

SOUTH KINGSTOWN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
REVIEWS OF 2015 SUMMER READING SELECTIONS

GRADE 10

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

Set on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico just after World War II, Silko's first novel movingly portrays the geographical and emotional landscapes of the American Indian. Tayo, who watched his "brother" Rocky die in the Philippines, is home after being hospitalized for battle fatigue. When the white man's war ended, so did the sense of dignity the Indians achieved as soldiers: "...they tried to sink the loss in booze, and silence their grief with war stories about their courage, defending the land they had already lost." Tayo's struggle for identity – complicated because he's a half-breed, subtly shunned by his own people – is defined in his relationships with Betonie, the old medicine man who explains the "ceremonies," and with the mountain woman he loves. Silko, who describes herself as a "cross-breed" descended from two New Mexican tribes, writes with insight and great sympathy for her characters.

Wiehe, Janet. *Library Journal* 15 Jan 1977, Vol. 102 Issue 2, p220.

East of Eden by John Steinbeck

When he began *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck intended to write about his family, and how they settled in California. Along the way, the story grew and changed, until it became an allegory about good and evil and a symbolic re-creation of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Spanning the years between the Civil War and the end of World War I, the novel traces the story of two generations of brothers: Adam and Charles Trask, and Adam's sons, Aron and Caleb. When Adam marries Cathy Ames, a manipulative but beautiful woman, she betrays him on their wedding night. Shortly after the wedding, she gives birth to twin boys, after which she leaves her husband. Adam raises his sons the best way he can, never telling the boys about their mother. However, the twins are in constant competition for their father's approval.

Commenting on *East of Eden*, Steinbeck wrote, "nearly everything I have is in it, and it is not full. Pain and excitement are in it, and feeling good or bad and evil thoughts and good thoughts." It is one of his greatest novels, a saga about the meaning of life that encompasses the best and worst of what it means to be human.

Hands Schuh, Judith. *TeenReads.com* 2003; 28 May 2009 <<http://teenreads.com/reviews/0142000655.asp>>.

A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway

Frederic Henry, an American lieutenant in the Italian ambulance service during World War I, and Catherine Barkley, an English nurse, fall in love while he is in the hospital recuperating from war wounds. The terrible waste of war has made Henry wary and sparing of his feelings, but the tough and bright Catherine appeals to his thoroughly unsentimental side.

The plot follows the development of their love in conversations that are remarkable examples of understatement. The crisp, economical dialogue is a brilliant counterpoint to ... the war scenes - although even in the war episodes the author describes battles and landscapes with extraordinary lucidity and a thrifty use of language.

Magill Book Reviews. Salem Press, Inc.: 1995.

In this novel, Hemingway has written a tragic love story, but beyond that he has written an antiwar book, one that shows the irrationality of the kind of fighting into which Frederic was drawn. The glamour and heroism of war tarnish quickly in the face of the realities that Frederic encounters in combat.

Shuman, R. Baird. *Magill's Survey of American Literature*.

Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen

Nightjohn is a compelling book full of detail and the stunning and believable thoughts of a twelve-year-old girl trying to be everything she can be with a clever narrative voice made to sound like the same pidgin used back then. And yet, the author is still able to maintain a likely story and allow the reader to finish the book with a ... true idea of what slavery was like for children and even adults. ...*Nightjohn* is a ... well-written example of how historical fiction can be both entertaining and yet full of fact and information. It both tells the story of Sarny and yet tells the story and struggles of every other slave around her as though she were alive.

TeenInk. Web. 3 June 2009 <<http://www.teenink.com/raw/Books/article/18826/Nightjohn>>.

Among the most powerful of Paulsen's works (*Hatchet*; *The Winter Room*; *Dogsong*), this impeccably researched novel sheds light on cruel truths in American history as it traces the experiences of a 12-year-old slave girl in the 1850s. Narrator Sarny exposes the abuse (routine beatings, bondage, dog

attacks, forced “breeding”) suffered by her people on the Waller plantation. The punishment for learning to read and write, she knows, is a bloody one, but when new slave Nightjohn offers to teach her the alphabet, Sarny readily agrees. Her decision causes pain for others as well as for herself, yet, inspired by the bravery of Nightjohn, who has given up a chance for freedom in order to educate slaves, Sarny continues her studies. Convincingly written in dialect, this graphic depiction of slavery evokes shame for this country’s forefathers and sorrow for the victims of their inhumanity.

Publishers Weekly Feb 1993.

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane

Crane’s greatest novel is *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), a story set during the American Civil War. It portrays a young Union soldier who undergoes a transformation from cowardice to heroism amid the noisy confusion and “crimson roar” of the battlefield. Crane based the youth’s experiences on conversations with veterans of combat, fictional works, histories of military campaigns, and his vivid imagination. The novel remains a masterpiece of literature about war.

Gribben, Alan. “Crane, Stephen.” *World Book Advanced*. 2009.

Because of its gritty realism, impressionistic style and iconoclastic views, *The Red Badge of Courage* was nothing less than revolutionary. It was the first popular American novel to question the romance and glory of war. *The Red Badge* is written with a powerful economy and intensity that has variously been called “poetic,” “symbolist,” “impressionistic,” “realistic” and “naturalistic.” Even its language seemed new, and still does. ...

Chowder, Ken. “A Writer Who Lived the Adventures He Portrayed.” *Smithsonian* Jan 95, Vol. 25, Issue 10.

Seedfolks by Paul Fleischman

A vacant lot in Cleveland, Ohio, is transformed into a garden when residents of the community plant seeds to fulfill personal needs. From the Korean girl who plants lima beans in memory of the father she never knew, to the elderly Guatemalan uncle who can’t speak English, to the Haitian cab driver who plants baby lettuce to sell to fancy restaurants, the 13 voices telling their stories are like a packet of variegated seeds that when sown produce a beautiful, multicolored harvest. ...One character’s words sum up the cumulative effect: “Gardening...has suspense,

tragedy, startling developments — a soap opera growing out of the ground.” Indeed it does. The vacant lot could be in any city as the message of diversity, people, and sensibility is universal, and beautifully cultivated by an author who has a green thumb with words.

Julie Cummins. *School Library Journal* 01 May 1997.

Unwind by Neal Shusterman

This book is sure to put any reader on the edge of their seat. It explores a horrific compromise society comes to when the war over abortion rights becomes too costly. Both the pro-choice and pro-life armies decide to fuse together their ideologies by forbidding the termination of an unborn child, but still giving parents the right to “unwind” their offspring before the age of eighteen if he or she becomes too burdensome.

The Guardian (UK) 25 June 2013.

What keeps *Unwind* moving are the creative and shocking details of Shusterman’s kid-mining dystopia. ... Ultimately, though, the power of the novel lies in what it doesn’t do: come down explicitly on one side or the other.

Ned Vizzini. “Young and In the Way” (Review of *Unwind*). *The New York Times* 16 Mar 2008.

Water for Elephants* by Sarah Gruen *Contains mature content

Life is good for Jacob Jankowski. He’s about to graduate from veterinary school and be with the girl of his dreams. Then his parents are killed in a car crash, leaving him in the middle of the Great Depression with no home, no family, and no career. Almost by accident, Jacob joins the circus. There he falls in love with the beautiful performer Marlena, who is married to the circus psychotic animal trainer. He also meets the other love of his life, Rosie the elephant. This lushly romantic novel travels back in forth in time between Jacob’s present day in a nursing home and his adventures in the surprisingly harsh world of 1930s circuses. The ending of both stories is a little too cheerful to be believed, but just like a circus, the magic of the story and the writing convince you to suspend your disbelief.

Segal, Marta. *Booklist* 15 Apr 2006, Vol. 102, no. 16, p. 36.