

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

## GRADE 12

### ***Candide* by Voltaire**

Voltaire's vivid satire of philosophical optimism, the belief that everything necessarily works out for the best in this "best of all possible worlds," takes its title character through an extravagant series of devastating disasters. After *Candide* is evicted from idyllic Westphalia for embracing Cunegonde, the Baron's daughter, the naive young man is beset by one misfortune after another. ... Through the wild implausibility of its events and the overt artifice of its structure, the book mocks the pretensions of rational control. Voltaire cynically depicts human beings as both obtuse and vile, perversely pursuing actions that are counter to their own best interests.

... Voltaire is more interested in examining general questions about happiness and human nature than in providing rounded, individualized characterizations. He rejects intolerance and fanaticism, holding blind allegiance to abstract systems responsible for most of the troubles that beset the world.

*Magill Book Reviews* 1 Jan. 1990.

### ***Five Skies*\* by Ron Carlson (2009 Reading Across Rhode Island selection) \*contains mature content**

High in the mountains and buttes of southern Idaho, three men gather to work on a massive construction project. Darwin and Arthur, the two older individuals, bring a lifetime of hard work and heartbreak to their approach to the project. ... The third person on the project, Ronnie Panelli, is an inexperienced young man who already has plenty of problems of his own. ... Their assignment is to build a motorcycle ramp from the plateau out over a stunningly deep river canyon, in order to stage a media event a la Evel Knievel. ... As they join forces to design and construct this foolhardy, almost absurd project, the three discover, or re-discover, the simple pleasures and sources of pride inherent in the act of creation, no matter how fruitless.

... Carlson's vivid and poetic representations of the Idaho landscape, its changeable weather, and, yes, its variable skies create what could be regarded as another main character. ... All these elements combine to create a novel of exquisite richness and pared-down elegance, in which few words are wasted but volumes of wisdom are conveyed.

Piehl, Norah. *Bookreporter.com* 7 June 2009.

### ***Flight*\* by Sherman Alexie**

\*contains mature content

A deadpan "Call Me Zits" opens the novel, narrated by a self-described "time-traveling mass murderer" whose name and deeds unravel as this captivating coming-of-age novel progresses. Half-Indian, half-Irish, acne-beset Zits is fifteen: he never knew his alcoholic father; his mother died when he was six; his aunt kicked him out when he was ten (after he set her sleeping boyfriend on fire). Running away from his twentieth foster home, Zits ends up, briefly, in jail; soon after, he enters a bank, shoots several people and is shot dead himself. Zits then commences time-traveling via the bodies of others, finding himself variously lodged in an FBI agent in the '70s (helping to assassinate radical Indian activists); a mute Indian boy at the Battle of Little Big Horn; an Indian tracker named Gus; an airplane pilot instructor (one of whose pupils commits a terrorist act); and his own father. Zits eventually comes back to himself and to an unexpected redemption. While the plot is wisp-thin, one quickly surrenders to Zits's voice, which elegantly mixes free-floating young adult cynicism with a charged, idiosyncratic view of American history. Alexie plunges the book into bracing depths.

*Publishers Weekly* 26 Feb. 2007, Vol. 254, Issue 9, p54.

[The author] has allowed the reader to feel the inner turmoil of Zits and the anger and confusion he has toward himself and society. Alexie has magically incorporated historical events in American Indian and U.S. history into this novel which tackles prejudice and race relations in the U.S. Readers will find the novel dark at times but will find themselves snickering at some of the underlying humor Alexie is well known for.

Toledo, Melanie. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* Feb. 2008.

## ***The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck**

Set during the Great Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* traces the migration of an Oklahoma Dust Bowl family to California and their subsequent hardships as migrant farm workers. Upon publication, the well-researched novel provoked controversy for exposing the injustices of the migrant labor system. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 1940. The work did much to publicize the injustices of migrant labor.

The narrative, interrupted by prose-poem interludes, chronicles the struggles of the Joad family's life on a failing Oklahoma farm, their difficult journey to California, and their disillusionment once they arrive there and fall prey to a parasitic economic system. The insularity of the Joads — Ma's obsession with family togetherness, son Tom's self-centeredness, and daughter Rose of Sharon's materialism — ultimately gives way to a sense of universal community. The novel combines Biblical symbolism and descriptive natural imagery with a zealous call for reform.

*Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature.*

Upon publication, *The Grapes of Wrath* attracted immediate attention and stirred tremendous controversy. ... None of these charges, however, can diminish the novel's strength, nor Steinbeck's deep sympathy with a people in terrible need. Why does it move readers today, far removed from the hounding anguish of the Depression...? Perhaps because these conditions, in varying forms, still exist today. Now, too, people wander homeless and helpless in the heart of the promised land. ... The significance of *The Grapes of Wrath* endures also because of its literary achievement. For hundreds of pages the reader is spellbound by a story woven with intricate craftsmanship out of the rich fabric of biblical symbolism and the flowing rhythms and patterns of the intercalary chapters. That it was written in so short a time is a wonder. *The Grapes of Wrath* earned Steinbeck a Nobel Prize more than 20 years after it appeared. Its greatest commendation, however, lies in the fact that it is still read today. This disquieting drama of a dispossessed people who in 1938 packed their lives aboard dilapidated trucks in search of the promised land is very much a story of America, a story of each of us, which we are constantly rediscovering.

Timmerman, John H. "The Grapes of Wrath Fifty Years Later." *The Christian Century* 5 Apr. 1989, p341.

## ***The Memory of Running*\* by Ron McLarty**

2009 Reading Across Rhode Island selection

\*contains mature content

When we first meet Smithy, it's clear that he's going nowhere fast. He's in a dead-end job at a toy factory in Rhode Island, making sure the faces on the action figures are on straight. He's 279 pounds and barreling headlong into a serious drinking problem, with no girlfriend or even friends to speak of. When he learns the horrible news that his parents have been in a terrible car accident ...[t]he grief is almost too much to bear, and Smithy's broad shoulders begin to buckle under the weight of his loss.

With all these pressures and problems, Smithy begins a cross-country trek with his childhood Raleigh bicycle looking for answers. As the miles roll by, the weight falls off and his confidence is renewed. He reflects back on his troubled family history, his guilt over his time in Vietnam, and comes to grips with the more difficult relationships in his life — his sister and his invalid neighbor, Norma, whose love and affection he had always rebuffed.

McLarty writes simply and honestly, and we are right there with Smithy on every step of his remarkable journey. We join in his mourning and celebrate his triumphs. In the end, we find ourselves deeply moved by this flawed but lovable Don Quixote.

Miller, Bronwyn. *Bookreporter.com* 2009.

## ***Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville**

The charismatic captain Ahab leads the crew of the whaleship *Pequod* in vengeful pursuit of the mysterious white whale Moby Dick. But to say that *Moby-Dick* is about a whale hunt is like saying *The Odyssey* is about sailing, or *Paradise Lost* is about gardening. There's not much that this novel *isn't* about. It's epic, it's tragic, it's allegorical, it's parodic, it's sublime, it's weird. Oh, yes — it's also *not* easy to read. Though revered by countless authors and critics as the novel with the strongest claim to the title "The Great American Novel," it's also (let's face it) feared by legions of high school students who think it's about three or four times longer than it needs to be. But if you let your mind be open to it, it will more than amply reward your effort.