

Delve Deeper into *Raising Bertie*

A film by Margaret Byrne

This list of fiction and nonfiction books, compiled by Rachael Harkness of Portland Public Library, provides a range of perspectives on the issues raised by the POV documentary *Raising Bertie*.

Raising Bertie is an intimate portrait of three African American boys as they face a precarious coming of age in rural Bertie County, North Carolina. Like many rural areas, Bertie County struggles with a dwindling economy, a declining population, and a high school graduation rate below the state average. This powerful vérité film weaves the young men's narratives together as they work to define their identities and grow into adulthood while navigating complex relationships, institutional racism, violence, poverty, and educational inequity.

ADULT NONFICTION

Ward, Jesmyn. *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*. Bloomsbury USA, 2013.

Jesmyn grew up in poverty in rural Mississippi. She writes powerfully about the pressures this brings, on the men who can do no right and the women who stand in for family in a society where the men are often absent. She bravely tells her story, revisiting the agonizing losses of her only brother and her friends. As the sole member of her family to leave home and pursue higher education, she writes about this parallel American universe with the objectivity distance provides and the intimacy of utter familiarity.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012. Today, it is no longer socially permissible to use race explicitly as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. Yet as civil-rights-lawyer-turned-legal-scholar Michelle Alexander demonstrates, it is perfectly legal to discriminate

against convicted criminals in nearly all the ways in which it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once labeled a felon, even for a minor drug crime, the old forms of discrimination are suddenly legal again. In her words, "we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." Alexander shows that, by targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control, even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness.

Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Vol. 39. Beacon Press, 1984. In an age of Black Lives Matter, James Baldwin's essays on life in Harlem, the protest novel, movies, and African Americans abroad are as powerful today as when they were first written. With documentaries like *I Am Not Your Negro* bringing renewed interest to Baldwin's life and work, *Notes of a Native Son* serves as a valuable introduction. Written during the 1940s and early 1950s, when Baldwin was only in his twenties, the essays collected in *Notes of a Native Son* capture a view of black life and black thought at the dawn of the civil rights movement and as the movement slowly gained strength through the words of one of the most captivating essayists and foremost intellectuals of that era. Writing as an artist, activist, and social critic, Baldwin probes the complex condition of being black in America.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015. In a profound work that pivots from the biggest questions about American history and ideals to the most intimate concerns of a father for his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a framework for understanding our nation's history and current crisis. Americans have built an empire on the idea of "race," a

falsehood that damages us all but falls most heavily on the bodies of black women and men -- bodies exploited through slavery and segregation, and, today, threatened, locked up, and murdered out of all proportion. What is it like to inhabit a black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history and free ourselves from its burden? *Between the World and Me* is Coates's attempt to answer these questions in a letter to his adolescent son.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Vintage, 2011. In a story of hope and longing, three young people set out from the American South during different decades of the 20th Century en route to the North and West in search of what the novelist Richard Wright called "the warmth of other suns." Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster are among the six million African-Americans who fled the South during what would become known as the Great Migration, a watershed in American history. This book interweaves their stories and those of others who made the journey with the larger forces and inner motivations that compelled them to flee, and with the challenges they confronted upon arrival in the New World.

Glaude, Eddie S. *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*. New York: Knopf, 2001. America's great promise of equality has always rung hollow in the ears of African Americans. But today the situation has grown even more dire. From the murders of black youth by the police, to the dismantling of the Voting Rights Act, to the disaster visited upon poor and middle-class black families by the Great Recession, it is clear that black America faces an emergency—at the very moment the election of the first



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black president has prompted many to believe we've solved America's race problem. *Democracy in Black* is Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s impassioned response. Part manifesto, part history, part memoir, it argues that we live in a country founded on a "value gap"—with white lives valued more than others—that still distorts our politics today.

Vance, J. D. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2016.

Vance, a former marine and Yale Law School graduate, provides an account of growing up in a poor Rust Belt town that offers a broader, probing look at the struggles of America's white working class. The decline of this group, a demographic of our country that has been slowly disintegrating over forty years, has been reported on with growing frequency and alarm. J.D. Vance tells the true story of what a social, regional, and class decline feels like when you were born with it hung around your neck.

ADULT FICTION

Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. Bloomsbury USA, 2011. Winner of the 2011 National Book Award. Lately, Esch can't keep down what food she gets; she's fourteen and pregnant. Her brother Skeetah is sneaking scraps for his prized pitbull's new litter, dying one by one in the dirt. While brothers Randall and Junior try to stake their claim in a family long on child's play and short on parenting. As the twelve days that comprise the novel's framework yield to the final day and Hurricane Katrina, the unforgettable family at the novel's heart--motherless children sacrificing for each other as they can, protecting and nurturing where love is scarce--pulls itself up to struggle for another day. A wrenching look at the lonesome, brutal, and restrictive realities of rural poverty, *Salvage the Bones* is muscled with poetry, revelatory, and real.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. Republished W. W. Norton, 1975. A literary masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane* is a powerful work of innovative fiction evoking black life in the South. The sketches, poems, and stories of black rural and urban life that make up *Cane* are rich in imagery. Visions of smoke, sugarcane, dusk, and flame permeate the Southern landscape: the Northern world is pictured as a harsher reality of asphalt streets. Impressionistic, sometimes surrealistic, the pieces are redolent of nature and Africa, with sensuous appeals to eye and ear.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. New York: Double Day, 2016. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the 2016 National Book Award. Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. Life is hell for all the slaves, but especially bad for Cora; an outcast even among her fellow Africans, she is coming into womanhood—where even greater pain awaits. When Caesar, a recent arrival from Virginia, tells her about the Underground Railroad, they decide to take a terrifying risk and escape.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1940. Right from the start, Bigger Thomas had been headed for jail. It could have been for assault or petty larceny; by chance, it was for murder and rape. *Native Son* tells the story of this young black man caught in a downward spiral after he kills a young white woman in a brief moment of panic. Set in Chicago in the 1930s, Richard Wright's novel is just as powerful today as when it was written -- in its reflection of poverty and hopelessness, and what it means to be black in America.

NONFICTION FOR YOUNGER READERS

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Penguin Random House, 1992. In the searing pages of this classic autobiography,

originally published in 1964, Malcolm X, the Muslim leader, firebrand, and anti-integrationist, tells the extraordinary story of his life and the growth of the Black Muslim movement. His fascinating perspective on the lies and limitations of the American Dream, and the inherent racism in a society that denies its nonwhite citizens the opportunity to dream, gives extraordinary insight into the most urgent issues of our own time.

FICTION FOR YOUNGER READERS

Hughes, Langston. Illustrated by Bryan Collier. *I, Too, Am America*. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2012. Winner of the Coretta Scott King illustrator award, *I, Too, Am America* blends the poetic wisdom of Langston Hughes with visionary illustrations from Bryan Collier in this inspirational picture book that carries the promise of equality.

Reynolds, Jason. *All American Boys*. New York, Atheneum Books, 2015. In this Coretta Scott King Honor Award-winning novel, two teens—one black, one white—grapple with the repercussions of a single violent act that leaves their school, their community, and, ultimately, the country bitterly divided by racial tension. A bag of chips. That's all sixteen-year-old Rashad is looking for at the corner bodega. What he finds instead is a fist-happy cop, Paul Galluzzo, who mistakes Rashad for a shoplifter, mistakes Rashad's pleadings that he's stolen nothing for belligerence, mistakes Rashad's resistance to leave the bodega as resisting arrest, mistakes Rashad's every flinch at every punch the cop throws as further resistance and refusal to STAY STILL as ordered. But how can you stay still when someone is pounding your face into the concrete pavement?

