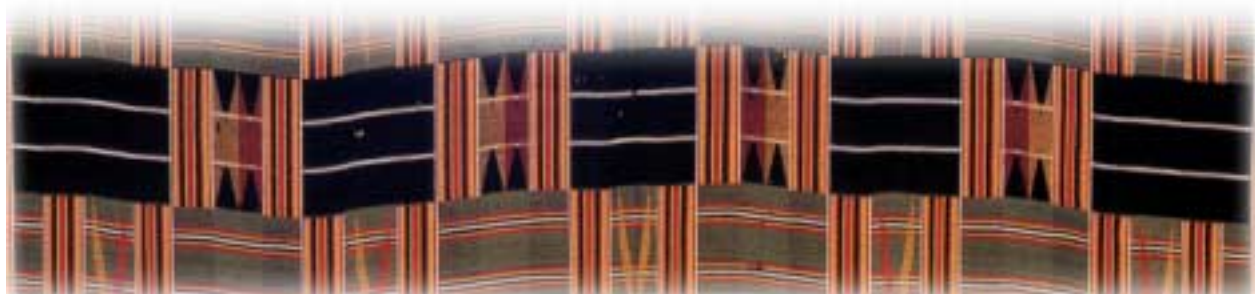


CLASSIC AFRICAN-AMERICAN NOVELS

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**POPULAR CONTEMPORARY
AFRICAN-AMERICAN NOVELS**



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***Another Country*, by James Baldwin**

Centering on the death of its central character, this novel—set in Greenwich Village, Harlem, and France—illuminates the process of how prejudices of race, gender, and sexuality destroy good people and simultaneously deprive American society of their gifts. Also recommended are Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; indeed, all the fiction and nonfiction works by this literary and intellectual giant are rewarding.

***Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson**

The bi-racial hero of this 1912 novel learns that American society will not allow him his art or even his manhood as long as he is Black, so he "passes" as white, only to realize that choosing white privilege deprives him of his birthright and his soul.

***Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, by Ernest Gaines**

Inspired by slave narratives, the author creates a remarkable 110-year-old protagonist, who chronicles her experiences from the 1860's through the 1960's. The same author's *A Lesson Before Dying* has been the center of reading and discussion programs in several cities across the nation.

***Beloved*, by Toni Morrison**

A mystery and a ghost story full of historical truth about the ravages of guilt upon, not only the desperate perpetrator, but also on her family and neighbors. Toni Morrison is also acclaimed for *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Jazz*, and other works of fiction.

***Brown Girl, Brownstones*, by Paule Marshall**

Selina Boyce, the daughter of immigrants, experiences the conflict between The American Dream and nostalgia for the land of Barbados. In this coming-of-age tale, she confronts poverty, racism, and the challenges of first-generation U.S. citizens.

***Cane*, by Jean Toomer**

According to the eminent African American critic Arna Bontemps, "No earlier volume of poetry or fiction or both had come close to expressing the ethos of the Negro in the Southern setting as *Cane* did. Even in today's ghettos astute readers are finding that its insights have anticipated and often exceeded their own."

***Chaneyville Incident*, by David Bradley**

Resisting his girlfriend's request to commit himself to their relationship, historian John Washington is detached from his heritage until he visits the bedside of his father's best friend and learns of his family's courageous heritage.

***Clotel, or The President's Daughter*, by William Wells Brown**

Based both on his own experiences as a fugitive slave and on the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, this 1853 novel examines "the peculiar institution."

***The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker**

With only the slightest education and constant demands that she be silent, Celie composes letters to God, in which she articulates her struggle for freedom from the brutality of her stepfather and husband. In finding her voice, she attracts genuine love and gains liberation and security.

***Corregidora*, by Gayl Jones**

In her review, cultural critic Margo Jefferson wrote of this book, first published in 1975, "History and fiction have yielded little about those black slave women who were mistress and breeder to their

white owners. There are some facts and figures, but they tell us nothing about the women themselves: their motives, their emotions, and the memories they passed on to their children. Gayl Jones's first novel is a gripping portrait of this harsh sexual and psychological genealogy....” The author's next novel, *Eva's Man*, elaborates on the theme of the sexual victimization of African American women.

Dessa Rose, by Sherley Anne Williams

Roles fall away and complex feelings develop in this story about a runaway slave and the white woman who harbors her.

A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich, by Alice Childress

Fourteen-year-old Benjie Johnson believes that he can stop using heroin any time he wants to but turns his life around only when his stepfather risks his life for him.

His Own Where, by June Jordan

Political activist and poet Jordan protests dreams deferred by classism, racism, and sexism, and so does her teenaged hero, Buddy, who refuses to bow to prejudices inside and outside his community. His courage in defending a friend against domestic abuse also serves as a model. The language, structure, and style of this novel have received plaudits.

Home to Harlem, by Claude McKay

Starkly realistic as well as redolent of its time and locale, this novel tells how the drifter Jake is deprived of his own path, while his friend, Ray, finds street life unbearably harsh.

If He Hollers Let Him Go, by Chester Himes

Tortured by a charge of rape by a white woman who had been only too glad to kiss him, Bob Jones resists his refined girlfriend's pleas that he turn away from his anger over racial oppression and carve out a personal solution among the Black bourgeoisie. He considers this option, only to learn that his girlfriend's father is corrupt.

The Invisible Man, by Ralph Ellison

“You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world”—but how can you when the only “recognition” you receive is from self-serving philanthropists and from political, spiritual, and community leaders—all of whom “see” you as a kind of puppet to manipulate? Famous for its often anthologized “Battle Royale” scene, in which African American men fight each other for the amusement of whites, the nameless narrator is no less scathing toward Blacks who objectify their own people.

Iola Leroy, by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Only when she is sold as a slave does the heroine learn that she is of mixed race. Like other slaves, she subverts delusions and discovers a new vision of liberation for herself and for others. So inspired was Ida B. Wells-Barnett by this novel, that she took “Iola Leroy” as a pen name.

Iron City, by Lloyd L. Brown

A prison novel that explores both the criminal justice system and the myriad institutions that dehumanize society. Describing *Iron City*, Paul Robeson said, “Here are people, richly characterized, warm, honest, tender, angry human beings, struggling, fighting, suffering, and triumphantly living the problems and answers.”

Jubilee, by Margaret Walker

This mesmerizing saga, extending from the antebellum period through Reconstruction, traces the extraordinary hardships that were ordinary for slaves and ex-slaves, revealing the singular position of Black mothers and other women.

The Man Who Cried I Am, by John A. Williams

A homesick expatriate in Europe is regarded as a great writer, not simply as a talented Black American writer, but he cannot enjoy his new freedom, because the information he possesses about an international plot to obliterate all people of African descent makes him a target for assassination. This thriller includes characters strongly reminiscent of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X.

Middle Passage, by Charles Johnson

This adventure tale with a serious theme revolves around a newly freed slave's sea journey on a slave ship. Before the crew can mutiny, he organizes a slave uprising.

Mumbo Jumbo, by Ishmael Reed

The leader of the Jes Grew faith is in a race to find a holy text. His opponent, who heads the Wallflower Order, a joyless sect, is evil itself. If you enjoy the life affirming, riotous humor of this novel, you will also seek Reed's other books, such as *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, *The Terrible Twos*, and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*.

Native Son, by Richard Wright

To hide from his almost subconscious fear of white domination, Bigger Thomas commits the ultimate violence. His attorney argues that Bigger represents the Black man's frustrations, a contention that only makes matters worse for his client, as the jury imagines riots. Often compared to *Crime and Punishment*, this masterpiece dissects American racism.

Our Nig, by Harriet Wilson

The first novel by an African American published in the United States (in 1859), this is the apparently semi-autobiographical story of a "free Black" foundling, who is abused by members of a New England family, even though others are kind to her. As her mother was deserted by her father, so does the man to whom she gives her love desert her.

Passing, by Nella Larsen

Clare appears to be purely European in descent, and she has married a white bigot. When she happens to meet Irene, a childhood friend, she realizes how much she misses the vitality of the African American community. The collision of her choices and those of Irene make this a book that, for author Alice Walker, "open[ed] up a whole world of experience and struggle." Many of the same themes are in Larsen's other famous Harlem Renaissance novel, *Quicksand*.

Plum Bun, by Jessie Redmon Fauset

In this novel from the Harlem Renaissance, a determined young woman learns the double oppression of racial and sexual politics. She imagined that passing as white would open doors to her, but she did not taken into account the obstacles of gender prejudice, which even love and marriage do not dissolve.

Roots, by Alex Haley

Subtitled *The Saga of an American Family*, this book's story line extends from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, through generations of suffering, spirit, valor, and love. Praised as "haunting" by no less a luminary than James Baldwin, *Roots* has inspired a deep appreciation of Black history in many readers.

The Salt Eaters, by Toni Cade Bambara

In contrast to Bambara's brilliant short story, "Gorilla, My Love," about a girl who knows pretty well who she is and what is right, this novel is about a woman who has attempted suicide. When modern Western medicine cannot make Velma Henry whole, African American faith healers come to her rescue.

The Spook Who Sat by the Door, by Sam Greenlee

A man hired by the CIA as a token Black but given no duties returns to his community to lead an uprising.

Sport of the Gods, by Paul Lawrence Dunbar

Forced to leave the South, a family falls apart amid the harsh realities of Northern inner city life in this 1902 examination of the forces that extinguish the dreams of African Americans.

The Street, by Ann Petry

A young mother arrives idealistic and starry-eyed in Harlem only to be beaten down by injustice. She gains some success, but at a terrible price. For more of Ann Petry's stunning artistry, read *The Narrows*.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston

One of the most thoughtful and beautifully written romances imaginable, this is the story of a woman's search for identity, fulfillment, and passion. After two unsatisfying marriages, she revels in a life on her own terms.

Walls of Jericho, by Rudolph Fisher

Shine, the hero of this 1928 novel, declares that, "The guy that's really hard is the guy that's hard enough to be soft." That heart's truth, along with a clear but humorous critique of social snobbery and a compelling story line, make this a memorable reading experience.

The Wedding, by Dorothy West

When the daughter of a prominent but loveless African American couple announces her engagement to a white musician, both her family and an ambitious Black businessman seek to foist the plans. Dorothy West's other famous novel, *The Living Is Easy*, also considers choices faced by African American women.

A Woman Called Fancy, by Frank Yerby

When a beautiful woman ascends from rags to riches, she struggles to hide her past in order to gain respectability, then gives up the effort and enjoys honest friendships in the African American community. This tale also exposes the ignoble pasts of many a "good family."

The Women of Brewster Place, by Gloria Naylor

Surviving in grinding poverty, the women in a decaying tenement in a walled off street of a big city struggle through disappointment, loss, and violence and achieve successes through mutual supportiveness. Also recommended are this author's *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Café*.

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***Annie John*, by Jamaica Kincaid**

A twelve-year-old and her mother have always been close, but, as Annie John reaches her teens, the relationship grows strained, even combative. In the background is the despoiling of their Antiguan countryside.

***Baby of the Family*, by Tina McElroy Ansa**

The power of clairvoyance is wonderful if you can focus on the good, not the evil, and a nurse helps the heroine to do so. On many of the same themes is the author's *The Hand I Fan With* and *Ugly Ways*.

***Balancing Act*, by Anita Richmond Bunkley**

Black Gold author Bunkley returns with this suspenseful novel about a public relations woman who comes to suspect that her company is causing severe damage to the environment and, in particular, to her old African American neighborhood.

***B-Boy Blues*, by James Earl Hardy**

In this love story of self-discovery and self-acceptance, the hero meets the man of his dreams and takes a wilder walk than either of them knew they could. After this book, move on to its sequel, *2nd Time Around*.

***Big Girls Don't Cry*, by Connie Briscoe**

A young woman's revelations through civil rights actions and a career in a world still distorted by racial discrimination enable her to provide herself with pride and happiness.

***Billy*, by Albert French**

A ten-year-old African American boy is executed for murdering a white girl in this indictment of the criminal justice system.

***Breath, Eyes, Memory*; by Edwidge Danticat**

"I come from a place where breath, eyes and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to." But young Sophie Caco leaves Haiti for Little Haiti, New York City, when the mother who left her in the care of her aunt sends for her. She learns that she is the product of a rape and that her mother feels compelled to keep her sexually innocent—or, as she sees it, ignorant.

***Caught up in the Rapture*, by Sheneska Jackson**

Jazmine seeks to break away from life as a preacher's kid and both enter the music industry and enjoy herself, unfettered by rules and routines. Of course, she encounters new forms that she can accept or reject—as well as an unconventional man. Also by this young author are *Blessings*, *L'il Mama Rules*, and *Southern Comfort*.

***Coffee Will Make You Black*, by April Sinclair**

A coming-of-age story rich in the ambiance of the 1960's as well as in the pressures upon young women to fit in instead of heeding their own instincts.

Daddy Cool, by Donald Goines

A hit man with a heart of gold—at least where his daughter is concerned—Larry Jackson seeks to avenge her degradation by the pimp who is her boyfriend. This novel is a true example of gangsta lit.

A Do Right Man, by Omar Tyree

Steady Bobby Dallas, who aspires to work in communications, has his head turned by a sophisticated New Yorker and abandons his best friend, Faye, only to realize that Faye is his soulmate. Readers will also appreciate Tyree's *Flyy Girl* and *Single Mom*.

Friends and Lovers, by Eric Jerome Dickey

Admirers of this comedian-author's *Sister, Sister* will take pleasure in *Friends and Lovers*. Set in Los Angeles, it follows two women, who have nearly given up on men, and two men, who want to be true to them but have their own issues to understand. Also flying off shelves is Dickey's *And This Too Shall Pass*.

How Stella Got Her Groove Back, by Terry McMillan

--By allowing herself to explore a relationship with a much younger man. Another Terry McMillan favorite is *Waiting to Exhale*.

I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked out All the Pots, by Susan Straight

The nuanced odyssey of a backwoods woman to the big city and then to the suburbs, as she learns about civil rights, football, and herself.

In Search of Satisfaction, by J. California Cooper

Two half-sisters support and complete each other in this family saga, replete with powerful emotions, some beautiful, many ugly. Cooper's other books include *Handmade Love* and *Some Love, Some Pain, Some Time*.

Just as I Am, by E. Lynn Harris

Oppressed groups often must present a united front. To be united, though, we needn't all be exactly the same. Celebrating our pluralism demonstrates profound power. Harris examines how sexual diversity and AIDS can actually create concert among people of good faith. Readers of all kinds find Harris's work moving and stimulating. Enjoy too *And This Too Shall Pass* and *Invisible Life*.

Knowing, by Rosalyn McMillan

When a woman seeks to earn a college degree so that she can fulfill her dreams and improve her job opportunities, her husband, who is wonderful in so many ways, feels threatened. Also in demand is Terry's sister's *One Better*.

A Little Yellow Dog, by Walter Mosley

Integrating keen psychological and social insights with a page-turning mystery, the author tells the events that led custodian Easy Rawlins from life on the streets to a responsible school custodian raising children to a new career as a detective, whose first job is to clear his own name of theft and murder. All Mosley's mysteries are satisfying; *RL's Dream*, which is not a mystery, stands also as creative triumph.

Magic City, by Jewell Rhodes Parker

This historical fiction set in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, known in its heyday as "the Black Wall Street," combines romance, the oppression and the courage of both African Americans and women of all races, romance, betrayal, daring jailbreaks, and massive destruction into one compelling tale.

Miss Ophelia, by Mary Burnett Smith

The necessity of facing issues of race, adultery, and abortion force a girl in 1948 rural Virginia to learn more than piano technique from the title character.

My Soul to Keep, by Tananarive Due

Horror fans will be riveted by this tale of a marriage between a human and an immortal who is considering betraying the brotherhood and inducting his wife and children into everlasting life with him. Real life questions of identity, loyalty, individuality, and silence give force to the plot. *The Between*, also by this author, is similarly recommended to readers.

Parable of the Sower, by Octavia Butler

Lauren Olamina, the heroine of this science fiction novel in diary form, experiences the pain of others, and that suffering is crippling in a time of full-scale marauding. She flees to a new world, where, as a prophet, she brings good people faith and hope. Other books by this prolific author include *Dawn* and *The Wild Seed*.

Platitudes, by Trey Ellis

As they exchange creative writing, the story of a relationship between Dewayne and Isshee develops into one they decide to explore as something less imaginary.

Push, by Sapphire

A courageous teacher inspires Claireece Precious Jones, the victim of father-daughter incest and other violence, to learn to read and then to write her story. ("Sometimes I wish I was not alive....But I don't know how to die. Ain' no plug to pull out. 'N no matter how bad I feel my heart don't stop beating and my eyes open in the morning.") In finding her voice, Precious is empowered to create a new life.

Sent for You Yesterday, by John Edgar Wideman

With a cast of absorbing characters and in the language of the blues, Wideman evokes the rundown Homewood section of Pittsburgh over some fifty years. Literature lovers will want also to turn to *Damballah, Hiding Place, and Fever*.

Singing in the Comeback Choir, by Bebe Moore Campbell

When she finds the old neighborhood more decayed than ever, a successful television producer seeks to move the grandmother who raised her into nicer surroundings, but, after visiting her grandmother's church, she finds that restoration, not removal, will be her goal. Like *Sisters and Brothers, Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, and *What You Owe Me*—this novel has been critically celebrated.

Souder, by William H. Armstrong

A boy becomes the head of the household after his father is imprisoned.

Tempest Rising, by Diane McKinney-Whetstone

When a mother and daughter begin caring for foster children, they must address their own tense relationship. *Tumbling*, by the same author, is another popular favorite.

What a Woman's Gotta Do, by Evelyn Coleman

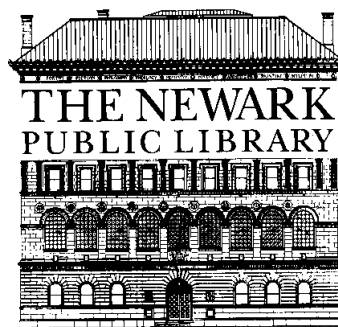
Left at the altar, journalist Patricia Conley is enraged, until she learns that her fiancé may have been murdered. Accused of that deed and also pursued by a geneticist who thinks she may have some vital information and by an undercover detective who says he loves her, she comes to see the value of independence and interdependence too.

What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day, by Pearl Cleage

Ava Johnson moved to Atlanta and developed a successful beauty salon as she enjoyed the excitement she had missed growing up in a small midwestern town. All was fine until she was diagnosed as HIV-positive. She visits her Michigan family in defeat, only to put together her life in ways she had never dreamed. Fans will also want to discover Cleage's *I Wish I Had a Red Dress*.

For more suggestions, please consult:

- The catalog, under such subjects as “African Americans—Fiction”
- Reference sources, such as
 - African American Writers*. 2nd ed. Charles Scriber’s Sons, 2001.
R810.9896073 Af8258
 - Best Literature by and about Blacks*, by Phillip M. Richards. Gale, 2000.
R016.8109896 R392be
 - Contemporary African American Novelists: a Bio-Bibliographical and Critical Sourcebook*. Greenwood, 1999.
R813.5409896 C765
 - Fiction Catalog*. H.W. Wilson, 1996.
R016.82 W6917 1996
 - Masterpieces of African American Literature*. HarperCollins, 1992.
R810.9896073 M39
 - The Oxford companion to African American Literature*. Oxford University, 1997.
R810.80896073 Ox25
 - Sacred Fire: the QRB Essential 100 Black Books*. Wiley, 1999.
R016.9730496 Sa15
 - What Do I Read Next?—Multicultural Literature*. Gale, 1997.
R016.81080920693 W555
- These reference databases:
 - NoveList* at www.npl.org/Pages/InternetResources
 - What Do I Read Next?* at www.npl.org/Pages/InternetResources
- the Library’s guide to websites of African American interest, at www.npl.org/Pages/InternetResources/SubjectGuides/africanamerican.html
- your librarian—and, if your library branch does not currently have a copy of the book of your choice, the librarian will arrange to borrow one for you.



Compiled by Leslie Kahn, Arts & Humanities Center, 2002