**Book Circles**

*The Bell Jar* – Sylvia Plath – 1963 (288 pgs)

From Goodreads: Sylvia Plath's shocking, realistic, and intensely emotional novel about a woman falling into the grip of insanity.

Esther Greenwood is brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful, but slowly going under—maybe for the last time. In her acclaimed and enduring masterwork, Sylvia Plath brilliantly draws the reader into Esther's breakdown with such intensity that her insanity becomes palpably real, even rational—as accessible an experience as going to the movies. A deep penetration into the darkest and most harrowing corners of the human psyche, The Bell Jar is an extraordinary accomplishment and a haunting American classic.

From Amazon: The Bell Jar chronicles the crack-up of Esther Greenwood: brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful, but slowly going under -- maybe for the last time. Sylvia Plath masterfully draws the reader into Esther's breakdown with such intensity that Esther's insanity becomes completely real and even rational, as probable and accessible an experience as going to the movies. Such deep penetration into the dark and harrowing corners of the psyche is an extraordinary accomplishment and has made The Bell Jar a haunting American classic.

*The Yellow Birds* – Kevin Powers – 2012 (226 pgs)

From Goodreads: "The war tried to kill us in the spring," begins this breathtaking account of friendship and loss. In Al Tafar, Iraq, twenty-one-year old Private Bartle and eighteen-year-old Private Murphy cling to life as their platoon launches a bloody battle for the city. In the endless days that follow, the two young soldiers do everything to protect each other from the forces that press in on every side: the insurgents, physical fatigue, and the mental stress that comes from constant danger.

Bound together since basic training when their tough-as-nails Sergeant ordered Bartle to watch over Murphy, the two have been dropped into a war neither is prepared for. As reality begins to blur into a hazy nightmare, Murphy becomes increasingly unmoored from the world around him and Bartle takes impossible actions.

With profound emotional insight, especially into the effects of a hidden war on mothers and families at home, The Yellow Birds is a groundbreaking novel about the costs of war that is destined to become a classic.

From Amazon: With The Yellow Birds, Kevin Powers introduces himself as a writer of prodigious talent and ambition. The novel opens in 2004, when two soldiers, 21-year-old Bartle and the teenaged Murphy, meet in boot camp on the eve of their deployment to Iraq. Bartle, bound by a promise to Murphy's mother to guide him home safely, takes the young private under his wing as they move through the bloody conflict that "rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer." Powers, an Iraq veteran, eyes the casual violence of war with a poet's precision but without romanticism, moving confidently between scenes of blunt atrocity and almost hallucinatory detachment with Hemingway-like economy and prose that shimmers like desert heat.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* – Ken Kesey – 1962 (325 pgs)

From Goodreads: "In this classic of the 1960s, Ken Kesey's hero is Randle Patrick McMurphy, a boisterous, brawling, fun-loving rebel who swaggers into the world of a mental hospital and takes over. A lusty, life-affirming fighter, McMurphy rallies the other patients around him by challenging the dictatorship of Nurse Ratched. He promotes gambling in the ward, smuggles in wine and women, and openly defies the rules at every turn. But this defiance, which starts as a sport, soon develops into a grim struggle, an all-out war between two relentless opponents: Nurse Ratched, back by the full power of authority, and McMurphy, who has only his own indomitable will. What happens when Nurse Ratched uses her ultimate weapon against McMurphy provides the story's shocking climax.

From Amazon: An international bestseller and the basis for a hugely successful film, **Ken Kesey**'s **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** was one of the defining works of the 1960s.

A mordant, wickedly subversive parable set in a mental ward, the novel chronicles the head-on collision between its hell-raising, life-affirming hero Randle Patrick McMurphy and the totalitarian rule of Big Nurse. McMurphy swaggers into the mental ward like a blast of fresh air and turns the place upside down, starting a gambling operation, smuggling in wine and women, and egging on the other patients to join him in open rebellion. But McMurphy's revolution against Big Nurse and everything she stands for quickly turns from sport to a fierce power struggle with shattering results.

With **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**, Kesey created a work without precedent in American literature, a novel at once comic and tragic that probes the nature of madness and sanity, authority and vitality. Greeted by unanimous acclaim when it was first published, the book has become and enduring favorite of readers.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* – Kurt Vonnegut – 1969 (215 pgs)

From Goodreads: Kurt Vonnegut's absurdist classic Slaughterhouse-Five introduces us to Billy Pilgrim, a man who becomes unstuck in time after he is abducted by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. In a plot-scrambling display of virtuosity, we follow Pilgrim simultaneously through all phases of his life, concentrating on his (and Vonnegut's) shattering experience as an American prisoner of war who witnesses the firebombing of Dresden.

Don't let the ease of reading fool you - Vonnegut's isn't a conventional, or simple, novel. He writes, "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick, and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters."

Slaughterhouse-Five is not only Vonnegut's most powerful book, it is also as important as any written since 1945. Like Catch- 22, it fashions the author's experiences in the Second World War into an eloquent and deeply funny plea against butchery in the service of authority. Slaughterhouse-Five boasts the same imagination, humanity, and gleeful appreciation of the absurd found in Vonnegut's other works, but the book's basis in rock-hard, tragic fact gives it a unique poignancy - and humor.

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*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* – Sherman Alexie – 2007 (230 pgs)

From Goodreads: Bestselling author Sherman Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to take his future into his own hands, Junior leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school where the only other Indian is the school mascot.

Heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, which is based on the author's own experiences, coupled with poignant drawings by Ellen Forney that reflect the character's art, chronicles the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he was destined to live.

With a forward by Markus Zusak, interviews with Sherman Alexie and Ellen Forney, and four-color interior art throughout, this edition is perfect for fans and collectors alike.

From Amazon: Exploring Indian identity, both self and tribal, Alexie's first young adult novel is a semiautobiographical chronicle of Arnold Spirit, aka Junior, a Spokane Indian from Wellpinit, WA. The bright 14-year-old was born with water on the brain, is regularly the target of bullies, and loves to draw. He says, "I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats." He expects disaster when he transfers from the reservation school to the rich, white school in Reardan, but soon finds himself making friends with both geeky and popular students and starting on the basketball team. Meeting his old classmates on the court, Junior grapples with questions about what constitutes one's community, identity, and tribe. The daily struggles of reservation life and the tragic deaths of the protagonist's grandmother, dog, and older sister would be all but unbearable without the humor and resilience of spirit with which Junior faces the world. The many characters, on and off the rez, with whom he has dealings are portrayed with compassion and verve, particularly the adults in his extended family. Forney's simple pencil cartoons fit perfectly within the story and reflect the burgeoning artist within Junior. Reluctant readers can even skim the pictures and construct their own story based exclusively on Forney's illustrations. The teen's determination to both improve himself and overcome poverty, despite the handicaps of birth, circumstances, and race, delivers a positive message in a low-key manner. Alexie's tale of self-discovery is a first purchase for all libraries.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – Maya Angelou – 1969 (246 pgs)

From Goodreads: Sent by their mother to live with their devout, self-sufficient grandmother in a small Southern town, Maya and her brother, Bailey, endure the ache of abandonment and the prejudice of the local "powhitetrash." At eight years old and back at her mother’s side in St. Louis, Maya is attacked by a man many times her age—and has to live with the consequences for a lifetime. Years later, in San Francisco, Maya learns that love for herself, the kindness of others, her own strong spirit, and the ideas of great authors ("I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare") will allow her to be free instead of imprisoned.

Poetic and powerful, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings will touch hearts and change minds for as long as people read.

From Amazon: Here is a book as joyous and painful, as mysterious and memorable, as childhood itself. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*captures the longing of lonely children, the brute insult of bigotry, and the wonder of words that can make the world right. Maya Angelou’s debut memoir is a modern American classic beloved worldwide.

*The Catcher in the Rye*  – J.D. Salinger –(277 pages)

From Goodreads: J.D. Salinger's classic novel of teenage angst and rebellion was first published in 1951. The novel was included on *Time*'s 2005 list of the 100 best English-language novels written since 1923. It was named by Modern Library and its readers as one of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century. It has been frequently challenged in the court for its liberal use of profanity and portrayal of sexuality and in the 1950's and 60's it was the novel that every teenage boy wants to read.

From Amazon: The hero-narrator of THE CATCHER IN THE RYE is an ancient child of sixteen, a native New Yorker named Holden Caulfield. Through circumstances that tend to preclude adult, secondhand description, he leaves his prep school in Pennsylvania and goes underground in New York City for three days.

The boy himself is at once too simple and too complex for us to make any final comment about him or his story. Perhaps the safest thing we can say about Holden is that he was born in the world not just strongly attracted to beauty but, almost, hopelessly impaled on it.

There are many voices in this novel: children's voices, adult voices, underground voices--but Holden's voice is the most eloquent of all. Transcending his own vernacular, yet remaining marvelously faithful to it, he issues a perfectly articulated cry of mixed pain and pleasure. However, like most lovers and clowns and poets of the higher orders, he keeps most of the pain to, and for, himself. The pleasure he gives away, or sets aside, with all his heart. It is there for the reader who can handle it to keep.