

Incoming 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Academic and Dual Credit English  
Required Summer Reading 2010  
Bellaire High School

**Incoming 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Academic & Dual Credit English**

(total required reading: 1 book)

- Students must read ONE of the following:  
*The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien  
*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison  
*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe  
*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers

**ASSIGNMENT**

Write a two-page paper (handwritten or typed) in which you compare the novel with any other work of literature that you have read. Analyze the novel based on your own opinions and ideas (emphasis is on your ideas and analysis). This essay will be due on the first day of school.

Students will be required to take a test on the novel in the first few weeks of the fall semester.

- Students enrolled in English 4 Academic may contact Mrs. Phillips (rphilli4@houstonisd.org), Mrs. Green (pgreen@houstonisd.org), or Ms. Thomas (kthomas5@houstonisd.org) with any questions about the assignment.
- Students enrolled in English 4 Dual Credit may contact Mrs. Green (pgreen@houstonisd.org), or Ms. Patrick (apatrick@houstonisd.org) with any questions about the assignment.

***All BHS required summer reading books are readily available at most major bookstores and on-line booksellers.***

## About the Books

### ***The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien**

*"They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing--these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice.... Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to."*

A finalist for both the 1990 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *The Things They Carried* marks a subtle but definitive line of demarcation between Tim O'Brien's earlier works about Vietnam, the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and the fictional *Going After Cacciato*, and this sly, almost hallucinatory book that is neither memoir nor novel nor collection of short stories but rather an artful combination of all three. Vietnam is still O'Brien's theme, but in this book he seems less interested in the war itself than in the myriad different perspectives from which he depicts it. Whereas *Going After Cacciato* played with reality, *The Things They Carried* plays with truth. The narrator of most of these stories is "Tim"; yet O'Brien freely admits that many of the events he chronicles in this collection never really happened. He never killed a man as "Tim" does in "The Man I Killed," and unlike Tim in "Ambush," he has no daughter named Kathleen. But just because a thing never happened doesn't make it any less true. In "On the Rainy River," the character Tim O'Brien responds to his draft notice by driving north, to the Canadian border where he spends six days in a deserted lodge in the company of an old man named Elroy while he wrestles with the choice between dodging the draft or going to war. The real Tim O'Brien never drove north, never found himself in a fishing boat 20 yards off the Canadian shore with a decision to make. The real Tim O'Brien quietly boarded the bus to Sioux Falls and was inducted into the United States Army. But the truth of "On the Rainy River" lies not in facts but in the genuineness of the experience it depicts: both Tims went to a war they didn't believe in; both considered themselves cowards for doing so. Every story in *The Things They Carried* speaks another truth that Tim O'Brien learned in Vietnam; it is this blurred line between truth and reality, fact and fiction, that makes his book unforgettable. --*Alix Wilber* (from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

### ***The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison**

Set in Lorain, Ohio, in 1941, *The Bluest Eye* is something of an ensemble piece. The point of view is passed like a baton from one character to the next, with Morrison's own voice functioning as a kind of gold standard throughout. The focus, though, is on an 11-year-old black girl named Pecola Breedlove, whose entire family has been given a cosmetic cross to bear:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question.... And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it.

There are far uglier things in the world than, well, ugliness, and poor Pecola is subjected to most of them. She's spat upon, ridiculed, and ultimately raped and impregnated by her own father. No wonder she yearns to be the very opposite of what she is--yearns, in other words, to be a white child, possessed of the blondest hair and the bluest eye.

This vein of self-hatred is exactly what keeps Morrison's novel from devolving into a cut-and-dried scenario of victimization. She may in fact pin *too* much of the blame on the beauty myth: "Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another--physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion." Yet the destructive power of these ideas is essentially colorblind, which gives *The Bluest Eye* the sort of universal reach that Morrison's imitators can only dream of. And that, combined with the novel's modulated pathos and musical, fine-grained language, makes for not merely a sophisticated debut but a permanent one. --*James Marcus* ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

## ***Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe**

One of Chinua Achebe's many achievements in his acclaimed first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is his relentlessly unsentimental rendering of Nigerian tribal life before and after the coming of colonialism. First published in 1958, just two years before Nigeria declared independence from Great Britain, the book eschews the obvious temptation of depicting pre-colonial life as a kind of Eden. Instead, Achebe sketches a world in which violence, war, and suffering exist, but are balanced by a strong sense of tradition, ritual, and social coherence. His Ibo protagonist, Okonkwo, is a self-made man. The son of a charming ne'er-do-well, he has worked all his life to overcome his father's weakness and has arrived, finally, at great prosperity and even greater reputation among his fellows in the village of Umuofia. Okonkwo is a champion wrestler, a prosperous farmer, husband to three wives and father to several children. He is also a man who exhibits flaws well-known in Greek tragedy:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father.

And yet Achebe manages to make this cruel man deeply sympathetic. He is fond of his eldest daughter, and also of Ikemefuna, a young boy sent from another village as compensation for the wrongful death of a young woman from Umuofia. He even begins to feel pride in his eldest son, in whom he has too often seen his own father. Unfortunately, a series of tragic events tests the mettle of this strong man, and it is his fear of weakness that ultimately undoes him.

Achebe does not introduce the theme of colonialism until the last 50 pages or so. By then, Okonkwo has lost everything and been driven into exile. And yet, within the traditions of his culture, he still has hope of redemption. The arrival of missionaries in Umuofia, however, followed by representatives of the colonial government, completely disrupts Ibo culture, and in the chasm between old ways and new, Okonkwo is lost forever. Deceptively simple in its prose, *Things Fall Apart* packs a powerful punch as Achebe holds up the ruin of one proud man to stand for the destruction of an entire culture. --*Alix Wilber* (from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

## ***The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers**

With the publication of her first novel, *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*, Carson McCullers, all of twenty-three, became a literary sensation. With its profound sense of moral isolation and its compassionate glimpses into its characters' inner lives, the novel is considered McCullers' finest work, an enduring masterpiece first published by Houghton Mifflin in 1940. At its center is the deaf-mute John Singer, who becomes the confidant for all various types of misfits in a Georgia mill town during the 1930s. Each one yearns for escape from small town life. When Singer's mute companion goes insane, Singer moves into the Kelly house, where Mick Kelly, the book's heroine (and loosely based on McCullers), finds solace in her music. Wonderfully attune to the spiritual isolation that underlies the human condition, and with a deft sense for racial tensions in the South, McCullers spins a haunting, unforgettable story that gives voice to the rejected, the forgotten, and the mistreated -- and, through Mick Kelly, gives voice to the quiet, intensely personal search for beauty.

Richard Wright praised Carson McCullers for her ability "to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness." She writes "with a sweep and certainty that are overwhelming," said the *NEW YORK TIMES*. McCullers became an overnight literary sensation, but her novel has endured, just as timely and powerful today as when it was first published. *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER* is Carson McCullers at her most compassionate, endearing best. (from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))