-WORLD WAR II AMERICA | MARK KURLANSKY (2009)

THE FORGOTTEN MAN: A NEW HISTORY OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION | AMITY SHALES (2007)

SOUL OF A PEOPLE: THE WPA WRITERS' PROJECT UNCOVERS DEPRESSION AMERICA | DAVID A. TAYLOR (2009)

AMERICAN-MADE: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE WPA: WHEN FDR PUT THE NATION TO WORK | NICK TAYLOR (★★★★★ July/Aug 2008) ■

