

Incoming 12th Grade AP/IB Required Summer Reading 2009

Bellaire High School

Incoming 12th Grade AP/IB English (total required reading: 2 books)

- *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe
- Additionally, students must read ONE of the following:
 - The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien
 - The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
 - Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya
 - Mythology* by Edith Hamilton
 - The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver

ASSIGNMENT

Students entering 12TH Grade AP/IB English in the fall semester of 2009 should read widely this summer, but two books from the above list are required. We strongly recommend that students buy the books to underline and take notes on key passages OR that they keep a reader's journal with quotations and their own notes on those important passages. During the first days of school, students will be tested on their two books. Students are welcome to contact Mrs. Fish (pfish123@gmail.com) with questions.

ABOUT the BOOKS:

***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)

***The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver**

The Poisonwood Bible is a story told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. They carry with them everything they believe they will need from home, but soon find that all of it—from garden seeds to Scripture—is calamitously transformed on African soil. What follows is a suspenseful epic of one family's tragic undoing and remarkable reconstruction over the course of three decades in postcolonial Africa.

(from www.barnesandnoble.com)

***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)

***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)

***Bless Me Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya**

A talent for meaningful storytelling and exquisite prose has made Rudolfo Anaya a leading exponent of Chicano literature in English. Anaya's work has won international acclaim, earning him a premier place in virtually every anthology of Latino writing. Now his classic bestseller, "Bless Me, Ultima" is reborn in this beautifully illustrated special edition. Antonio Marez is six years old when Ultima enters his life. She is a curandera, one who heals with herbs and magic. 'We cannot let her live her last days in loneliness,' says Antonio's mother. 'It is not the way of our people,' agrees his father. And so Ultima comes to live with Antonio's family in New Mexico. Soon Tony will journey to the threshold of manhood. Always, Ultima watches over him. She graces him with the courage to face childhood bigotry, diabolical possession, the moral collapse of his brother, and too many violent deaths. Under her wise guidance, Tony will probe the family ties that bind him, and he will find in himself the magical secrets of the pagan past—a mythic legacy equally as palpable as the Catholicism of Latin America in which he has been schooled. At each turn in his life there is Ultima who will nurture the birth of his soul. Enhanced by four full-color paintings by noted New Mexican artist Bernadette Vigil, this book will be treasured by all admirers of Rudolfo Anaya, whether they are longtime followers of his work or are discovering him for the first time. (from www.barnesandnoble.com)

***Mythology* by Edith Hamilton**

Edith Hamilton loved the ancient Western myths with a passion--and this classic compendium is her tribute. "The tales of Greek mythology do not throw any clear light upon what early mankind was like," Hamilton explains in her introduction. "They do throw an abundance of light upon what early Greeks were like--a matter, it would seem, of more importance to us, who are their descendents intellectually, artistically, and politically. Nothing we learn about them is alien to ourselves." Fans of Greek mythology will find all the great stories and characters here--Perseus, Hercules, and Odysseus--each discussed in generous detail by the voice of an impressively knowledgeable and engaging (with occasional lapses) narrator. This is also an excellent primer for middle- and high-school students who are studying ancient Greek and Roman culture and literature. --*Gail Hudson* (from www.amazon.com)