



ILLINOIS CLASSICS: A Bicentennial Reading List

Compiled for Illinois public libraries by John E. Hallwas of the Illinois State Historical Society

Purposes:

- to provide engaging and thought-provoking reading experiences;
- to prompt renewed appreciation for a variety of outstanding Illinois books;
- to use the Illinois experience for fostering better understanding of the human condition;
- to promote a deeper sense of place for the Illinois residents who participate; and
- to help public libraries develop a distinctive 2018 reading program.

The Reading List:

This twelve-month reading list includes novels, nonfictional works, and poetry – all by Illinois authors and expressive of the Illinois experience. Listed below the twelve-month schedule are some alternative book titles, in case a library wants to customize the 2018 reading list by substituting another notable work of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry.

A library may also wish to promote community-wide reading by selecting a title from this list for a 2018 [Your Town] Reads” event, involving a library program that focuses on the selected books or, more broadly, on the author’s historical or thematic content. Among the broad topics related to the following list of twelve titles are such themes as native American culture on the frontier, the Illinois pioneer experience, small-town life and issues, the development of social activism, the lives and values of ordinary working Americans, the black experience, the female struggle for respect and equality, violence in the Roaring Twenties, Chicago life in a particular era, the human quest for togetherness, coping with loss or troubling memories, and the Mexican-American experience.

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| January | Black Hawk, <i>Life of Black Hawk</i> (1833). Famous in its own time, it was the first native American autobiography. A remarkable self-portrait of a complex individual. |
| February | Rebecca Burlend, <i>A True Picture of Emigration</i> (1848). A compelling account of settling in Illinois during the 1830s, by a poor immigrant, as dictated to her son, Edward. |
| March | Edna Ferber, <i>So Big</i> (1924). Winner of the 1925 Pulitzer Prize, this novel, set near Chicago in the 1890s and early 20 th century, depicts a widow who supports herself and her son. |
| April | Jane Addams, <i>Twenty Years at Hull House</i> (1910). A superb autobiography, in which the famous social activist recounts her early years and the social work at Hull House. |
| May | Carl Sandburg, <i>Harvest Poems</i> (1958). Selected poems by the famous poet and Lincoln biographer, from such volumes as <i>Chicago Poems</i> , <i>Cornhuskers</i> , and <i>The People, Yes</i> . |
| June | Richard Wright, <i>Native Son</i> (1940). An acclaimed, powerful novel, about a black youth in Chicago, who is brutalized and deprived by powerful forces, and condemned to die. |
| July | Gwendolyn Brooks, <i>Selected Poems</i> (2006). A volume of compelling poems, often about the black experience, by the celebrated, Pulitzer Prize-winning Chicago poet. |
| August | Paul M Angle, <i>Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness</i> (1952). A vivid account of the multi-faceted violence in Williamson country during the 1920s. |
| September | Studs Terkel, <i>Division Street: America</i> (1967). One of several best-selling books by Terkel. His oral interviews about Chicago become very insightful social commentary. |
| October | Lisel Mueller, <i>Alive Together: New and Selected Poems</i> (1996). This volume won the Pulitzer Prize. She deals with her cultural and family history, the value of love, etc. |

- November** William Maxwell, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980). An acclaimed short novel focused on youth, memory, and personal loss. It reflects Maxwell's youth in Lincoln, Illinois.
- December** Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (1984). A celebrated short novel, with chapters like prose poems, about a young woman in a Chicago Latino neighborhood.

Alternative Titles

- Eliza Farnham, *Life in Prairie Land* (1846). Engaging account by a traveler and settler, who came to central Illinois in the 1830s. She depicts the natural world as well as people.
- Francis Grierson, *The Valley of Shadows: Sangamon Sketches* (1990). Vivid memoir of Lincoln's area of Illinois in the 1850s. (This edition omits non-Illinois chapters of the 1909 book.)
- Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (1952). Widely acclaimed, it is still one of the great Lincoln biographies. Thomas was raised in Springfield.
- Elia W. Peattie, *The Precipice* (1914). An engaging feminist novel about a Chicago social worker, of the Jane Addams era, who is both devoted to her work and to finding herself.
- Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology* (1915, 1916). An American classic of poetic monologues, in which dead village residents reflect on their lives and struggles.
- Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900). The first novel by a great American author, this was a shocking book: a struggling girl sells herself to live in Chicago, but she survives it all.
- Vachel Lindsay, *Collected Poems of Vachel Lindsay* (1925). First published when Springfield's Lindsay was a national figure, this volume included many distinctive, idealistic poems.
- Ruby Berkley Goodwin, *It's Good to be Black* (1953). A vivid memoir of the Berkley family in DuQuoin, a mining town, and of small-town community life in the early 20th century.
- Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine* (1957). A compelling novel, of linked vignettes, on the life of a small-town boy, set in 1928. He learns about death, temporality, and relating to the past.
- James T. Farrell, *Studs Lonigan* (1932, 1934, 1935). A superb trilogy of novels, focused on a young man growing up on Chicago's South Side. A riveting, acclaimed, 800-page book.
- Willard Motley, *Knock on Any Door* (1947). A powerful novel, by a black author, focused on a white Chicago youth impacted by his bad environment, who dies in the electric chair.
- Nelson Algren, *Chicago: City of the Make* (1951). A high praised prose poem that emphasizes the characters, cultures, and corruptions of the city in Algren's time, different from today.
- Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). A lively picaresque novel about a Jewish youth from the Chicago slums who adapts to the city and seeks fulfillment in the world.
- Dave Etter, *Alliance, Illinois* (1983). A collection of 222 monologue poems by small-town characters, It's like Masters' Spoon River, but the residents are in the midst of life.

About John E. Hallwas

John E. Hallwas, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Western Illinois University, has written or edited two dozen books related to the Midwest, including the award-winning *Cultures in Conflict: A Documentary History of the Mormon War in Illinois* (with Roger Launius, 1995) and the highly praised true crime narrative *The Bootlegger: A Story of Small-Town America* (1998). His most recent book is *Dime Novel Desperadoes: The Notorious Maxwell Brothers* (2008). He has also written scores of magazine and journal articles and hundreds of newspaper essays.

A literary scholar, writing teacher, and historian, Hallwas has two degrees from Western Illinois University and a Ph.D. from the University of Florida. He has spoken in more than 150 communities in several states, on true crime writing, historical writing, the small-town Midwest, noted outlaws, the Roaring Twenties, American nonfiction, Illinois authors, and other topics. An award-winning teacher and cultural leader, Dr. Hallwas continues to teach non-credit, adult-education classes, and to speak widely.