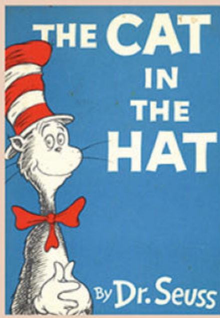

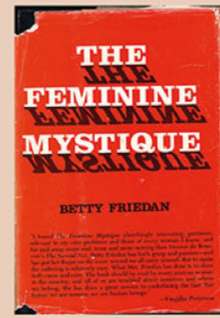

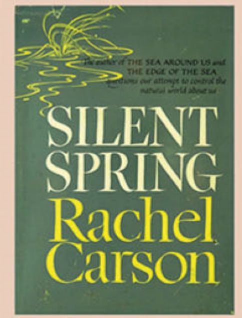

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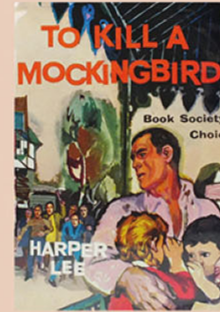
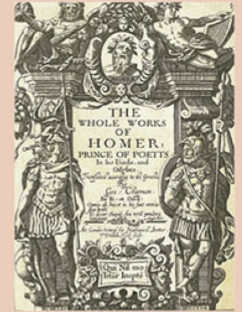
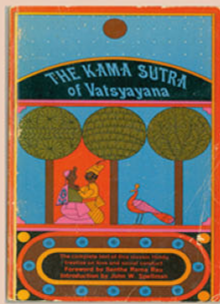
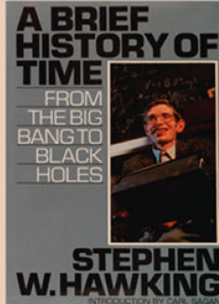
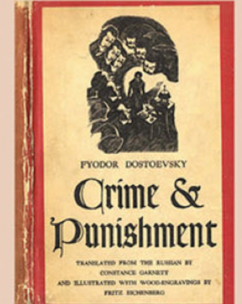
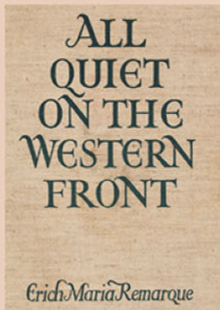








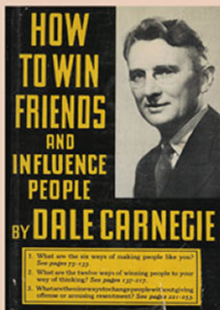


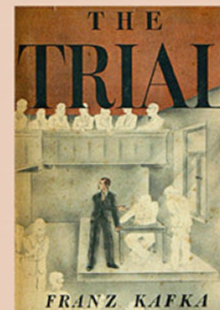


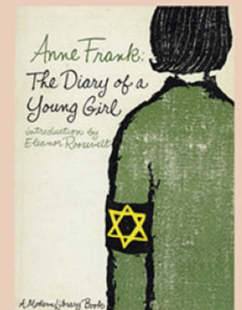
Books

that changed the world

Scott Christianson | Colin Salter







Don Quixote
Cervantes
(1605)

Even those who have never read *Don Quixote* know something of its sympathetic central characters – the thin man on a skinny horse and the fat servant on a tubby donkey, tilting at windmills – but the novel is far more than a series of tragicomic episodes befalling a deluded fool and his companion.

Don Quixote is a novel that grows in wisdom and humanity the further you read. It starts out as a comic attack on the prevailing literature of the day – nostalgic, chivalrous romances about knights in shining armour fighting monsters and saving maidens. Don Quixote, driven mad by reading such stories, believes himself to be such a knight-errant and sets off into the world to right wrongs. His mighty steed is in reality a barnyard nag called Rosinante, his faithful squire a bumbling farm labourer called Sancho Panza, and his noble lady, Dulcinea, merely a farmer's daughter. He attacks windmills believing they are giants, and flocks of sheep that look to him like armies.

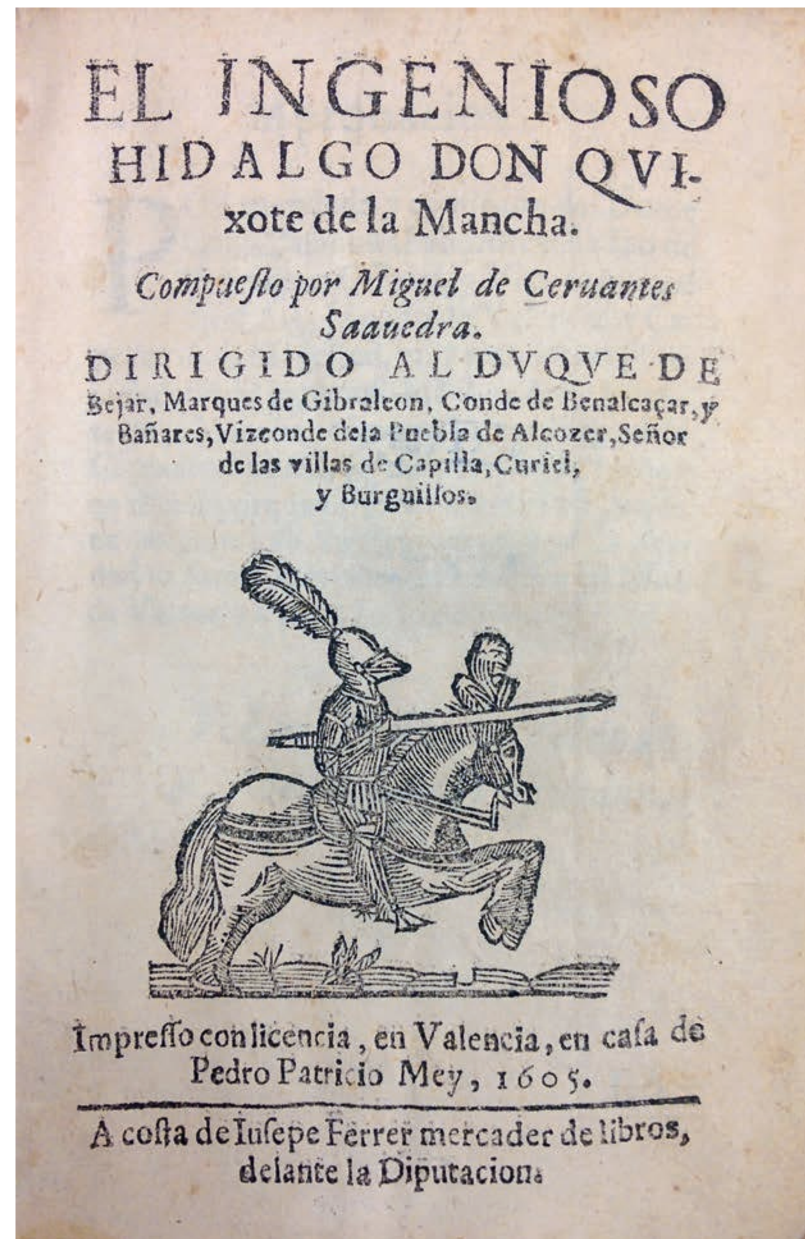
But these are not simple stock characters in a farce. Having created them, Cervantes (1547–1615) allows them to grow in emotional intelligence and experience with each life lesson that he puts them through. The reader, and Cervantes, seem to watch this process of maturing unfold, and the result is a rich range of very human players in the drama. Cervantes writes with great economy, not commenting but simply describing events with just enough colour and detail to let the reader's imagination take over. The famous windmill episode, for example, lasts only a few lines, but remains much larger and more vivid in our minds. His characters thus have lives of their own, and it is no wonder that Don Quixote himself has entered our culture and language. To be quixotic is to be an unconventional, or impractical, visionary.

Don Quixote also attacks the divisions of class and the attitudes of the Church; and although the book is in part a parody of those chivalrous tales of old, it is the values of ordinary decency embodied by Don Quixote and Sancho Panza that touch the reader – the very values that inspired the outdated ideals of chivalry.

The first part of the book, published with the promise of a sequel in 1605, was an immediate success. It was translated into English as early as 1612, and in Spain it was so popular that a fake part two was written and published by another author, before Cervantes had finished the real one. When that did finally appear in 1615, only a few months before Cervantes's death, it introduced characters who knew of Don Quixote because they had read part one and who criticised the false tales of him put about by the fake sequel – a very modern literary device of self-reference.

As a sign of the book's enduring appeal, at least fourteen movie adaptations of it have been released, alongside twelve plays, operas and ballets. In the twenty-first century alone four new English translations of it have already been published. *Don Quixote* lives on.

LEFT: The first English edition, translated by Thomas Shelton, was printed in 1612.


EL INGENIOSO HIDALGO DON QVIXOTE de la Mancha.

Compuesto por Miguel de Ceruantes Saauedra.

DIRIGIDO AL DVQVE DE Bejar, Marques de Gibraleon, Conde de Benalcaçar, y Bañares, Vizconde de la Puebla de Alcozer, Señor de las villas de Capilla, Curiel, y Burguillos.

Impresso con licencia, en Valencia, en casa de Pedro Patricio Mey, 1605.

A costa de Iusepe Ferrer mercader de libros, delante la Diputacion.

ABOVE: The first edition, printed in Valencia in 1605. Two other editions came out the same year, printed in Madrid and Lisbon.

Frankenstein
Mary Shelley

(1818)

Frankenstein is the classic Gothic horror novel, and Shelley's monstrous creation has provided the premise for hundreds of books, plays and films. Her original story discusses nature, responsibility, isolation and the dangers of using powerful knowledge.

Frankenstein was originally written as a challenge. Three friends were stuck indoors reading ghost stories to one another one cold evening in 1816 and decided to see who could write the best tale of horror. The friends were the poet Lord Byron, his doctor John Polidori, and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the daughter of the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The competition threw up two Gothic classics: Polidori's *The Vampyre,* the first-ever vampire novel; and Mary's *Frankenstein.*

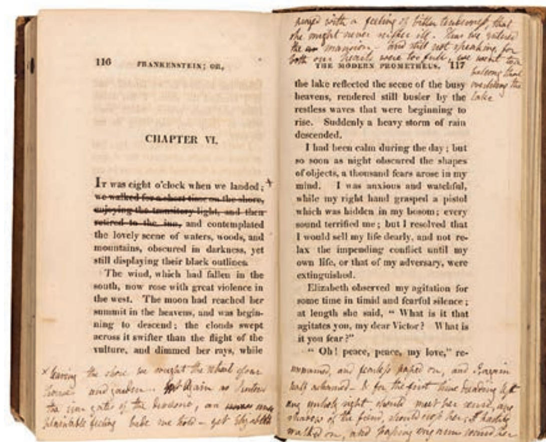
Mary was there with her lover, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The pair were married later that year, and Percy helped the new Mrs. Shelley (1797–1851) to expand her original short story into a novel over the following few months. Mary was inspired by the experiments of the Italian physicist Luigi Galvani, which proved that muscles could be animated with the application of an electric current – a phenomenon, christened Galvanism, that had been demonstrated publicly in 1803, on the body of a dead criminal in London.

Frankenstein was published in 1818, at a time when female novelists were still relatively rare. That fact, and the grisly subject matter, resulted in some mixed views from the critics of the day. But the book was an immediate success with the reading public, and within three years the first of many melodramatic versions of it appeared on the London stage.

The novel itself begins and ends with an epistolary framing device – the letters of an Arctic sea captain describing his meeting with Frankenstein, who has travelled to the frozen north to destroy the monster that he created. Shelley uses the icy wilderness to evoke the book's recurring motif of isolation. As Shelley relates the story that Frankenstein told the captain, we find that Frankenstein too is isolated, by his obsession with creating life and his ability to do so. And no one is more isolated than Frankenstein's monstrous creation, who is shunned, even by his creator.

The creature, although physically crude and brutish, is intellectually and emotionally mature – he reads Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example. He hopes that Frankenstein will create a companion for him; and only when Frankenstein, horrified by what he has made, dashes that hope does the monster seek violent revenge. But when in the end he finds that Frankenstein has died in the Arctic of hypothermia, he grieves, aware that he is now more alone, more isolated, than ever.

In the twenty-first century the book still raises moral and psychological questions about man playing God. These ideas fascinate almost as much as the lurid possibility, closer than ever, of creating life from spare parts.



110 FRANKENSTEIN; OR,

CHAPTER VI.

It was eight o'clock when we landed; ~~we walked for a short time on the shore, enjoying the transitory light, and then retired to the inn,~~ and contemplated the lovely scene of waters, woods, and mountains, obscured in darkness, yet still displaying their black outlines.

The wind, which had fallen in the south, now rose with great violence in the west. The moon had reached her summit in the heavens, and was beginning to descend; the clouds swept across it swifter than the flight of the vulture, and dimmed her rays, while

THE MODERN PROMETHEUS. 117

the lake reflected the scene of the busy heavens, rendered still busier by the restless waves that were beginning to rise. Suddenly a heavy storm of rain descended.

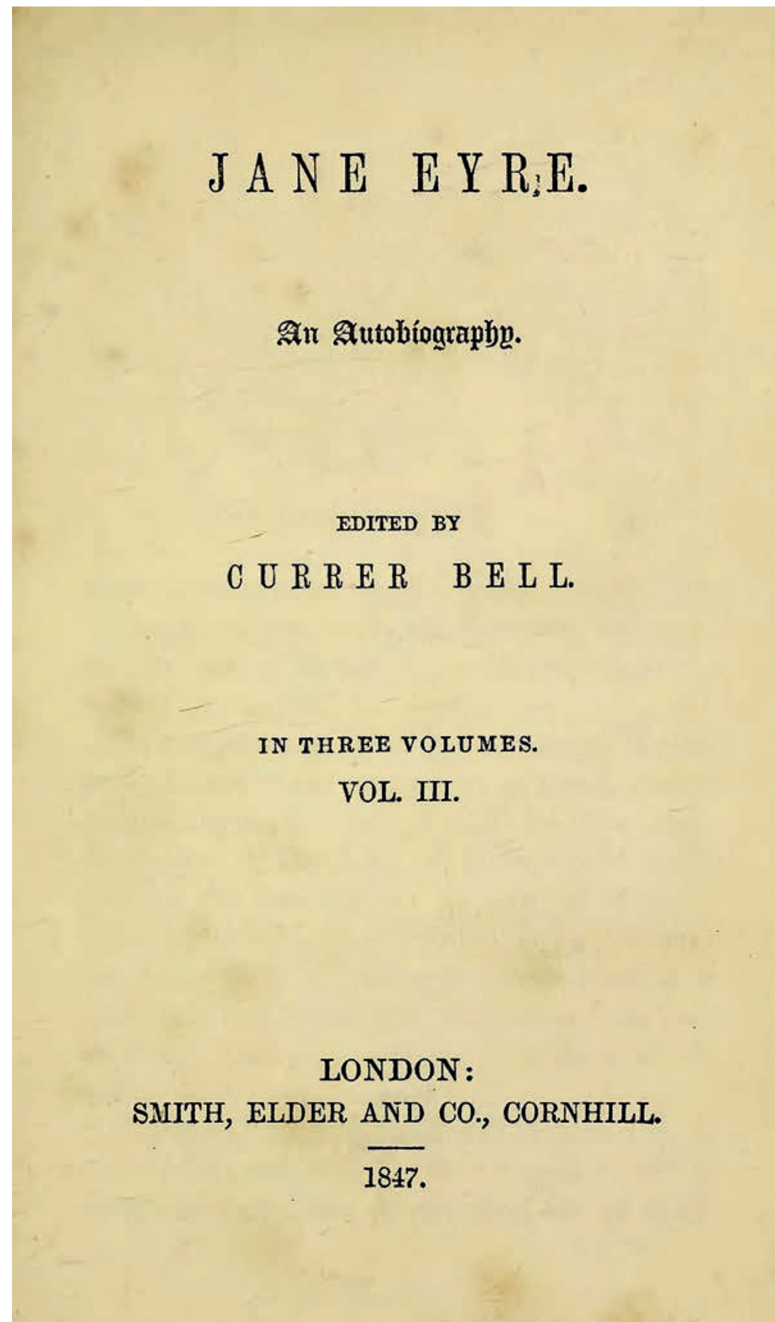
I had been calm during the day; but so soon as night obscured the shapes of objects, a thousand fears arose in my mind. I was anxious and watchful, while my right hand grasped a pistol which was hidden in my bosom; every sound terrified me; but I resolved that I would sell my life dearly, and not relax the impending conflict until my own life, or that of my adversary, were extinguished.

Elizabeth observed my agitation for some time in timid and fearful silence; at length she said, "What is it that agitates you, my dear Victor? What is it you fear?"

"Oh! peace, peace, my love," re-

LEFT: *A copy of the first edition from 1818, with handwritten amendments by Mary Shelley, some of which were incorporated into subsequent editions of the book.*

ABOVE: *The frontispiece of the 1831 edition with an illustration by Theodor von Holst, showing the creature awakening.*



JANE EYRE.

An Autobiography.

EDITED BY

CURRER BELL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

SMITH, ELDER AND CO., CORNHILL.

1847.

ABOVE: The title page of the first edition, which was published under the male pen name Currer Bell. Charlotte Brontë suspected that female authors were 'liable to be looked upon with prejudice.'

OPPOSITE: Charlotte Brontë's handwritten manuscript is remarkably neat, with very few corrections. 'She would wait patiently,' her biographer Elizabeth Gaskell noted, 'searching for the right term, until it presented itself to her.'

Jane Eyre
Charlotte Brontë
(1847)

A vivid story of love and belonging, cruelty and class. The autobiographical nature of Charlotte Brontë's debut gives it a strength and wisdom that ring true for each new generation that reads it.

At its simplest level *Jane Eyre* is a well-told tale of the far-from-smooth course of true love. It owes its lasting success to its acute observation of a young woman growing up at a time when there were severe social limits on her life choices. It found immediate popularity with women, who recognised its protagonist's predicaments.

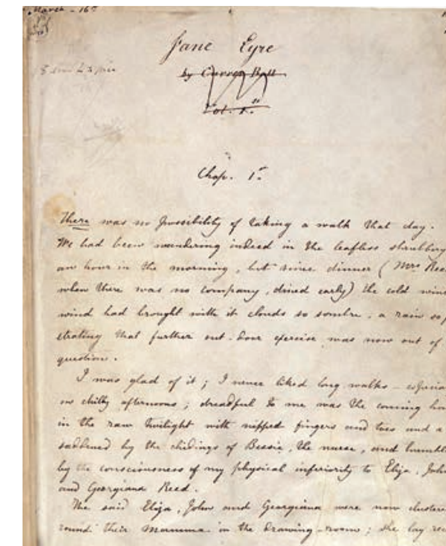
The Brontë sisters from West Yorkshire – Charlotte, Emily and Anne – are a formidable force in English literature. Emily gave us *Wuthering Heights*; Anne wrote *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Charlotte Brontë (1816–55), the only one of the family to live beyond the age of thirty-one, wrote four novels, three of them published in her lifetime.

All three had their first novels published in 1847, but Charlotte beat the others by two months. Because writing fiction was still not considered a respectable activity for a woman, Charlotte was at pains to conceal her authorship and true identity: *Jane Eyre* was originally subtitled *An Autobiography*, ostensibly edited by one Currer Bell – the name Charlotte had used for her poetry.

Truth is a constant theme of the book, whether it be true love, real beauty or genuine religious faith. Several times Jane rejects relationships because she feels that love is absent. The difference between inner and outer beauty is expressed through several characters. Rochester's mistress, Céline Varens, is exceptionally beautiful but scheming, while the unassuming Jane has a spiritual beauty that shines through in her moral decisions. By contrast, her teacher, Mr. Brocklehurst, is an outwardly Christian man who mistreats his pupils and embezzles the school funds for his own comfort.

Jane, like Charlotte, finds work as a governess, one of the few employment opportunities open to women in the early nineteenth century, and a socially ambiguous position. On the one hand, governesses were expected to be refined and educated; on the other, their status in the household was little more than a servant's. The duality often gave rise to tension in a household, and it gave both Charlotte and Jane the chance to observe and criticise English class. However, at no point does Charlotte challenge the social order. Her happy ending is only possible because she inherits a fortune that raises her position in society and makes her Rochester's equal.

Running throughout the novel is Jane's struggle to balance her instinct for independence with a longing for companionship, family and love. Jane's new equality with Rochester is further emphasised by his disfigurement after heroic actions in a house fire. The once handsome, rakish man is now ugly of hand and eye but noble of deed. Her inheritance guarantees her independence and his good heart assures her of true love and companionship. The assertive opening to the last chapter – 'Reader, I married him.' – is now one of the most famous lines in English literature.



Jane Eyre

~~by Currer Bell~~

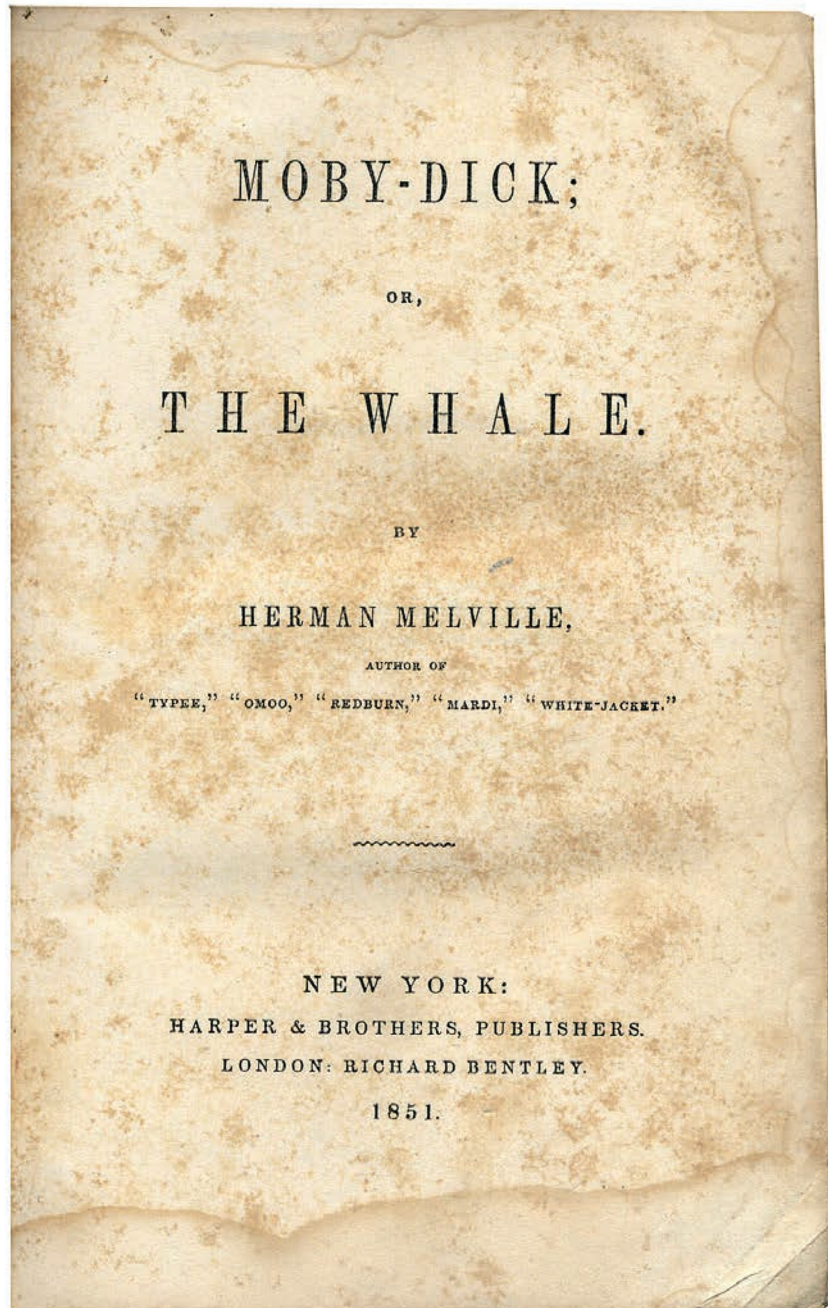
~~Vol. I.~~

Chap. 1.

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering indeed in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning, but since dinner (Mrs Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, a rain so penetrating that further out-door exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it; I never liked long walks – especially on chilly afternoons; dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight with nipped fingers and toes and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John and Georgiana Reed.

The said Eliza, John and Georgiana were now clustered round their Mamma in the drawing-room; she lay reclin-



MOBY-DICK;

OR,

THE WHALE.

BY

HERMAN MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF

"TYPEE," "OMOO," "REDBURN," "MARDI," "WHITE-JACKET."

NEW YORK:

HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS.

LONDON: RICHARD BENTLEY.

1851.

ABOVE: The British edition was published as The Whale *on October 18, 1851. Melville changed his mind about the title in time for the American edition (shown here), which was published on November 14, 1851, as* Moby-Dick; or, The Whale.

OPPOSITE: This illustration, showing 'The Voyage of the Pequod *from the Book* Moby Dick *by Herman Melville', was one of twelve literary maps produced by the Harris-Seybold Company of Cleveland between 1953 and 1964.*

Moby-Dick
Herman Melville

(1851)

A former mariner's epic tale about Captain Ahab's obsessive pursuit of a ferocious white whale is revered as one of the great novels in English literature. Yet some of its most enduring qualities may have come from a hike up Monument Mountain with America's leading symbolic novelist.

Herman Melville (1819–91) had spent eighteen months roaming the oceans as an ordinary seaman aboard the whaling ship *Acushnet*. His experiences were to find outlet in his greatest novel, which was first published in London in October 1851 as *The Whale* and a month later in New York as *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale.*

Melville had gathered an enormous body of research and oral history about whaling, yet as he toiled over his novel, he longed to produce something more profound and original. On August 5, 1850, Melville took a break from his labours to go on an outing with a friend, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., and the celebrated author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had recently published his great allegorical novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Together they climbed Monument Mountain in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in what was for the younger writer Melville a life-altering exchange. Hawthorne's influence on the scope of *The Whale* was profound, and Melville dedicates the book to him, 'in token of my admiration for his genius.'

Melville's narrator, Ishmael, tells the story of Captain Ahab's obsessive quest for the white whale that had wrenched off his leg on a previous whaling expedition and left him with a peg leg carved from a whale's jawbone. As the voyage progresses, Ishmael realises that the voyage is less of a commercial whaling trip and more about Ahab's revenge. Their ship, the *Pequod*, encounters many other ships, always ending with an inquiry about the whereabouts of the white whale, Moby-Dick. At the conclusion, the whale ends up destroying the *Pequod*, and all those aboard, a similar fate to the whaler *Essex* out of Nantucket, which was sunk by a sperm whale in the Southern Ocean in 1820, of which seven crew members survived thanks only to cannibalism.

Melville had read an account of the *Essex* written by its first mate, Owen Chase, and was also aware of the story of Mocha Dick, a white sperm whale killed in the late 1830s in waters off the Chilean island of Mocha, which was said to attack ships with premeditated ferocity.

Moby-Dick is both a gripping narrative on the perils of harpooning from a flimsy whaleboat and the tensions that arise from one man's secretive monomania. Interspersed are essays on whales and whale hunting, and Melville uses many different literary styles and devices, including songs, poetry, stage directions and soliloquies. The book's many asides are used in the exploration of social status, good and evil, and the existence of God.

Although the book's opening line – 'Call me Ishmael' – would become one of the most famous in literature, the book was not a commercial success in Melville's lifetime. When he died in 1891, the book had sold 3,200 copies and long been out of print.

The book's revival began at the centenary of his birth in 1919. E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence both became champions of the novel, and it has been reevaluated throughout the twentieth century and steadily gained its place in the canon of great American literary works.

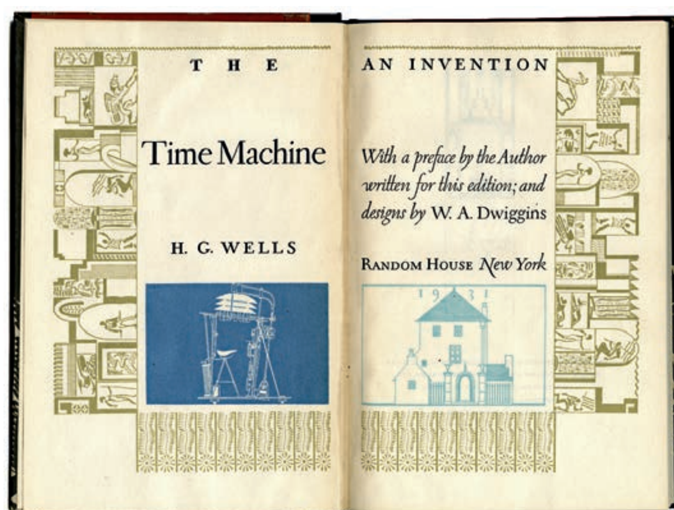
The Time Machine
H.G. Wells

(1895)

With his debut novel – a dystopian vision of the world in the year 802,701 – H.G. Wells popularised the fantasy of time travel and established his reputation as the father of science fiction.

The notion of time travel is infinitely attractive. Who doesn't want to know how things turn out? Who wouldn't like to put right the mistakes of the past? H.G. Wells (1866–1946) was not the first author to play with the idea. Samuel Madden's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* was published in 1733; and closer to Wells's own lifetime, Charles Dickens transported Scrooge to Christmases past and future in 1843's *A Christmas Carol*. But at a time when science was moving from an amateur pursuit to a professional occupation, Wells was the first to consider time travel from a scientific perspective.

Science was H.G. Wells's subject. He studied it at the Royal College of Science, where the college magazine published his short story 'The Chronic Argonauts', a first attempt at time-travel fiction. He worked for a time as a teacher, and his first book was *A Textbook of Biology*. After a period of writing humorous articles for magazines, he wrote his first full-length work of fiction, *The Time Machine*.



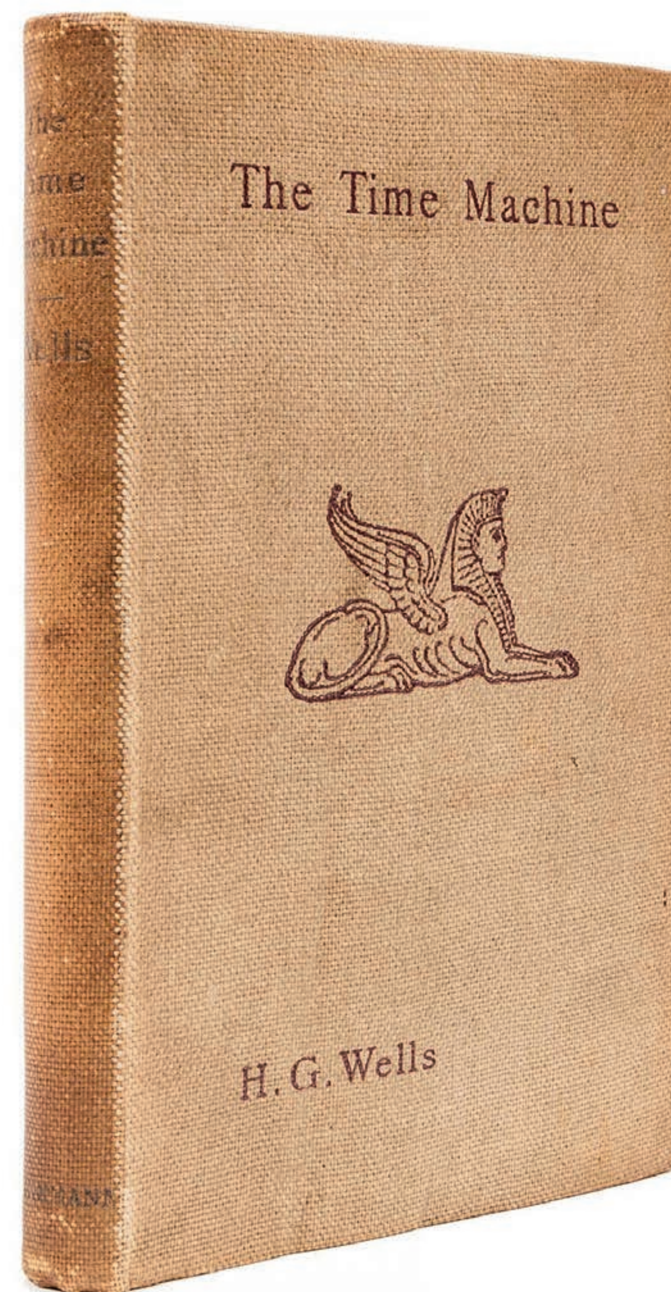
In it, an unnamed inventor travels to the future. Most of the book describes his adventures in a futuristic world inhabited by two humanoid species: the idle, childlike Eloi and the predatory, subterranean Morlocks. The actions of these two groups make *The Time Machine* not only a fantastical adventure but a powerful, political allegory.

H.G. Wells was a committed socialist, critical of the way class in Victorian society was diverging. The Morlocks are the descendants of the working classes, locked away for so long in dark factories that in the future they live underground. The Eloi have evolved from the capitalist elite, dominant for so long that they have lost their intellect and interest in the world. In *The Time Machine*, the workers have turned against the ruling classes and prey on them at night.

If you have criticisms to make of the society in which you live, it sometimes helps to relocate your story to a distant time or place. *Gulliver's Travels* successfully satirised Jonathan Swift's times by inventing strange lands; *The Time Machine* does so with strange times.

The book is a pessimistic view of the future, a commentary on both capitalism and communism. It ends with the time traveller going thirty million years into the future to find that the planet itself is dying. Wells's fiction imagines how both scientific and social trends of his age might develop if left unchecked.

The Time Machine has spawned some twenty sequels by other authors and inspired countless other works of time-bending science fiction. The appeal of travel to the past and the future remains timeless.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: The original hardback edition (above), published in 1895 by Heinemann, and the 1931 edition (opposite), with illustrations by W.A. Dwiggins, published by Random House.

All Quiet on the Western Front
Erich Maria Remarque

(1929)

All Quiet on the Western Front is a brutal account of the effects of war on young soldiers at the front. It has sold more than fifty million copies since its publication, but was one of the first books declared 'decadent' by the Nazis and burned in public bonfires in 1933.

When he turned eighteen in 1916, German-born Erich Maria Remarque (1898–1970) enlisted in the army and was posted to the Western Front in northern France. Much of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is autobiographical, and certainly based on firsthand experiences. It is narrated by its central character, Paul Bäumer, who enlists with several of his classmates at the age of nineteen.

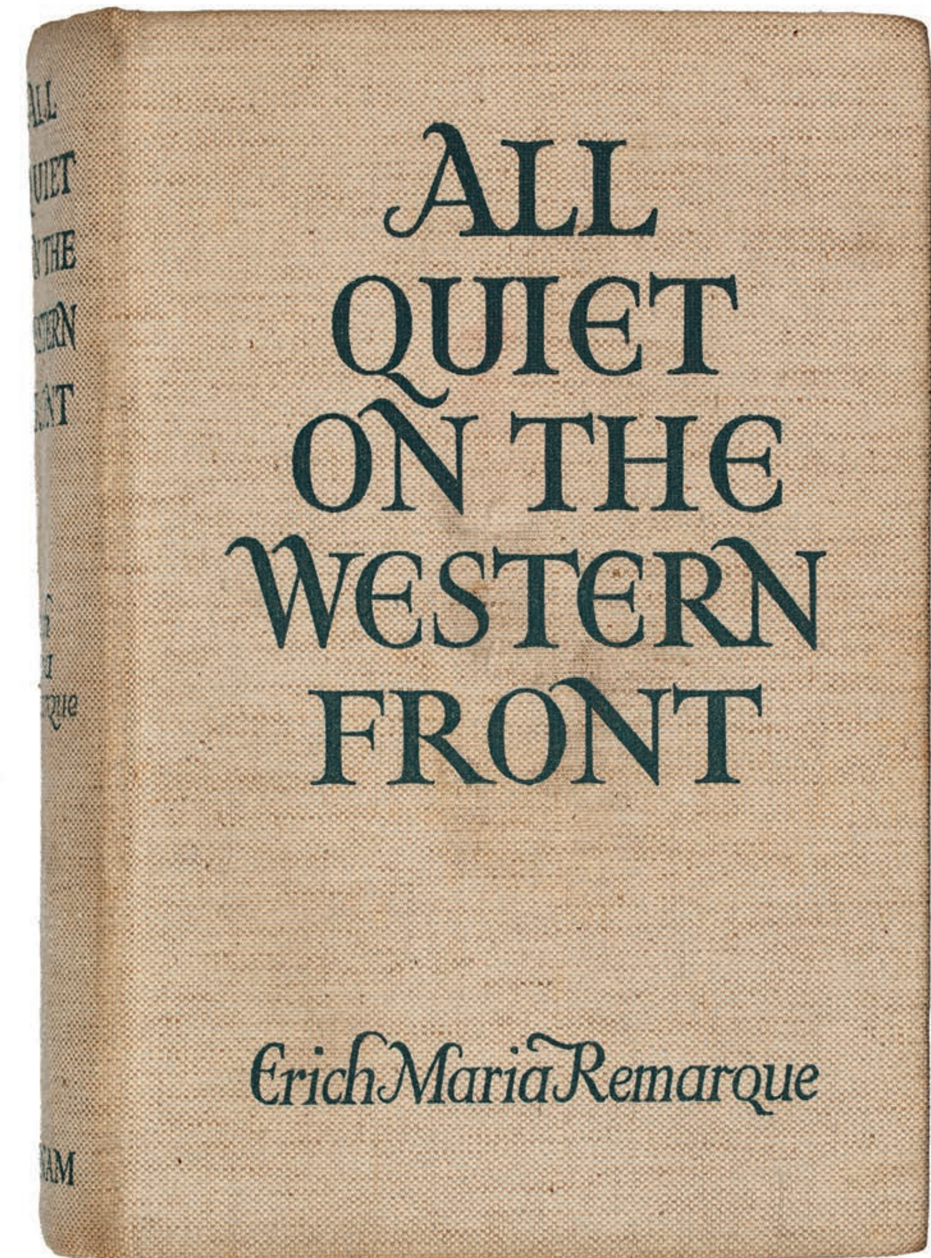
The book describes life on the front line, and the often violent deaths, one by one, of Paul's comrades. It is unflinching in its depiction of horrific injuries, and although Remarque insists in his preface that he is not making political points, his characters repeatedly question the nationalism that drives the conflict. The soldiers' real enemies are not 'the enemy', but the men in power, far behind the lines of battle. Soldiers kill each other not out of any ideological purpose but purely to avoid being killed. One of the book's key passages is the moment when Paul stabs a French infantryman for the first time in hand-to-hand combat. He bitterly regrets his instinctive action and nurses the man as he slowly dies. In another passage he is similarly sympathetic to 'enemy' Russian prisoners.

Traditional war novels glorified heroism and patriotism. Remarque presents the grim reality of modern warfare, where killing is made easier by machines – guns, tanks and airplanes. More than earlier wars, World War I dehumanised those who fought it, both by the means of killing and by the sheer scale of it.

All Quiet on the Western Front chronicles the soldiers' emotional disconnection in the face of such slaughter. You might die at any moment, so you live only in the moment. 'Goodbye' becomes the hardest word. The men cut themselves off from family and friends, from memories of the past and from hope for the future. The only shreds of humanity that survive are the intense bonds between brothers in arms.

Remarque found that publishers were hesitant about printing his book, fearing that ten years after his country's defeat in World War I, there would be little appetite for stirring up memories of it again. Instead, it was serialised in the Berlin daily newspaper the *Vossische Zeitung* in the last two months of 1928, where the response was encouraging enough to publish it in book form the following year. *All Quiet on the Western Front* was at once an international success, translated into more than twenty languages and selling two and a half million copies in the first eighteen months. An American film production of it was released as early as 1930 and was nominated for five Oscars and won three, including Best Picture and Best Director.

One of the most remarkable things about *All Quiet on the Western Front* is its success in countries such as America and Great Britain, which might not have been expected to sympathise with the traumas of enemy soldiers. Remarque's masterpiece succeeded, and endures, because of its universal message: war is hell for all combatants, and at heart all men are brothers.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: *The first UK edition (above), published in 1929 by Putnam. The Grosset & Dunlap edition (opposite) was published in 1930 in New York. It is described as 'unexpurgated' because it included a scene of a battalion's visit to a latrine that Little, Brown (the original US publisher) removed for fear of offending its readers.*

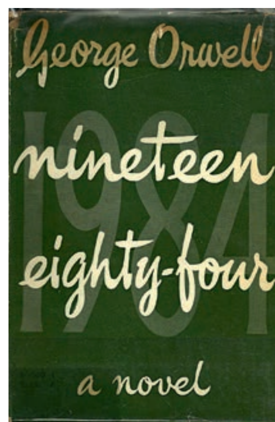
1984
George Orwell
(1949)

The definitive political novel of our time was written in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when a veteran English essayist, journalist, critic and novelist imagined the future of life in a totalitarian society in which 'Big Brother is Watching You', lies are decreed as truth, and individuals are micromanaged and crushed by the state.

Eric Arthur Blair (1903–50) adopted the pen name of George Orwell to satisfy publishers for marketing reasons. But he was an independent thinker who had crammed enormous experience and struggle into his forty-seven years. A former imperial policeman in Burma, and an anarchist who had fought against Franco's fascists in the Spanish Civil War and survived terrible hardship and personal loss in World War II, he was desperate when he went to a primitive house on a remote island in the Inner Hebrides to write his next novel.

Although his recently published 'animal fable' – a political-allegorical novella entitled *Animal Farm* (1945) – was receiving a warm reception, the combination of tuberculosis, lack of money, family obligations and worry weighed on his mind. His ordeal was a race against time. Despite his rapidly declining health and anguish, Orwell pounded out his vision on a battered typewriter, determined to save the world from its fate.

The new novel began: 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.' In its opening scene, he wrote: 'On each landing, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.'



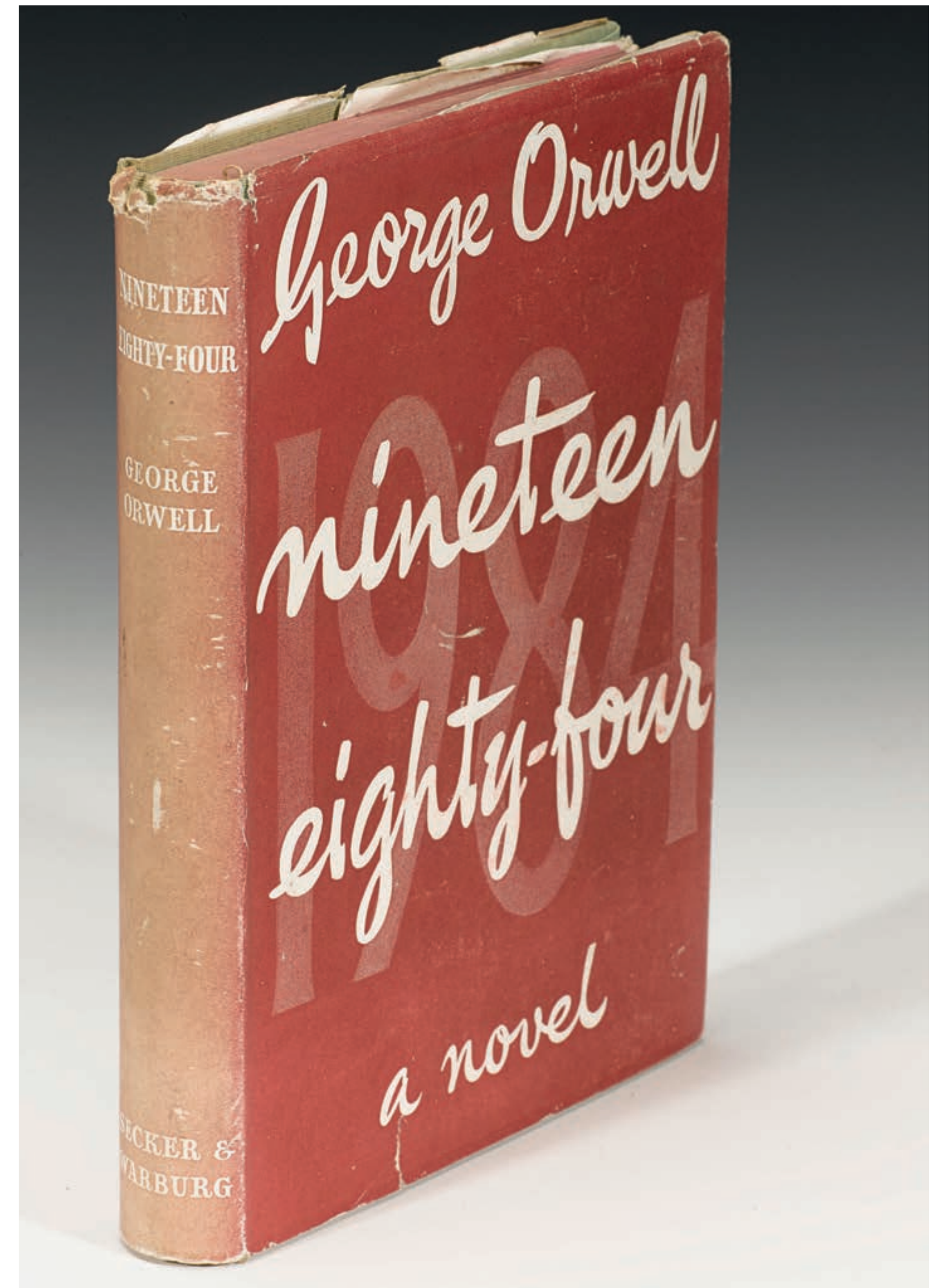
The main characters, Winston Smith and Julia, struggle to maintain their humanity in an insane world. The conflict is between ideology and emotion. The language is gritty and factual. Orwell was frantically racing to get it all down as soon as he could.

One of the best assessments of Orwell's achievement was written by the literary critic Irving Howe as follows: 'Nightmare the book may be, and no doubt it is grounded, as are all books, in the psychological troubles of the author. But it is also grounded in his psychological health, otherwise it could not penetrate so deeply the social reality of our time. The private nightmare, if it is there, is profoundly related to, and helps us understand, public events.'

Historians argue over how the publisher selected the title. Orwell's working title was *The Last Man in Europe*. Was it a homage to his idol, Jack London, whose novel *The Iron Heel*, had been set in 1984? Or was it a reversal of the numbers of the year – 48 – when the book was completed?

When *1984* was published in June 1949, it was quickly hailed as a masterpiece, but its completion proved fatal to the author. He died alone in a hospital on January 21, 1950. His chilling dystopian vision has been translated into more than sixty-five languages and made into numerous screen and stage versions. In 2017 it once again became the Amazon top best-seller, after social media commentators connected the phrase 'alternative facts' (used by Counsellor to President Donald Trump, Kellyanne Conway) with the language of *1984*.

Such terms as 'doublethink', 'the thought police', 'Room 101' and 'newspeak' are now part of everyone's political vocabulary, along with the term 'Orwellian', signifying something repressive or totalitarian.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: *The first edition, published in June 1949 by Secker & Warburg, was printed with red and green dust jackets.*

On the Road
Jack Kerouac

(1957)

The defining novel of the Beat Generation. Kerouac's almost-autobiographical voyage of discovery tells of the bonds and limits of friendship, of broken dreams and plans gone awry in postwar America.

After the turmoil of World War II, America settled down to a period of much-needed stability, reaping the benefits of victory and wartime industrial development in a booming peacetime economy. The focus was on steady jobs, prosperity and wholesome family units.

There was inevitable reaction to this conventional vision of white middle-class America. Authors such as Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Neal Cassady sought greater meaning to life than mere material success. These voices of the Beat Generation felt that the bland conformity of postwar consumerism stultified the mind until it was beaten: Beat.

For Jack Kerouac (1922–69), another of the circle of Beat authors, being beaten down meant more – it reduced you to your core, an almost blissful state from which the only way was up. The Beat movement was not just the eternal rebellion of one generation against the previous one; it was a spiritual journey. In the 1940s Kerouac embarked on a series of road trips with Cassady, looking for another America and for a more spirited way of living. As he wrote to a student in 1961: 'It was really a story about two Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him.'

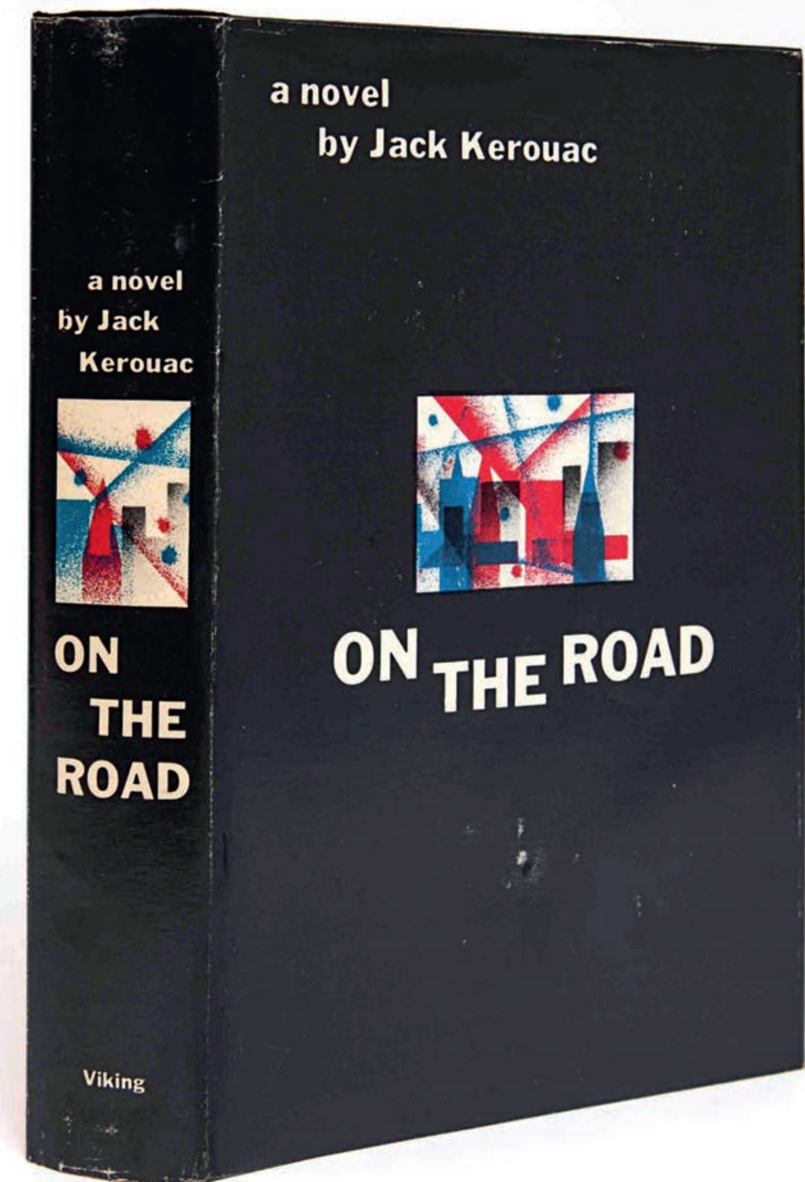
In 1950, Kerouac received a long, disjointed letter from Cassady that inspired him to develop what he called 'spontaneous prose'. Although he had already been trying to turn their trips into a novel, he now started again, telling his story in the literary equivalent of an improvised jazz solo, a stream of consciousness uninterrupted by paragraph breaks or new sheets of paper. He typed the first draft continuously on a scroll made by taping individual pages together to a length of 120 feet.

On the Road was finally published in 1957 after many revisions, including the fictionalisation of names and the removal of some sexually explicit episodes. Kerouac became Sal Paradise, Allen Ginsberg appeared as Carlo Marx, William S. Burroughs as Bull Lee, and Neal Cassady as Dean Moriarty.

In the book, Sal looks up to Dean, a wild, free spirit. Crisscrossing America in four trips, they meet a string of characters who prompt questions about class, race, conformity and change. But each journey, fuelled by alcohol, drugs and sex, is a little less carefree than the last. Dean, exciting as he is to be with, is not a reliable friend. When they part at the end, it is with little regret, and a sense that perhaps we all need to grow up, eventually.

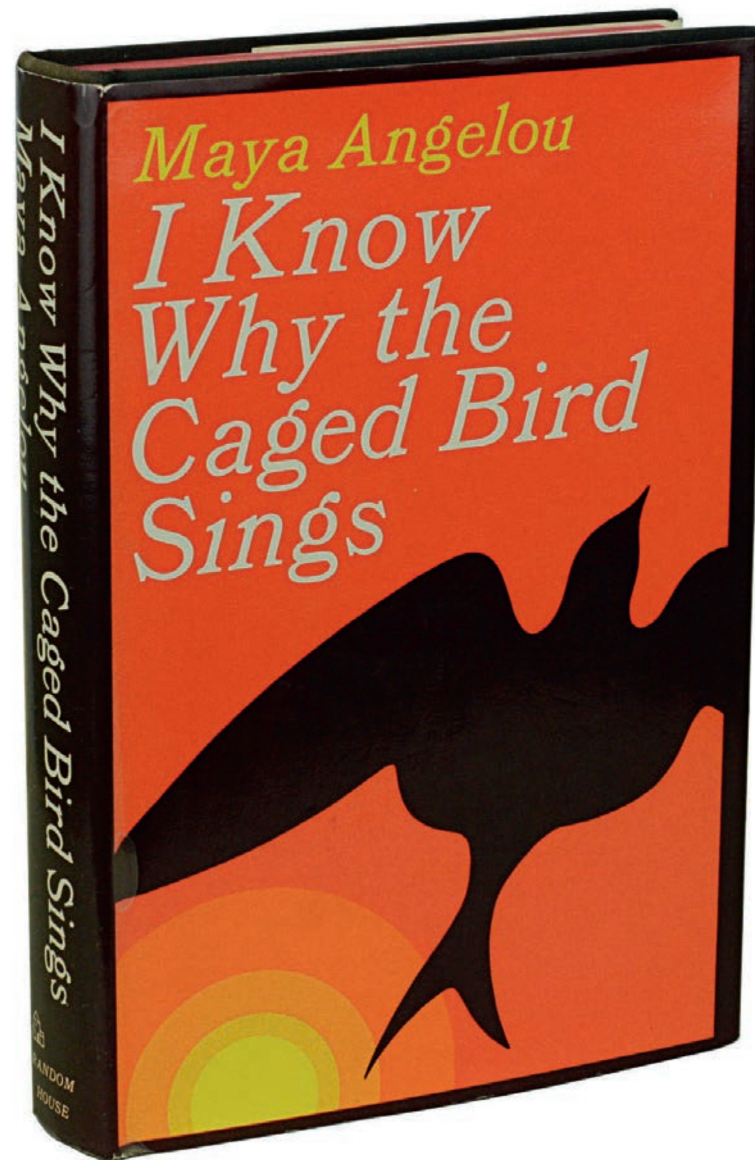
Kerouac's new form of prose, the literary equivalent of an Impressionist painting, divided critics. Some hailed it as visionary, while others condemned it as a self-indulgent road to nowhere, a novel in which nothing really happened.

On the Road is groundbreaking in its style, the finest book of the Beat Generation, which laid the groundwork for the radical movements of the 1960s. It inspired Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Tom Waits, Hunter S. Thompson and many more, as well as films like *Easy Rider* and *Thelma and Louise*. Today, in a professionalised, over-regulated, overprotective world in which once again conformity and prosperity are the conventional goals, we can still be inspired by *On the Road*.



ABOVE: The original hardback edition, published in 1957 by Viking.

OPPOSITE: Kerouac with the manuscript of his novel, which he typed up in April 1951 on a 120-foot-long continuous reel of paper.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: The original Random House hardback edition (above) and the Bantam Press paperback (opposite), subtitled 'The Moving and Beautiful Autobiography of a Talented Black Woman'.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Maya Angelou
(1969)

Rejection and determination, prejudice and triumph. The first of seven volumes of Angelou's autobiography takes her from infancy to young motherhood. Its frank retelling of incidents of racism and abuse have made it an essential element of many reading lists but have also seen it banned from others.

In the 1960s Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was a successful poet and playwright and an active campaigner for civil rights for African-Americans. She had worked with both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., only to see both of them assassinated – Malcolm in 1965 and MLK on April 4, 1968, her fortieth birthday. Both deaths threw her into depression, and it was in an attempt to lift her out of it that her friend James Baldwin suggested she write a literary autobiography – one approached with the sensibilities of a novelist rather than simply a chronological narration of history.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings was the result. It took its title from a verse by the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and was written with a poet's feel for the power of words. Indeed, one of the book's themes is the redemptive power of poetry and drama in the young Maya's life. She discovers Shakespeare while growing up in a segregated Southern town; and after being struck dumb by guilt at having lied in court, she regains her voice by reading literature out loud.

Instead of ordering the key events by time, Angelou uses episodes at a point in the book where they will have the greatest impact. So an incident of racial abuse experienced by the ten-year-old Maya occurs earlier in the book than her traumatic sexual abuse and rape by her mother's boyfriend when she was eight. In this way, Angelou regains control over events, which at the time she was helpless to prevent, by making them serve her purpose now. The narrative thrust of the book is the determination with which Maya does take control of her life. It is in one sense a series of lessons in how to resist oppression, both as a woman and as an African-American. It is therefore a triumphant book. Speaking of her mother, she says, 'She comprehended the perversity of life, that in the struggle lies the joy.'

Maya becomes San Francisco's first African-American tram ticket collector by persistent badgering of a racist employment clerk; and *Caged Bird* ends with the birth of her only son, the result of her decision to try sex with a teenage classmate. Although neither particularly pleasurable nor exciting, it is a positive choice, unlike the earlier rape. Maya overcomes her experiences of both sexual and racial abuse by sheer strength of character. As she writes: 'You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated.'

The book was an immediate best-seller, at a time when women's liberation and black equality were high on the radical agenda. Its success validated the experiences of women and blacks, who had hitherto been marginalised. Angelou's graphic descriptions of sex, sexuality and racism have led to the book being banned from some libraries and schools. But those descriptions are the same reasons why it is often included in syllabuses, either in its own right or as a companion piece to other books dealing with similar issues. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* speaks of the shameful African-American experience of the 1930s and 1940s and is therefore relevant reading for people of all colours.

A Brief History of Time
Stephen Hawking

(1988)

A Brief History of Time offered big science without the equations. Subtitled 'From the Big Bang to Black Holes', Hawking's attempt to explain the universe and everything in it to nonscientists has been hugely successful, selling around twenty million copies to date. It's a colossal achievement for a man whose own time was not, mercifully, as brief as expected.

Stephen Hawking (1942-2018) was diagnosed at the age of twenty-one with motor neuron disease. It slowly paralyses the body, and Hawking was expected to live for only another two years. Well into his seventies, Hawking continued to write, deliver public lectures and make regular guest appearances on popular TV series such as *The Big Bang Theory*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Futurama*. His electronically generated 'voice' was instantly recognisable, controlled by a muscle in his cheek.

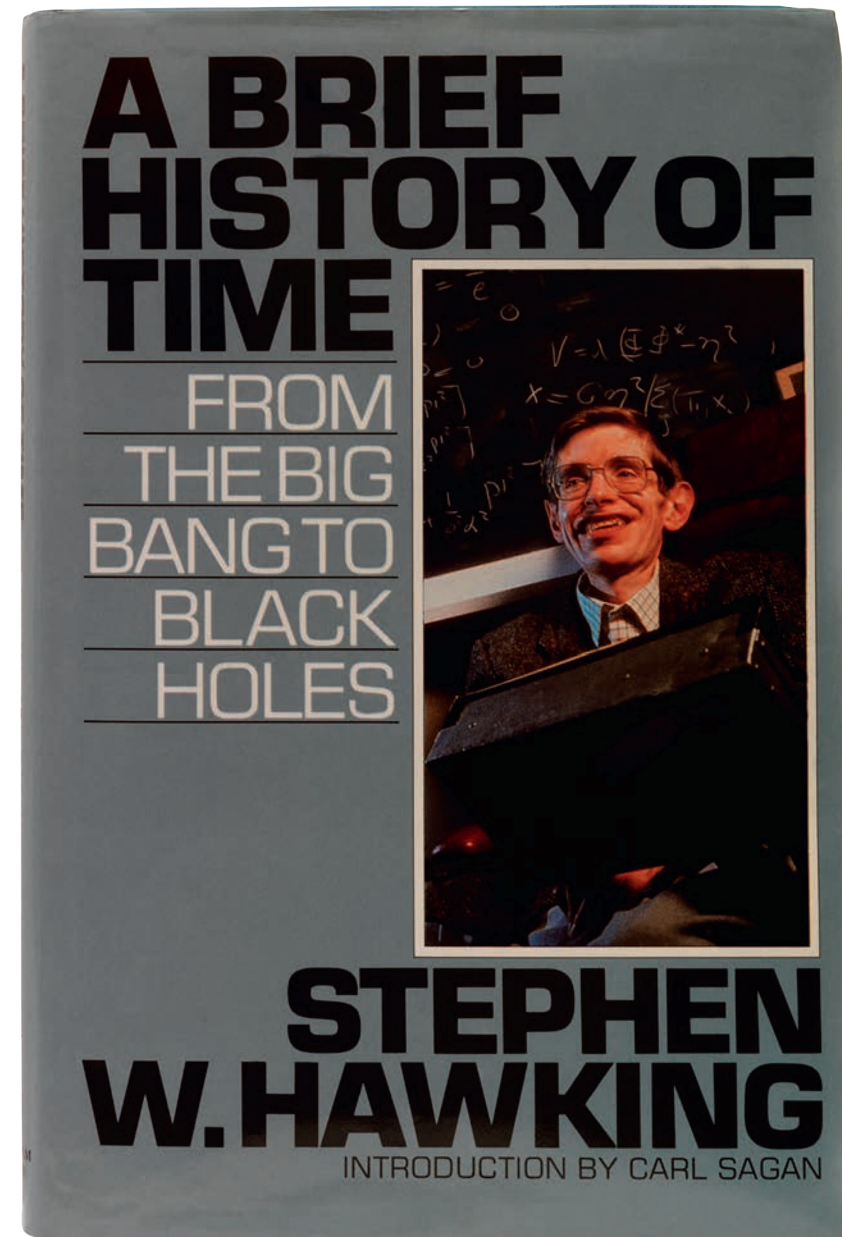
A Brief History of Time was his first book. In it Hawking set himself the ambitious task of explaining cosmology to ordinary readers: how the universe began, how it works, and how it may end. First he took a historical look at how our perceptions of the universe have changed over the few millennia that we have been part of it. The history of space is the history of the time that has elapsed since the Big Bang, and Hawking deals with the nature of three kinds of time in an expanding universe – four if you count imaginary time. Later editions of the book even discuss the possibility of time travel.

Not content with leading us through the infinitely large, Hawking also tackled the smallest particles in space, the many colours and flavours of quarks and anti-quarks that are the building blocks of matter. And finally, concerning the two scientific theories that apply to the cosmos – quantum mechanics and general relativity – he considered the possibility of one big theory that might unify them both and explain everything.

'What did God do,' he asked, 'before He created the universe?' St. Augustine was asked this and replied that there was no 'before', since God invented time only as a property of the universe. It was a little too evasive for Hawking. As if all the science were not enough, he asked the big philosophical questions, too, although he came out unapologetically as an atheist. Scientists, he wrote, are too busy explaining it all to ask 'Why?' and philosophers are too wrapped up in the whys and wherefores to keep up with the science. So in a sense Hawking was also looking for a unifying theory for philosophy and science.

Hawking's publisher rejected the first draft that he submitted. It was a much more technical work, and as the publisher pointed out, every equation that he included (and there were many) would halve Hawking's readership. Nobody wants to read mathematics. In the published version, helpful diagrams abound, and Hawking removed all but one equation, Einstein's famous $E=mc^2$.

In 2005 he worked with popular science author Leonard Mlodinow on *A Briefer History of Time*, a shortened version of the original. The full-length 1988 book remained on the best-seller lists for five years after its publication. Stephen Hawking, recognised since the 1970s as a brilliant scientist, was now applauded as a great ambassador for science. He introduced millions of nonscientists to the biggest science of all, and to some philosophy, too.



RIGHT: *The first edition of* A Brief History of Time*, which remained on the London* Sunday Times *best-seller list for five years. Hawking's succinct, entertaining and lucid text introduced readers to wormholes, spiral galaxies and superstring theory.*