A novel idea

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How it works

The resource largely consists of an engaging list of contemporary novels with lively student-friendly descriptions of them. Each description ends with a summary of the key themes, flagged up with the tag 'particularly good if you like …' What makes this resource so refreshing is that it assumes nothing and everything at the same time. It assumes no prior knowledge of these authors or novels but it takes it entirely for granted that young people will naturally want to read books when they are described with such joyful conviction. Literature looks cool, funky, quirky, challenging and intriguing here. As it is …

The pedagogical frame for this list is an activity that engages students in selecting one of the books, reading it, and preparing an individual presentation to the class on it. A list of prompt points is included to scaffold this.

Try this!

This activity could be a very nice bridging activity between AS and A2, or indeed, if circumstances allow, between GCSE and AS. You will always get some students who didn’t do it because they didn’t anticipate taking the course, and it’s easy to buy into the ‘oh miss/sir, it’s not fair, they didn’t have to do it’ argument. But step back and remind yourself that everyone who does it will be enriched by it, and that’s the point – not punishment-by-homework. Either that or go into evil-teacher mode (always a good option) and only allow students who have done it to progress to A2.

Or this!

If the prospect of listening through 25 individual presentations fills you with horror, try this. Make all the students prepare a presentation, using PowerPoint slides so that you can take it in and mark it (very light touch). Make the giving of the presentation a Key Skills ‘opportunity’ and invite only those who are ready for assessment to do it. That way everyone will get valuable feedback on the structure and content of their presentation, but you’ll only have to sit through two or three performances. As long as everyone does the reading, and everyone does a presentation at some point during the course, it’s fine.
Modern literature can seem baffling and confusing: the proliferation of authors, genres and styles means that bookshops are full to overflowing, yet many people complain of never being able to find anything to read. Below you can see a (very selective) list of some important or interesting or arresting novels of the last twenty years.

**Task:**

Select one of these novels to read and prepare a brief presentation on it.

All are available in bookshops or, most likely, in a charity shop or second hand bookshop near you. Please note: there won’t be any ‘crossover fiction’ here - these are books for adults!

**Fingersmith** by Sarah Waters:
A Dickensian romp in Victorian London with enough plot twists to keep even the most cynical of readers gripped. Crime, sex, lesbianism, madness and more ... definitely one for the sensationalists among you.

- Particularly good if you like: detective stories, Victorian fiction, ‘romps’ (!).

**Midnight’s Children** by Salman Rushdie: A swirling and evocative magical realist epic covering the emergence of Modern India. Saleem is born at the midnight of India’s independence and joins 1000 children born at that time, each with an amazing talent.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: international politics, stories, India.

**The Life of Pi** by Yann Martel: A boy drifts across the ocean on a yacht with only a tiger for company. From this unconventional beginning a novel exploring religion, philosophy and humanity is born, written in beautifully simple prose. Spicy, vivacious, kinetic and very entertaining fiction.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: philosophy, animals, reasoning.

**Middlesex** by Jeffrey Eugenides: No, it’s not about outer London. Calliope is a hermaphrodite, born to Greek-American parents in the 1960s. Her story is epic: entertaining, broad, philosophical and gripping. It’s a book about love, family, genetics, immigration, history, secrets and more.

- Particularly good if you like: family sagas, epics, international fiction, twists and turns in plots.

**Vernon God Little** by DBC Pierre: A hilarious tragedy (trust me) about Vernon Gregory Little, a teenager in Texas caught up in a Columbine-style massacre at his high school. Told in Vernon’s inimitable Texan drawl, peppered with swearwords, this is a biting satirical take on modern American culture with an extremely comic supporting cast of typical Southerners. A true original.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: Michael Moore(!), America, teenagers, satire.
Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell: A dazzling interweaving of six very different stories and genres, this hyper-modern novel is amazingly crafted and brilliantly entertaining. The reader is catapulted through time and space via six linked narratives which range from the story of an exploited nineteenth century explorer to a post-apocalyptic Hawaii via a Blade-runner-esque tale of clones in Korea. It’s astoundingly original and absolutely gripping - one for the philosophers among you.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: power politics, lots of different genres.

Norwegian Wood by Haruki Murakami: This novel threw Murakami onto the international stage - he’s now a cult novelist worldwide with the highest critical acclaim to boot. A whimsical yet deep look at young love - Toru Watanabe is looking back on the love and passions of his life and trying to make sense of it all. As his first love Naoko sinks deeper into mental despair, he is inexorably pushed to find a new meaning and a new love in order to survive.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: young people, Japan, the mind, memory.

The New York Trilogy or The Book of Illusions by Paul Auster: Auster is one of the most respected and best reviewed modern American novelists. The New York Trilogy consists of three gripping detective stories which will certainly exercise your brain. The Book of Illusions is about David Zimmer, who finds solace from the grief of losing his wife and two sons in a plane crash by immersing himself in the films of silent comedy star, Hector Mann. An academic by profession, David writes a critical study of Mann’s films, but, as the book is published, he is contacted by sources who claim that Hector Mann, who hasn’t been seen for almost sixty years and is presumed dead, is alive and living in New Mexico. This is gripping, suspenseful and taut.

- Both good if you like: big cities, crime writing, America.

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels: The stories of two men from different generations whose lives have been transformed by war. A young boy, Jakob Beer, is rescued from the mud of a buried Polish city during World War II and taken to an island in Greece by an unlikely saviour, the scientist/humanist Athos Roussos. Written in an extraordinary lyrical style, this book will haunt you for years.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: WW2, Holocaust, survivors’ guilt / repressed memories, beautiful writing, generation gap, philosophy.

The Corrections by Jonathan Franzen: A huge success in the States, this modern epic focuses on matriarch Enid Lambert’s attempts to gather her three grown children back home for Christmas. The Corrections examines their lives: Enid’s husband Alfred, sinking into dementia, her sons banker Gary and writer Chip (now in Lithuania) and daughter Denise, a chef, busily re-evaluating her sexual identity. Examines the foibles, fears, neuroses and worries of 21st century family life.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: family sagas, America.
**The Secret History** by Donna Tartt: Warning: You won’t be able to put this down. A boy leaves California to attend a college in New England and falls in with a group of students of Ancient Greek. Four of their number work themselves into a trance-like condition one night, and murder a local farmer. One of the most talked about books of the nineties, people were literally walking down the street reading this as soon as it came out. This synopsis really doesn’t do it justice!

- Particularly good if you are interested in: Classics, psychology, murder, incest, school, America, young people, crime.

**White Teeth** by Zadie Smith: Another much-discussed book, ‘White Teeth’ is a comic epic of multicultural Britain which tells the story of immigrants in England over a period of 40 years. Set in contemporary London, the dialogue and stories are comic and richly entertaining.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: comic novels, modern Britain, multiculturalism.

**Perfume: The Story of a Murderer** by Patrick Suskind: The opening sentence of this novel tells you almost everything you need to know: 'In eighteenth-century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era which knew no lack of gifted or abominable personages.’ Jean Baptiste Grenouille is born, astoundingly, without any personal smell. From this unusual premise grows a gripping tale of crime and murder that will have you spellbound until the bitter end.

- Particularly good if you enjoy books about: murder, crime, criminals, psychology.

**Regeneration** by Pat Barker: The first novel in Barker’s trilogy focuses on the presumed meetings between Owen and Sassoon in a mental hospital in Scotland during World War One. In Craiglockhart war hospital, Doctor William Rivers attempts to restore the sanity of officers from the war. When Siegfried Sassoon publishes his declaration of protest against the war, the authorities decide to have him declared mentally defective and send him to Craiglockhart. The novel is about the effects of war on a man’s sanity.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: war, madness, poetry, psychology.

**Carter Beats the Devil** by Glen David Gold: Glen David Gold’s impressive debut is an inspired delight, a dazzling combination of fact and fiction. Charles Carter is given his stage name ‘Carter the Great’ by the legendary Harry Houdini and the jazz age of the early 1900s is clearly well researched, yet the romance and strong cast of characters must owe more to the imagination than to history. The novel begins in 1923 with the most daring performance of Carter’s life. Unfortunately, two hours into the performance, US President Harding is dead and the magician must flee the country, pursued by the Secret Service. This is an ambitious and compulsive novel and deserves all the praise that Carter himself received and more.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: magic, history, America, escapology, 1920s, jazz age, wild animals … the list goes on!
**Cat’s Eye or The Blind Assassin** by Margaret Atwood: Atwood is one of the most prolific and respected female authors writing in the world today. *Cat’s Eye* was her first major success; it’s a story about childhood bullying and the effect on later life. Sounds worthy but is wonderfully written, using humour to remind readers of details of childhood they may have forgotten.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: childhood, memory, psychology.

**The Blind Assassin** won the Booker in 2000. At the end of her life, Iris Griffen takes up her pen to record the secret history of her family, the romantic melodrama of its decline and fall between the two World Wars. Conjuring a world of prosperity and misery, marriage and loneliness, the central enigma of Iris’s tale is the death of her sister, Laura Chase, who ‘drove a car off a bridge’ at the end of the Second World War. Suicide or accident?

- Particularly good if you are interested in: books about writing, mystery, suspense, the 1950s.

**One Hundred Years of Solitude** by Gabriel Garcia Marquez: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a journey through the story of the Buendias family, living in Macondo in the heart of the South American jungle. The family is filled with inimitable characters who live through love, civil war and tragedy.

- Particularly good if you like: history, fairy tales, family epics, tragedy.

**Enduring Love** by Ian McEwan: This novel has one of the most gripping opening sequences in modern fiction. It begins with a balloon accident that quickly spirals into an obsessive relationship. McEwan’s narrative is carefully constructed so that you are never quite sure whether the narrator is telling the truth.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: psychology, thrillers, London.

**The God of Small Things** by Arundhati Roy: Another Booker Prize winner, this is a gloriously evocative tragedy set in Kerala. It’s about the events surrounding a Christian family in an obviously Indian setting, and while the story itself is gripping, the inventive and original style of Roy’s writing stands out. You might be interested to know that Roy has not written a novel since and is now an international campaigner against the Indian government’s Narmada Dam project - her work on this subject is intensely political and well worth reading.

- Particularly good if you like / are interested in: Indian politics and society, beautiful writing, family sagas and tragedies.

**Remains of the Day** by Kazuo Ishiguru: Told in the first person and set in the 1930s, this is the story of Stevens, a straight-laced and coldly inhuman butler who nevertheless convinces us he has a human side through his relationship with Miss Kenton, a housemaid in his employer’s household. This is a novel about what might have been that will also appeal to anyone who is interested in England’s history.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: English history, compelling stories, moving stories, human pressures, emotional pressures - a riveting book.
**True History of the Ned Kelly Gang** or **Oscar and Lucinda** by Peter Carey: Peter Carey is one of Australia’s foremost authors and these are two of his most renowned novels. *True History of the Ned Kelly Gang* is about Australia’s most famous outlaw. Told in Carey’s version of Kelly’s unmistakable Aussie drawl, the reader comes to feel pity for the robber as we see his creation through poverty and ignorance.

*Oscar and Lucinda* is perhaps Carey’s best-loved book. Set onboard an ocean liner travelling to Australia in 1864, this novel is both a love story and an historical tour-de-force that relates the developing romance between Oscar Hopkins, an Oxford seminarian, and Lucinda Leplastrier, a Sydney heiress with a fascination for glass. - Particularly good if you are interested in: Australia, crime, poverty, nature vs nurture.

**The Bloody Chamber** by Angela Carter: This is a collection of short stories; modern reimaginings of fairy tales that will challenge your perception of the myths that are an essential part of our culture.

- Particularly good if you like: short stories, myths, legends.

**Possession** by AS Byatt: An enthralling literary detective story as well as a beautiful modern love story. ‘Literary critics make natural detectives’, says Maud Bailey, heroine of a mystery where the clues lurk in university libraries, old letters and dusty journals. Together with Roland Michell, a fellow academic and accidental sleuth, Maud discovers a love affair between the two Victorian writers the pair has dedicated their lives to studying: Randolph Ash, a literary great long assumed to be a devoted and faithful husband, and Christabel La Motte, a lesser-known ‘fairy poetess’ and chaste spinster. At first, Roland and Maud’s discovery threatens only to alter the direction of their research, but as they unearth the truth about the long-forgotten romance, their involvement becomes increasingly urgent and personal.

- Particularly good if you like: poetry, the nineteenth century, romance, detective stories.

**Cold Mountain** by Charles Frazier: The story begins near the end of the Civil War as Inman, a confederate soldier, recuperates from his wounds and reflects on four years of ferocious fighting. He sneaks out of the hospital through a window and begins a long, difficult trek home. At the same time, Ada, his love from before the war, has just lost her father in the hill country in the smokies. Brought up as an educated lady to her minister father in Charleston, she is unprepared to fend for herself. Soon befriended by Ruby, she begins the unremitting toil to get her farm working again without the proper help, resources and training.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: American Civil War, historical fiction, film adaptations.
Spies by Michael Frayn: In Michael Frayn’s novel Spies an old man returns to the scene of his seemingly ordinary suburban childhood. Stephen Wheatley is unsure of what he is seeking but, as he walks once-familiar streets he hasn’t seen in 50 years, he unfolds a story of childish games colliding cruelly with adult realities. It is wartime and Stephen’s friend Keith makes the momentous announcement that his mother is a German spy. The two boys begin to spy on the supposed spy, following her on her trips to the shops and to the post, and reading her diary. Keith’s mother does have secrets to conceal but they are not the ones the boys suspect.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: WW2, childhood, psychology, unreliable narrators.

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters by Julian Barnes: A fictional history of the world in which stories echo each other as themes deepen and images recur. Very similar in style to Cloud Atlas - another hyper-modern novel which rewards concentration while reading it.

- Particularly good if you are interested in: history, myths, legends, different styles and genres.

Task

Your task is to prepare a short presentation explaining your chosen book to the rest of the group. You should cover:

- the basic storyline, but don’t give too much away
- the author’s background and career
- any other opinions about the book that you can find
- what you enjoyed about it
- what you didn’t enjoy about it
- if it is adapted into a film, something about the adaptation
- anything else you feel is relevant.