

African-American Classics

Go Tell it On the Mountain by James Baldwin

John Grimes wants to be a man standing on his own; at the same time, he wants his father, Gabriel, to love him. He feels oppressed by his father and by his circumstances as a black youth in New York during the Depression. To achieve manhood, he must either accept his heritage or embrace a world he instinctively feels is evil: the materialistic and oppressive white world.

The Salt Eaters by Toni Cade Bambara

As she sits in an infirmary and is questioned by a faith healer, Velma Henry probes her reasons for attempting to commit suicide, and the healing that takes place affects the lives of her town's Black inhabitants.

The Chaneyville Incident by David Bradley

Resisting his girlfriend's request to commit himself to their relationship, historian John Washington is detached from his heritage until he visits the bedside of his father's best friend and learns of his family's courageous heritage.

Clotel, or the Presidents Daughter by William W. Brown

Based both on his own experiences as a fugitive slave and on the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, this 1853 novel examines "the peculiar institution."

The House Behind the Cedars by Charles Chesnutt

John Walden, a young black man, decides to pass for white in post-Civil War North Carolina in order to achieve the American dream.

Sport of the Gods by Paul L. Dunbar

Forced to leave the South, a family falls apart amid the harsh realities of Northern inner city life in this 1902 examination of the forces that extinguish the dreams of African-Americans.

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

The plight of the African-American in America is presented in the somewhat allegorical story of one young man who in frustration concludes that he is an invisible man. He starts life with trust and illusions but after a shocking experience at a men's club in his Southern hometown and further revealing experiences at a college he finds his way to Harlem and an organization that might be the communist party.

Plum Bun by Jessie Redmon Fauset

Written in 1929 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance by one of its most prolific authors, Plum Bun is the story of Angela Murray, a young black girl from Philadelphia who discovers she can pass for white.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman by Ernest J. Gaines

Miss Jane Pittman is 110 when she recalls her childhood and the arrival of both Union and Confederate troops on the plantation where she lived.

Roots by Alex Haley

Captured in Africa, Kunta Kinte, a tribal prince, becomes a slave, and eventually generations of his family survive to become free again.

[Cotton Comes to Harlem by Chester Himes](#)

Set in Harlem's underside in the 1950s, a fast-paced tale of mystery and intrigue unfolds as Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones work to halt the theft of thousands of dollars marked for the Back-to-Africa movement.

[Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston](#)

Meet the unforgettable Janie Crawford, an articulate African-American woman in the 1930s. Traces Janie's quest for identity, through three marriages, on a journey to her roots.

[The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man by James Weldon Johnson](#)

The author, the first Black executive secretary of the NAACP, offers a fictionalized account of his life and looks at the consequences of denying one's heritage.

[Brown Girl, Brownstones by Paule Marshall](#)

Selina Boyce, the daughter of immigrants, experiences the conflict between The American Dream and nostalgia for the land of Barbados. In this coming-of-age tale, she confronts poverty, racism and the challenges of first-generation U.S. citizens.

[Beloved by Toni Morrison](#)

After the Civil War ends, Sethe longingly recalls the two-year-old daughter whom she killed when threatened with recapture after escaping from slavery 18 years before.

[The Women of Brewster Place by Gloria Naylor](#)

This story chronicles the communal strength of seven diverse black women who live in decaying rented houses on a walled-off street of an urban neighborhood.

[The Color Purple by Alice Walker](#)

Sisters Nettie and Celie are separated from one another as young girls, Celie to become the child bride and wife to a widower, and Nettie to be taken by a black family to Africa as a missionary. Celie's marriage is a harsh and poverty-stricken arrangement, and she is sustained only by a series of trusting letters she addresses to God and to her sister.

[Jubilee by Margaret Walker](#)

This mesmerizing saga, extending from the antebellum period through Reconstruction, traces the extraordinary hardships that were ordinary for slaves and ex-slaves, revealing the singular position of black mothers and other women.

[The Man Who Cried I Am by John A. Williams](#)

A homesick expatriate in Europe is regarded as a great writer, not simply as a talented black American writer, but he cannot enjoy his new freedom, because the information he possesses about an international plot to obliterate all people of African descent makes him a target for assassination.

[Our Nig by Harriet Wilson](#)

The first novel by an African-American published in the United States (in 1859), this is the apparently semi-autobiographical story of a "free black" foundling, who is abused by members of a New England family, even though others are kind to her. As her mother was deserted by her father, so does the man to whom she gives her love desert her.