

AP Lit & Composition: Contemporary Novel Descriptions

The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach (Back Bay Books)

There was a lot of hoopla around the acquisition and publication of Harbach's novel and it's well-deserved. *The Art of Fielding* weaves just the sort of rich, distinctly American tapestry that classrooms embrace. And it's set at a small Midwestern university, providing even more catnip to English professors everywhere. Henry Skrimshander is a baseball phenom, brought to Westish College by fellow student Mike Schwartz to turn the program around. While Henry unravels on the field, Mike falls for the university president's daughter, who is struggling to find herself. Meanwhile, the university president falls for someone he never expected. Full of flawed, rich, aspiring characters, *The Art of Fielding* is layered and lovely.

Life of Pi by Yann Martel (Mariner Books)

Full of fantasy, adventure and spirituality, *Life of Pi* is just the thing to engage young minds. After his ship sinks (taking his family with it), Pi finds himself stranded on a boat with an orangutan, hyena, zebra, and Bengal tiger named Richard Parker for a companion. The son of a zookeeper, Pi uses his knowledge and wits to co-exist with the tiger, who takes care of the other animals in short order. Having explored various faiths, Pi calls upon his curiosity and resilience during the 227-day harrowing and hallucinatory journey. For anyone looking to think outside of the box of the classroom, Martel's fable-like novel will take them on a rich flight of fancy.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer (Mariner Books)

Safran Foer gives the tragedy of 9/11 a personal face in the character of Oskar Schell. Nine years old, this precocious kid is an inventor, Shakespearean actor, corresponds with the likes of Stephen Hawking, and now he's a detective. Armed with a key that belonged to his father (who died in the World Trade Center), he is driven to find the matching lock. This little big man meets all sorts of lost (or, at least, coping) souls during his New York City walkabout, which ultimately brings him back to where he started his search. Safran Foer's novel is about the journey of grief, with an unforgettable protagonist at its heart; be prepared to carry this book and its characters with you for a long, long time.

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

Taking us from Afghanistan in the final days of the monarchy to the present, *The Kite Runner* is the unforgettable and beautifully told story of the friendship between two boys growing up in Kabul. Raised in the same household and sharing the same wet nurse, Amir and Hassan grow up in different worlds: Amir is the son of a prominent and wealthy man, while Hassan, the son of Amir's father's servant, is a Hazara—a shunned ethnic minority. Their intertwined lives, and their fates, reflect the eventual tragedy of the world around them. When Amir and his father flee the country for a new life in California, Amir thinks that he has escaped his past. And yet he cannot leave the memory of Hassan behind him.

The Kite Runner is a novel about friendship and betrayal, and about the price of loyalty. It is about the bonds between fathers and sons, and the power of fathers over sons—their love, their sacrifices, and their lies. Written against a backdrop of history that has not been told in fiction before, *The Kite Runner* describes the rich culture and beauty of a land in the process of being destroyed. But through the devastation, Khaled Hosseini offers hope: through the novel's faith in the power of reading and storytelling, and in the possibilities he shows us for redemption

***Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden**

A literary sensation and runaway bestseller, this brilliant debut novel tells with seamless authenticity and exquisite lyricism the true confessions of one of Japan's most celebrated geisha. Speaking to us with the wisdom of age and in a voice at once haunting and startlingly immediate, Nitta Sayuri tells the story of her life as a geisha. It begins in a poor fishing village in 1929, when, as a nine-year-old girl with unusual blue-gray eyes, she is taken from her home and sold into slavery to a renowned geisha house. We witness her transformation as she learns the rigorous arts of the geisha: dance and music; wearing kimono, elaborate makeup, and hair; pouring sake to reveal just a touch of inner wrist; competing with a jealous rival for men's solicitude and the money that goes with it. In ***Memoirs of a Geisha***, we enter a world where appearances are paramount; where a girl's virginity is auctioned to the highest bidder; where women are trained to beguile the most powerful men; and where love is scorned as illusion. It is a unique and triumphant work of fiction—at once romantic, erotic, suspenseful—and completely unforgettable

***The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by Michael Chabon (Picador)**

Another worthy contender for the Great American Novel, Chabon's wonderful book focuses on two cousins. Artist as well as escape artist, Joe Kavalier has just escaped Nazi-invaded Prague and moved in with relatives in New York City, namely, his Brooklyn cousin Sammy Clay, a fast-talking, imaginative hustler looking to break into the comic book business. Kavalier & Clay do just that, creating superheroes inspired by their own experiences and dreams. They live vicariously through their creations; their first issue of 'The Escapist' shows Hitler whacked but good on the cover. Joe's desperate attempts to get his family out of Europe are reflected in increasing intensity in his illustrations. This novel, set against the golden age of comic books, is about the American dream of reinvention as well as escapism, magic, and the power of art. Chabon has truly created his own work of art.

***The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (Mariner Books)**

After breaking onto the literary scene with her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri followed up with this novel on the challenges of the immigrant experience. After an arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima move from Calcutta to Cambridge, where Ashima resists assimilation while her husband adapts with greater ease. But it's their son Gogol Ganguli who really stumbles as he tries to navigate between his heritage and his life in America. Burdened with expectations by his family, Gogol must learn to define himself and make his own way and decisions. An elegant novel about identity, any student—any person—can relate to the challenges of and opportunities in reinvention.

The Road by Cormac McCarthy (Vintage)

With an impressive body of work under his belt, Cormac McCarthy ups his game with what might be his masterpiece. Moving through a burned and desolate America, a nameless father and son move doggedly toward the coast, keeping hope alive even as they are confronted with hunger, hypothermia, and—yes—roving cannibals. McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning vision of a post-nuclear world explores weighty themes of man's destructiveness, tenacity, and love, all with McCarthy's lyrical prose.

The Corrections by Jonathan Franzen (Picador)

Christmas is coming and the Lambert family is losing it. Alfred is becoming increasingly lost to dementia, while his wife Enid lives in denial. Their kids aren't faring much better. After seducing one of his students and losing his college post, Chip is now floundering in a shady job. Denise might be heating up the kitchen as a chef, but her love life is leaving her cold. And Gary's marriage is suffocating him. Franzen takes all of this and, with masterful attention to Midwestern detail, gives us a story of a family who, while gathering for the holidays, has to face some hard realities about their individual lives. This National Book Award winner is a masterpiece of family dynamics and fully fleshed-out characters that are compelling because of their flaws. It's hard to find a better take on the dysfunctional family and ever-changing American culture.

A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan (Alfred A. Knopf)

With thirteen different characters presenting their own stories across a 40-year span, the book is rock 'n' roll in its structure, which makes sense, since it centers around a jaded record producer/aging punk rocker. Egan brings all these voices together and turns them into a literary rock opera about self-destruction, regret and love. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* won awards and topped all sorts of best-of lists in 2011 but it's far from stuffy. *Entertainment Weekly* called it "a frequently dazzling piece of layer-cake meta-fiction."

Atonement by Ian McEwan (Anchor)

McEwan's gorgeous novel is a heart-wrenching tale of the persistent upstairs/downstairs love of Cecelia and Robbie set against the harrowing backdrop of World War II. But it's so much more. The pair's passion is complicated by Cecelia's younger sister Briony, who falsely fingers Robbie as the one who raped her cousin after a dinner party at the family's English estate. How Briony deals with her regret and attempts to atone for her mistake will stay with you long after you read the last page. McEwan's novel covers so many themes—class, guilt, forgiveness, grief, love, and war.