**Brighton Girls English Department**

**Preparing for English Studies at A Level – reading list for students of Language and Literature.**

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| **Title** | **Writer** | **What it’s about** | **Recommended ways to explore the text** | **Relevance to A Level?** |
| ***1. A Gathering Light*** | **Jennifer Donnelly** | Inspired by the letters in an infamous murder case that gripped America in the early 1900s. Described as 'the OJ Simpson case of its time', Mattie Gokey’s story touches on race, gender and class prejudice, wealth and poverty, the power of words and the crucial choices that enable us to live a self-determined life. | * Read more about what inspired the book, interview comments and why Donnelly thinks Cockneys are like New Yorkers at: <http://www.cilip.org.uk/publications/updatemagazine/archive/archive2004/september/article4.htm> * Find out about her life, books, writing at: <http://www.jenniferdonnelly.com/> * Read about the original trial at: [www.courts.state.ny.us/history/elecbook/gillette/pg1.htm](http://www.courts.state.ny.us/history/elecbook/gillette/pg1.htm) * Compare it with An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser | A beautifully written and structured contemporary  (2005) novel which explores major social themes. |
| ***2. Brighton Rock*** | **Graham Greene** | Dark gangland violence in loveless 1930s Brighton. Teenage hoodlum Pinkie Brown commits a crime and is then faced with the prospect of having to marry Rose, a key witness. Ida, however, is on his case. Who will win in the battle between good and evil? | * Watch the excellent black and white film version, shot in Brighton and directed by John Boulting * Find out about Greene’s life and views about writing. Start with the Greeneland website: <http://members.tripod.com/~greeneland/index.htm> * Research some of the fundamental beliefs and rituals of Catholicism which are important to the novel’s themes and characterisation | Setting, creation of character, significant moral and religious themes. |
| ***3. The Catcher in the Rye*** | **J.D. Salinger** | Holden Caulfield, a teenager growing up in early 1950s New York, has been expelled from school again. He decides to “take a vacation'” before returning to his parents' wrath. Told as a monologue, the book describes Holden's thoughts and activities over these few days. Read it before you get too old! Discover why people and life are “phony”, according to Holden. | * Find out about J.D. Salinger and the impact of *“Catcher”* on his writing career: <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/salinger.htm> * Read different critical reviews of the novel. Start with: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43680-2004Oct18.html> | Narrative form, colloquial style, characterisation. |
| ***4. The Handmaid’s Tale*** | **Margaret Atwood** | Influenced by *“Nineteen Eighty Four”* and written after a trip to Afghanistan, the novel, set in a future state ruled by religious fundamentalism, tells the story of Offred (she belongs to Fred…), a ‘handmaid’ who exists only to breed for rich couples. She remembers before, when she was free and had her own child…Far-fetched science fiction? | * Read about the novel and its author at [www.bookrags.com](http://www.bookrags.com) * Find out how the role of women has changed in your family over the last 50 years * What are your own views on religious fundamentalism and surrogate motherhood? * Watch the television series and or read the 2019 sequel The Testaments * Some critics have said that the ‘second wave’ of popularity for this novel is due to our increasingly unstable political and social context. What do you think? | Style of writing and futuristic theme make this an absorbing and challenging modern novel. |
| ***5. Jane Eyre*** | **Charlotte Bronte** | The first nineteen years of the life of Jane Eyre, told from her point of view. Find out about her life at Lowood Institution and later as a governess at Thornfield Hall. Who put the mad woman in the attic? Why did the hero on horseback go blind before our heroine even kissed him? Is it still “a book to make the pulses gallop and the heart beat, and to fill the eyes with tears” | * Research the lives of the Bronte family, the historical context and critical reviews of *“Jane Eyre”* when it was first published in 1847. Start with: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/bronte.html> or <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bronte/cbronte/society.html> * Find out about artist Paula Rego’s lithographs based on *“Jane Eyre”* * Visit the Bronte Parsonage Museum in Howarth next time you are in Yorkshire! | Key text for pre-1914 language features, imagery, symbolism, narrative style and use of nature. |
| ***The Wide Sargasso Sea*** | **Jean Rhys** | A feminist and anti-colonial response to Jane Eyre describing the background to Mr. Rochester's marriage from the point-of-view of his mad wife [Antoinette Cosway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha_Mason), a [Creole](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creole_peoples) heiress. | * How far is being the storyteller or the writer akin to being the person in control? * How has Rhys changed the way we view the handsome Mr Rochester? | Beautifully written but also hugely relevant in terms of intersectional feminism. |
| ***6. Nineteen Eighty Four*** | **George Orwell** | Freedom is slavery. Lies are Truth. That’s what Big Brother says and Big Brother is watching You. A novel warning about the dangers of a totalitarian state. Orwell was also responsible here for introducing the idea of controlling people through placing them in Room 101 – which contains your worst fear. | * Find out more about Orwell and “opinions” about his work: <http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/> * Watch the film version. Why do you think it was deliberately shot in black and white rather than colour? How does its vision of the future compare with the one in the novel? * Browse through the Newspeak Dictionary for definitions of Orwell’s key words and maps: <http://www.newspeakdictionary.com/> | So many echoes in today’s society and highly relevant to contemporary political and media manipulation. |
| ***7. The Caretaker*** | **Harold Pinter** | Modern (well, 1959) play in which verbally dexterous wide-boy and his recovering brother grapple with the selfish down-and-out house guest who is offered a job as their caretaker. Who will survive? Will you laugh or cry? | * Watch the film/DVD version of the play * Read the play out loud with two friends * Find out about the life and work of Harold Pinter through the following comprehensive website: <http://www.haroldpinter.org/biography/index.shtml> * Explore different critical responses to the play | Unusual stagecraft, variations in language, characterisation, and famous “Pinteresque”  Pauses. |
| ***8. Waiting for Godot*** | **Samuel**  **Beckett** | Two vagrants wait beneath a tree for Godot. A witty, slapstick two-act drama which asks its audience to think about theatre, life, death –  and God(ot). | * Read the play * Research the life of Beckett on-line at [samuel-beckett.net](http://samuel-beckett.net) * Find out about theatre of the absurd * See the animated guinea pig version: <http://www.musearts.com/cartoons/pigs/godot.html> | Thought-provoking characterisation, language, stagecraft and themes. |
| ***9. Learning to Swim and other stories*** | **Graham Swift** | Enigmatic short stories by a celebrated contemporary writer, often about tensions or rifts in relationships and featuring a peculiar twist. Unsurprisingly, written during a relationship problem… | * Research the life/work of Graham Swift * Read an interview with him about his work at <http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/graham_swift.htm> * Find out about the history of the short story | A good introduction to concentrated, subtle, nuance-ridden short stories. |
| ***10. Spies*** | **Michael Frayn** | Stephen Wheatley revisits the Close where he was a child in the second world war. A fascinating study of the perplexing secrets which lie beneath the surface of family life in 1940s London. | * Research attitudes to sex, marriage and children in 1940s Britain. Look at relevant chapters of A Century of Women by Sheila Rowbotham or read a useful review of it: <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr210/german.htm> * Find out about attitudes to conscription and desertion in this period * Read reviews of the novel. Try The Daily Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2002/01/28/bospy28.xml> Or The Guardian’s: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/whitbread2002/story/0,,842599,00.html#article_continue> | Very useful preparation for studying the more demanding and multi-levelled type of modern novel set by AS/A2 exam boards. |
| ***11. Great Expectations*** | **Charles Dickens** | The story of a young working class boy who is mysteriously transported to the life of a young gentleman in London**.** | * See Dickens’ animated biography at: [www.bbc.co.uk/drama/bleakhouse/animation.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/bleakhouse/animation.shtml) * Watch the 1998 film version, starring Ethan Hawke and Gwyneth Paltrow  Survive Dickens' London! Take a tour of Dickensian London at: [www.bbc.co.uk/arts/multimedia/dickens/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/multimedia/dickens/) | A significant 19th century novel addressing social issues, with rich characterisation and language, and wry comedy. |
| ***12. Scars upon my Heart, edited by Catherine W. Reilly*** | **Various female poets** | “Your battle wounds are scars upon my heart” wrote Vera Brittain in a poem to her brother, four days before he died in June 1918. This anthology of women war poets shows that women were writing protest poetry before Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and that the view of “the women at home” as ignorant and idealistic was false. Many of these poems come out of direct experiences of nursing the victims of trench warfare, or the pain of lost lovers, brothers, sons | * Research the shifting role of women in British society before, during and after World War 1 (1914-18). Start with: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_roles_in_the_World_Wars> * Find out more about the life in the trenches. Try: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/trenchlife.htm> * Research some of the more familiar male poets such as Wilfred Owen or Sigfried Sassoon. Are they different to the women poets in *“Scars Upon My Heart”?* Start with Owen: <http://www.hcu.ox.ac.uk/jtap/> | Variety of views of war expressed in different forms and styles. |
| ***13. Poetry by Benjamin Zephaniah*** | **Benjamin Zephaniah** | There are a number of collections of poetry by this black British writer. For a selection of on-screen poems and links to “more information”, go to: http://www.poemhunter.com/benjamin-zephaniah/poet-6669/ | * Find out more about Benjamin Zephaniah – his poetry, politics, newspaper articles, music and why he rejected an OBE: <http://www.benjaminzephaniah.com/content/music.php> | More accessible modern poetry in variety of forms. |
| ***14. Pride and***  ***Prejudice*** | **Jane Austen** | Austen is considered one of the best English novelists. Lizzie Bennet is one of literature’s most popular heroines. On one level, it’s boys meet girls (you’ll see why Colin Firth’s career took off when he played Austen’s Mr. Darcy) but Austen gives us an entertaining, thought-provoking,, gently critical examination of her society. | * Watch the recent film version, starring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfaddyen, on DVD. * If you’ve more time, watch the DVD of the famous BBC serialised version and spot the swimming scene that was added… * Or watch video clips from the series at [bbc.co.uk/drama/prideandprejudice/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/prideandprejudice/) * Find out about Austen’s life at [austen.com](http://www.austen.com) | Using an interesting narrative style, Austen explores a range of social issues. |
| ***15. Top Girls*** | **Caryl Churchill** | What sacrifices must women make to get on in a man’s world? The play’s main character runs an employment agency for women. She also, bizarrely, holds a dinner party for remarkable women from history. But she has a painful secret which emerges in a powerful final scene. | * Read the play with some friends! * Find out more about the range of women round the Top Girls table: <http://www.innogize.com/papers/topgirls.html> * Research Caryl Churchill’s life and work at: <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth259> * Read some different reviews of the play. Start with: <http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/topgirls-rev.htm>  or: <http://www.curtainup.com/topgirlswtf.html> | Challenging modern play in terms of structure, jumps in time and style. |
| ***16. Sister Outsider*** | **Audre Lorde** | In order to understand what we are seeing on the news and experiencing in our lives, it’s important to understand how history has shaped this moment. Reaching back to books published by black thinkers and feminists decades ago shows us (depressingly) how things are still very much the same, but also (empoweringly) gives us language and context for understanding what we are seeing now – and therefore the ability to disrupt tactics of oppression that still operate today. | * There are lots of other excellent suggestions for reading and learning about the Black Lives Matter movement here   <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2020/jun/03/do-the-work-an-anti-racist-reading-list-layla-f-saad> |  |
| ***17. Mind Your Language – selection of articles*** | The editors of the Guardian write about language usage and abusage | An excellent array, continuously updated and relevant, of articles written about language use. | <https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language> |  |
| ***18. A History of Proper English*** | Henry Hitchings | The English language is a battlefield. Since the age of Shakespeare, arguments over correct usage have been acrimonious, and those involved have always really been contesting values - to do with morality, politics and class. Hitchings examines the present state of the conflict, its history and its future. | Review -  <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8316091/The-Language-Wars-A-History-of-Proper-English-by-Henry-Hitchings.html> |  |
| ***19. You Are What You Speak*** | Robert Lane Greene | Lane Green is a correspondent for The Economist – here he explores the connections between identity politics and the words we use. | This article suggests our language (mother tongue) shapes who we are in all sorts of interesting ways <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22830520-400-you-are-what-you-speak-how-your-mother-tongue-shapes-you/> |  |
| ***20.***  <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2pjllg>  <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2XBIkHW954> | Various sources | Think about these two key questions in English Language: How do we learn to talk, read and write? And once we have learnt to talk is there only way correct way to communicate? Is the idea of “Standard” or “Queen’s” English an outdated myth? Watch these clips to get you thinking. |  |  |
| ***21. Mother Tongue*** | Bill Bryson | Highly readable!  Not only fascinating but extremely funny (Angus Deayton)  The sort of linguistics I like, anecdotal, full of revelations, and with not one dull paragraph (Ruth Rendell *Sunday Times*) | A gold mine of language-anecdote, information, curiosity. A surprise on every page... enthralling (*Observer*)  Delightful, amusing and provoking... A joyful celebration of our wonderful language, which is packed with curiosities and enlightenment on every page (*Sunday Express*) |  |