

## Books for AP Lit – second “choice” novel:

### Daniel Quinn – Ishmael

Quinn ( Dreamer ) won the Turner Tomorrow Award's half-million-dollar first prize for this fascinating and odd book--not a novel by any conventional definition--which was written 13 years ago but could not find a publisher. The unnamed narrator is a disillusioned modern writer who answers a personal ad ("Teacher seeks pupil. . . . Apply in person.") and thereby meets a wise, learned gorilla named Ishmael that can communicate telepathically. The bulk of the book consists entirely of philosophical dialogues between gorilla and man, on the model of Plato's Republic. Through Ishmael, Quinn offers a wide-ranging if highly general examination of the history of our civilization, illuminating the assumptions and philosophies at the heart of many global problems. Despite some gross oversimplifications, Quinn's ideas are fairly convincing; it's hard not to agree that unrestrained population growth and an obsession with conquest and control of the environment are among the key issues of our times. Quinn also traces these problems back to the agricultural revolution and offers a provocative rereading of the biblical stories of Genesis. Though hardly any plot to speak of lies behind this long dialogue, Quinn's smooth style and his intriguing proposals should hold the attention of readers interested in the daunting dilemmas that beset our planet. 50,000 first printing; major ad/promo.

### Barabbas— by Par Lagerkvist (Swedish, Nobel Prize winner)

This short novel by Scandinavian Nobel Prize winner Par Lagerkvist fills in a little hole left open by the Bible; specifically, what happens to Barabbas after the crowd chooses to crucify Jesus and spare his life. The book begins with Barabbas being freed. He is in a state of bewilderment, and something within him leads him to follow Christ to the cross, where he witnesses the death. Afterwards, he tries to pick up the pieces of his life and wanders through town. By coincidence, he encounters some of the 12 apostles at a small cafe without knowing who they are, though they know who he is. When he discovers their identities, he is somewhat drawn to them yet repulsed by their poorly-concealed anger. In quick succession, he witnesses the stoning of a female friend, works as a laborer on a wealthy estate, and travels to Rome. There he sees Rome burn down around him, discovers that this was done on orders of the emperor to be blamed on the Jews. He is captured along with some Jews (some of whom he recognizes from Golgotha) and killed.

The story is easy to read, yet delivers a very strong emotional impact. The different individuals Barabbas encounters are shown as very human, with faults and frailties that make the reader empathize with them. The apostles that Barabbas meet are not Biblical heroes in any sense of the word, but grieving friends who wrench their hearts to try and not bear ill-will towards him. The various Roman soldiers and officials are shown as all too human; some cruel, some sympathetic towards the Jews and others apathetic.

\*\*\*Paired with *The Book of Job* AND *The Sibyl*

### The Tin Drum – Gunter Grass

The Tin Drum (1959) remains one of the classic German post-war texts. It is also a fascinating mixture of magic realism, history, narrative perspective, psychology, poetry and prose. Told from the perspective of Oskar Matzerath - an unreliable narrator because he is a traumatized patient in a mental institution - the

story follows the strange life of a sophisticated three-year-old boy who refuses to grow up and fulfill his destiny as a grocer.

Oskar suffers from arrested development after getting a bump on the head. Unsure of his paternity, he spends the early part of his life entertaining the German troops as a performing dwarf on the front line. He then embarks on a string of strange professions and relationships, possibly fathering a child called Kurt with his step-mother, Maria. The one constant passion in his life is the tin drum he was given as a child.

The rhythm of Oskar's tin drum drives the entire novel. It produces a startling range of language and emotion that is compelling, innovative, disturbing, but highly original. The continual pounding that beats beneath the tale highlights that nebulous line between genius and madness - creativity and destruction. And the magical elements make us question what is fantasy, propaganda, or real.

The Tin Drum grapples with what it means to be human. Like Nietzsche, Oskar would rather be a Superman than follow the Herd, but he finally realizes that anarchy and individualism only lead to self-indulgence. Grass uses this allegory to show that public conscience and morality are necessary to maintain civilization. That beyond good and evil - there is only war, ego, madness, and chaos.

This is a very difficult read - but well worth the effort!

## The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov

Nothing in the whole of literature compares with *The Master and Margarita*. Full of pungency and wit, this luminous work is Bulgakov's crowning achievement, skilfully blending magical and realistic elements, grotesque situations and major ethical concerns. Written during the darkest period of Stalin's repressive reign and a devastating satire of Soviet life, it combines two distinct yet interwoven parts, one set in contemporary Moscow, the other in ancient Jerusalem, each brimming with incident and with historical, imaginary, frightful and wonderful characters. Although completed in 1940, *The Master and Margarita* was not published until 1966 when the first section appeared in the monthly magazine *Moskva*. Russians everywhere responded enthusiastically to the novel's artistic and spiritual freedom and it was an immediate and enduring success.

The House of the Spirits - by [Isabel Allende](#)

*The House of the Spirits* brings to life the triumphs and tragedies of three generations of the Trueba family. The patriarch Esteban is a volatile, proud man whose voracious pursuit of political power is tempered only by his love for his delicate wife, Clara, a woman with a mystical connection to the spirit world. When their daughter Blanca embarks on a forbidden love affair in defiance of her implacable father, the result is an unexpected gift to Esteban: his adored granddaughter Alba, a beautiful and strong-willed child who will lead her family and her country into a revolutionary future.

One of the most important novels of the twentieth century, *The House of the Spirits* is an enthralling epic

that spans decades and lives, weaving the personal and the political into a universal story of love, magic, and fate.

## The Good Earth – Pearl Buck

Nobel Laureate Pearl S. Buck's epic Pulitzer Prize-winning novel and Oprah Book Club selection about a vanished China and one family's shifting fortunes.

Though more than seventy years have passed since this remarkable novel won the Pulitzer Prize, it has retained its popularity and become one of the great modern classics. In *The Good Earth* Pearl S. Buck paints an indelible portrait of China in the 1920s, when the last emperor reigned and the vast political and social upheavals of the twentieth century were but distant rumblings. This moving, classic story of the honest farmer Wang Lung and his selfless wife O-Lan is must reading for those who would fully appreciate the sweeping changes that have occurred in the lives of the Chinese people during the last century.

Nobel Prize winner Pearl S. Buck traces the whole cycle of life: its terrors, its passions, its ambitions and rewards. Her brilliant novel—beloved by millions of readers—is a universal tale of an ordinary family caught in the tide of history.

## Midnight's Children – by Salman Rushdie

Anyone who has spent time in the developing world will know that one of Bombay's claims to fame is the enormous film industry that churns out hundreds of musical fantasies each year. The other, of course, is native son Salman Rushdie--less prolific, perhaps than Bollywood, but in his own way just as fantastical. Though Rushdie's novels lack the requisite six musical numbers that punctuate every Bombay talkie, they often share basic plot points with their cinematic counterparts. Take, for example, his 1980 Booker Prize-winning *Midnight's Children*: two children born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947--the moment at which India became an independent nation--are switched in the hospital. The infant scion of a wealthy Muslim family is sent to be raised in a Hindu tenement, while the legitimate heir to such squalor ends up establishing squatters' rights to his unlucky hospital mate's luxurious bassinet. Switched babies are standard fare for a Hindi film, and one can't help but feel that Rushdie's world-view--and certainly his sense of the fantastical--has been shaped by the films of his childhood. But whereas the movies, while entertaining, are markedly mediocre, *Midnight's Children* is a masterpiece, brilliant written, wildly unpredictable, hilarious and heartbreaking in equal measure.

Rushdie's narrator, Saleem Sinai, is the Hindu child raised by wealthy Muslims. Near the beginning of the novel, he informs us that he is falling apart--literally:

I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug--that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of an acceleration.

In light of this unfortunate physical degeneration, Saleem has decided to write his life story, and, incidentally, that of India's, before he crumbles into "(approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious, dust." It seems that within one hour of midnight on India's independence day, 1,001 children were born. All of those children were endowed with special powers: some can travel through time, for example; one can change gender. Saleem's gift is telepathy, and it is via this power that he discovers the truth of his birth: that he is, in fact, the product of the illicit coupling of an Indian mother and an English father, and has usurped another's place. His gift also reveals the identities of all the other children and the fact that it is in his power to gather them for a "midnight parliament" to save the nation. To do so, however, would lay him open to that other child, christened Shiva, who has grown up to be a brutish killer. Saleem's dilemma plays out against the backdrop of the first years of independence: the partition of India and Pakistan, the ascendancy of "The Widow" Indira Gandhi, war, and, eventually, the imposition of martial law.

We've seen this mix of magical thinking and political reality before in the works of Günter Grass and Gabriel García Márquez. What sets Rushdie apart is his mad prose pyrotechnics, the exuberant acrobatics of rhyme and alliteration, pun, wordplay, proper and "Babu" English chasing each other across the page in a dizzying, exhilarating cataract of words. Rushdie can be laugh-out-loud funny, but make no mistake--this is an angry book, and its author's outrage lends his language wings. *Midnight's Children* is Salman Rushdie's irate, affectionate love song to his native land--not so different from a Bombay talkie, after all.

## The Name of the Rose - Umberto Eco

Novel by Umberto Eco, published in Italian as *Il nome della rosa* in 1980. Although the work stands on its own as a murder mystery, it is more accurately seen as a questioning of "truth" from theological, philosophical, scholarly, and historical perspectives. The story centers on William of Baskerville, a 50-year-old monk who is sent to investigate a death at a Benedictine monastery. During his search, several other monks are killed in a bizarre pattern that reflects the Book of Revelation. Highly rational, Baskerville meets his nemesis in Jorge of Burgos, a doctrinaire blind monk determined to destroy heresy at any cost.

## Zeno's Conscience – Italo Svevo

Long hailed as a seminal work of modernism in the tradition of Joyce and Kafka, and now available in a supple new English translation, Italo Svevo's charming and splendidly idiosyncratic novel conducts readers deep into one hilariously hyperactive and endlessly self-deluding mind. The mind in question belongs to Zeno Cosini, a neurotic Italian businessman who is writing his confessions at the behest of his psychiatrist. Here are Zeno's interminable attempts to quit smoking, his courtship of the beautiful yet unresponsive Ada, his unexpected--and unexpectedly happy--marriage to Ada's homely sister Augusta, and his affair with a shrill-voiced aspiring singer. Relating these misadventures with wry wit and a perspicacity at once unblinking and compassionate, **Zeno's Conscience** is a miracle of psychological realism.