



5 lessons you can learn from classic novels

"A great book should leave you with many experiences," Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist William Styron once said. Here, five noted authors share the life-changing wisdom they discovered inside their favorite timeless reads.

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SARA NELSON

Embrace individuality.

I read *The World According to Garp*, by John Irving, the year I graduated from college, and I identified with Garp in so many ways: He wanted to be a writer, and he was trying to be an adult, but he messed everything up. However, the most memorable message from the novel was illustrated by outcasts, like the transsexual ex-football player and the woman without a tongue, who finally found a community to call home. These characters showed me that people can be accepting of each other's eccentricities, which is a big lesson to take from a book that is, in many ways, a romp. You have to give people room to be who they are and to let their true colors show.

SARA NELSON is the author of *So Many Books*, *So Little Time: A Year of Passionate Reading*. She lives in New York City.

MARY ROACH

Just move forward.

Growing up, I lived this very small-town existence, so I adored the surreal fantasy series *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with its walking oysters and tea-drinking hares. I remember the scene where Alice asks the Cheshire cat about which way to go. "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," he says. "I don't much care where—so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice replies. And he tells her, "Oh, you're sure to do that if you only walk long enough." For a directionless kid who didn't know what she wanted to do or where she wanted to go, those words were comforting. You've got to end up somewhere, so just go.

MARY ROACH is the author of *Stiff*, *Bonk*, *Spook*, and, most recently, *Packing for Mars*. She lives in Oakland.

MADELINE MILLER

Fight injustice.

In eighth grade, I read *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. At the time, most of it sailed right over my head. But that last 25 percent was potent enough to knock me over. I had never read a book so deeply engaged with social injustice, and the abuses it depicted—by religious figures, civic authorities, and the mob—shocked me to the core. I wondered, How could such things be allowed to go on? It made me want to be a warrior against corrupt power and to give voice to the stories of outcasts and outsiders. It also made me appreciate how deep the human desire for connection is; Quasimodo's yearning to love and be loved speaks for us all. The end left me weeping, but even more important, it left me thinking, and forever changed.

MADELINE MILLER is the author of *The Song of Achilles*, which won the 2012 Orange Prize for Fiction. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

JUNOT DÍAZ

Be courageous.

I grew up dirt-poor in the Dominican Republic, and when my family moved to the United States (I was six), my new home felt very hostile and cold. As a kid who wanted protection, I read *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams. It's about a group of rabbits who are forced from their home and encounter another warren of well-fed rabbits. The displaced animals realize that their fat kinsmen are safe because a farmer has turned their burrow into an outdoor refrigerator. At just eight years old, I realized that security is sometimes too high a price to pay for your freedom. Kindling bravery is a daily challenge: not hiding away in safety, not settling for whatever is just good enough.

JUNOT DÍAZ is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, out in September. He lives in New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

GAIL CARSON LEVINE

Don't judge.

I've read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* so many times through the years. The narrator is sharp and observant: No one crosses her field of vision without being assessed, and sometimes skewered. Yet the story shows the danger of snap judgments. After their first meeting, Elizabeth and Darcy seem such an unlikely match, but their eventual marriage is based on real romance. I think that I'm a kind person, but on occasion I quickly write people off. Part of the reason I return to this book is that it reminds me to take a second look. In books and in life, you need to read several pages before someone's true character is revealed.

GAIL CARSON LEVINE is the author of 20 children's books and young-adult novels, including *Ella Enchanted*, winner of the Newbery Honor Award. She lives in Brewster, New York.