

Reading for Black History Month

The Rhode Island organization **Stages of Freedom** offers a range of programs and a short, informative daily e-blast "Connected." In December, the e-blasts featured the following list of seminal works authored by African Americans between the mid-1800s and the 1980s. To learn more about Stages of Freedom, go to the webpage <https://www.stagesoffreedom.org/> and to subscribe to the daily e-blast, write to stagesofFreedom@aol.com

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass by Frederick Douglass (1845).

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is a memoir and treatise on abolition written by famous orator and former slave Frederick Douglass during his time in Lynn, Massachusetts. It is generally held to be the most famous of a number of narratives written by former slaves during the same period.

Coming of Age in Mississippi by Anne Moody (1968). A memoir about growing up in rural Mississippi in the mid-20th century as an African American woman. The book covers Moody's life from childhood through her mid twenties, including her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement beginning when she was a student at the historically Black Tougaloo College. Moody's autobiography details her struggles both against racism among white people and sexism among her fellow civil rights activists. It received many positive reviews and won awards from the National Library Association and the National Council of Christians and Jews.

Native Son by Richard Wright (1940). The novel tells the story of 20-year-old **Bigger Thomas**, a black youth living in utter poverty in a poor area **on** Chicago's **South Side** in the 1930s. While not apologizing for Bigger's crimes, Wright portrays a systemic causation behind them. Bigger's lawyer, Boris Max, makes the case that there is no escape from this destiny for his client or any other black American since they are the necessary product of the society that formed them and told them since birth who exactly they were supposed to be.

God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse by James Weldon Johnson (1927). A book of poems patterned after traditional African American religious oratory. Johnson explains the title's use of the trombone by discussing the vocal and rhetorical qualities of a preacher he had recently heard who, he felt, exemplified the compelling and persuasive nature of the folk preacher, naming the trombone as "the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice — and with greater amplitude." He also cited a dictionary definition that noted the trombone as being the brass instrument most resembling the range and sound of the human voice.

Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967). Dr. King's fourth and final book before his 1968 assassination. Written in Jamaica during a long period of social isolation, it advocates for human rights and rings with a sense of hope.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou (1969). An autobiography detailing the early years of American writer and poet Maya Angelou. The first in a seven-volume series, it is a coming-of-age story that illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma. The book begins when three-year-old Maya and her older brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of 16. In the course of Caged Bird, Maya transforms from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice..

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison (1952). Winner of the National Book Award, the book addresses many of the social and intellectual issues faced by African Americans in the early twentieth century,

including Black nationalism, the relationship between Black identity and Marxism, the reformist racial policies of Booker T. Washington, as well as issues of individuality and personal identity.

Passing by Nella Larsen (1920). Set primarily in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City in the 1920s, the story centers on the reunion of two childhood friends - Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield - and their increasing fascination with each other's lives. The title refers to the practice of "racial passing," and is a key element of the novel. Clare Kendry's attempt to pass as white for her husband, John (Jack) Bellew, is a significant depiction in the novel and a catalyst for the tragic events.

Larsen's exploration of race was informed by her own mixed racial heritage and the increasingly common practice of racial passing in the 1920s. Praised upon publication, the novel has since been celebrated in modern scholarship for its complex depiction of race, gender, and sexuality, and the book is the subject of considerable scholarly criticism. As one of only two novels that Larsen wrote, the novel has been significant in placing its author at the forefront of several literary canons.

The novel was adapted as a 2021 film of the same name by Rebecca Hall.

Home to Harlem by Claude McKay (1928). With sensual, often brutal accuracy, the novel traces the parallel paths of two very different young men struggling to find their way through the suspicion and prejudice of American society. At the same time, this stark but moving story touches on the central themes of the Harlem Renaissance, including the urgent need for unity and identity among blacks

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston (1937). Hurston's novel is considered a classic of the Harlem Renaissance and Hurston's best-known work. The novel explores main character Janie Crawford's "ripening from a vibrant, but voiceless, teenage girl into a woman with her finger on the trigger of her own destiny". It is set in central and southern Florida, Hurston's home state, (her father was mayor of Eatonville, an all-Black township) in the early 20th century.

Since the late 20th century, thanks to efforts by female champions, such as author Alice Walker, it has been regarded as influential to both African American literature and women's literature. TIME included the novel in its 2005 list of the 100 best English-language novels published since 1923.

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin's (1963) contains two essays: "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" and "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind". The first essay, written in the form of a letter to Baldwin's 14-year-old nephew, discusses the central role of race in America. The second essay, which takes up the majority of the book, deals with the relationship between race and religion, focusing in particular on Baldwin's experiences in the Baptist church as a youth, as well as the Islamic ideas of others in Harlem.

The book's title comes from a couplet in the African American spiritual "Mary Don't You Weep":

*God gave Noah the rainbow sign
No more water, the fire next time*

Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison (1977). Morrison's third novel to be published, follows the life of Macon "Milkman" Dead III, an African American man living in Michigan, from birth to adulthood. This novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award, was chosen for Oprah Winfrey's popular book club, and was cited by the Swedish Academy in awarding Morrison the 1993 Nobel Prize in literature. In 1998, the Radcliffe Publishing Course named it the 25th best English-language novel of the 20th century.

The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903).

W. E. B. Du Bois' landmark book is a seminal work in the history of sociology and a cornerstone of African American literature. The book contains several essays on race, some of which had been published earlier in *The Atlantic Monthly*. To develop this work, Du Bois drew from his own experiences as a Black man in America. Outside of its notable relevance in African American history, *The Souls of Black Folk* also holds an important place in social science as one of the earliest works in the field of sociology.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois uses the term "double consciousness", perhaps taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson, applying it to the idea that Black people must have two fields of vision at all times. They must be conscious of how they view themselves, as well as being conscious of how the world views them.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker (1982). An epistolary novel which won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction. It was later adapted into a film and a Broadway musical of the same name. The novel has been the frequent target of censors and appears on the American Library Association list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 2000–2009 at number seventeenth because of the sometimes explicit content, particularly in terms of violence. In 2003, the book was listed on the BBC's The Big Read poll of the UK's "best-loved novels".

Color by Countee Cullen (1925). "In *Color*, Countee Cullen exhibits an unmistakable lyric gift that is out of the ordinary. It would be easy to overpraise him, for it is not often that men of his blood reveal so deep and so modern a sensitivity to the poetic urge, and so his excellence stands out all the more vividly. He still has some distance to go before he reaches any particularly high eminence as a poet, but what he has accomplished in "Color" leads to the suspicion that if he is not spoiled by overadulation during these early years he will produce distinguished and lasting work." - *NY Times Review, 1925*

Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde (1984). A collection of essential essays and speeches written by Audre Lorde, a writer who focuses on the particulars of her identity: Black woman, lesbian, poet, activist, cancer survivor, mother, and feminist. This collection, now considered a classic volume of Lorde's most influential works of non-fiction prose, has had a groundbreaking impact in the development of contemporary feminist theories. In fifteen essays and speeches dating from 1976 to 1984, Lorde explores the complexities of intersectional identity, while explicitly drawing from her personal experiences of oppression to include sexism, heterosexism, racism, homophobia, classism and ageism.

Roots: The Saga of an American Family by Alex Haley (1976). The novel tells the story of Kunta Kinte, an 18th-century African, captured as an adolescent, sold into slavery in Africa, transported to North America; following his life and the lives of his descendants in the United States down to Haley. It spent forty-six weeks on The New York Times Best Seller List, including twenty-two weeks at number one. The release of the novel, combined with its hugely popular television adaptation, *Roots* (1977), led to a cultural sensation in the United States. The last seven chapters of the novel were later adapted in the form of a second miniseries, *Roots: The Next Generations* (1979). It stimulated interest in African American genealogy and an appreciation for African-American history.

When and Where I Enter by Paula Giddings (1984) is an eloquent testimonial to the profound influence of African-American women on race and women's movements throughout American history. Drawing on speeches, diaries, letters, and other original documents, Paula Giddings powerfully portrays how black women have transcended racist and sexist attitudes--often confronting white feminists and black male leaders alike--to initiate social and political reform. From the open disregard for the rights of slave women to examples of today's more covert racism and sexism in civil rights and

women's organizations, Giddings illuminates the black woman's crusade for equality. In the process, she paints unforgettable portraits of black female leaders, such as anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, educator and FDR adviser Mary McLeod Bethune, and the heroic civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, among others, who fought both overt and institutionalized oppression.

***The Weary Blues* by Langston Hughes (1926).** Hughes' first book is a collection of poems that includes the title poem "The Weary Blues". The poem first appeared in the May 1925 issue of the Urban League magazine, *Opportunity*, and was awarded the magazine's prize for best poem of the year.

***Black Feeling Black Talk* by Nikki Giovanni (1968)** is one of the single most important volumes of modern African American poetry. Electrifying generations with its revolutionary phrases and inspiring them with such masterpieces as the lyrical "Nikki-Rosa" and the intimate "Knoxville, Tennessee," *Black Feeling Black Talk* made Giovanni famous when it was published.

***To Be A Slave* written by Julius Lester and illustrated by Tom Feelings (1968).** This nonfiction children's book explores what it was like to be enslaved. The book includes many personal accounts of former slaves, accompanied by Lester's historical commentary and Feelings' powerful and muted paintings. *To Be a Slave* has been a touchstone in children literature for more than 30 years.