

# TEN BOOKS THAT SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

*Walden* is here, of course; but so too is Fanny  
Farmer's first cookbook

by Jonathan Yardley

America is not a nation of readers, yet books have had a deep and lasting effect on its national life. By comparison with the Russians, whose thirst for books—especially contraband books—is legendary, we pay them scant attention; Walker Percy once dolefully estimated that the hard-core audience for serious literature in this country of two hundred and thirty million is perhaps one or two million, and he probably was not far off. True though that may be, it remains that had it not been for a number of hugely influential books, this nation might well be an almost unrecognizably different place.

Without Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, how broad and enthusiastic would support have been for the chancy

business of revolt against the British crown? Without Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, how strong would sentiment have been in the industrial North for the abolitionist cause? Without Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, would Congress have roused itself to pass the Meat Inspection Act of 1906? Without Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, what would the environmental movement look like now—or would one even exist? Without Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*, would there be such a thing as consumer protection?

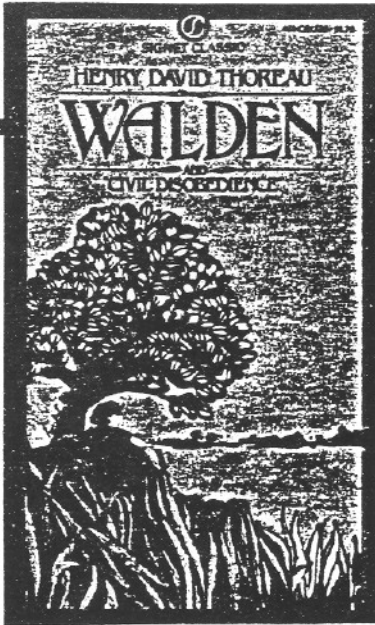
These are the obvious ones, the books that had direct and easily traceable effect on public policy. Among the others of comparable influence must certainly be numbered *The Federalist*, by Alexander Hamilton et al; *Progress and Poverty*, by Henry George; *Looking Backward*, by Edward

Bellamy; *The Shame of the Cities*, by Lincoln Steffens; *The Best and the Brightest*, by David Halberstam. Add these five titles to the five in the paragraph above, and there you have it—ten books that shaped America.

That, in fact, was precisely my initial instinct when I was invited to draw up such a list under such a heading: to find ten books that changed the political life of the nation. But that, as it turned out, was a simple and rather boring task; the books chose themselves with little help from me, and even allowing for some notable omissions—Paine's *The Rights of Man*, George Bancroft's *History of the United States*, Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of*

A watercolor sketch from around 1913 by Gari Melchers of a man reading. The finished painting is lost.

1



I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings.

In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

2



A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,  
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

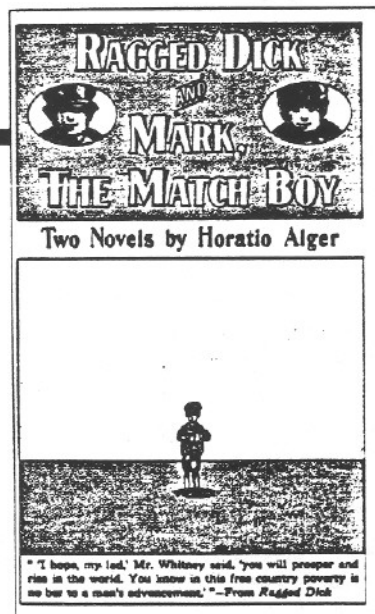
Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic, And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, Growing among black folks as among white,

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

3



"How did you get up in the world?" asked Dick, anxiously.

"I entered a printing-office as an apprentice, and worked for some years. Then my eyes gave out and I was obliged to give that up. Not knowing what else to do, I went into the country, and worked on a farm. After a while I was lucky enough to invent a machine, which has brought me in a great deal of money. But there was one thing I got while I was in the printing-office which I value more than money."

"What was that, sir?"

"A taste for reading and study. During my

leisure hours I improved myself by study, and acquired a large part of the knowledge which I now possess. Indeed, it was one of my books that first put me on the track of the invention, which I afterwards made. So you see, my lad, that my studious habits paid me in money, as well as in another way."

"I'm awful ignorant," said Dick, soberly.

"But you are young, and, I judge, a smart boy. If you try to learn, you can, and if you ever expect to do anything in the world, you must know something of books."

"I will," said Dick, resolutely. "I aint always goin' to black boots for a livin'."

"I hope, my lad," Mr. Whitney said, "you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty is no bar to a man's advancement." --From *Ragged Dick*

*the Constitution*—the list is an amply representative one. But there is nothing especially surprising, or interesting, or provocative about it. I wanted something better.

What might be more profitably considered, I thought, would be those books that have had a less celebrated yet equally large effect on the daily life of the nation—not its political life but its cultural, social, and domestic life. What are ten titles, I wondered, that have extended their influence from the relatively small circle of regular readers into the general culture of the nation? What are the books that can be said to have helped shape that vague but endlessly fascinating creature called the American character?

They had to be books written by Americans, I determined, and thus I said a rueful farewell to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. No children's books, though it almost broke my heart to eliminate my own boyhood favorite, Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *The Story of a Bad Boy*. No textbooks, though a solid case can be made that the most influential books in the nation's history were William Holmes McGuffey's *Ectlectic Readers*. No religious books, because that is a separate inquiry unto itself and a can of worms into the bargain. And Webster be damned: no dictionaries or encyclopedias.

No, these had to be books issued for the general trade that for one reason or another worked their way into the fabric of American life. As it

## Only four of the ten books I chose have any genuine literary merit.

turned out, several of those I finally chose had small sales upon original publication: it took the country a while to figure out what they were about and why they were important. As it further turned out, only four of the ten I chose can be said to have genuine literary merit; the presence in our public life of Hawthorne and Melville, Faulkner and Frost, is depressingly small, however great it may be in the groves of academe and the libraries of serious readers.

Choosing the list was not easy; I came close to pleading with the editors to let me have twelve titles instead of ten, such was my consternation at having to leave off *Babbitt* and *The Feminine Mystique*. Needless to say there were other near-misses, and I shall list them at the end. But here are the final ten, for which nobody is to blame except me, listed in chronological order of publication:

*Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau (1854). There are four books on this list that could not possibly be eliminated from it; this is the first of them. Although Thoreau's famous essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" had the greatest immediate public effect of any of his works, it is this major work of transcendental thought that has had the most lasting influence. Writing about his many months by Walden Pond, Thoreau speaks to themes that run right to the heart of American life: the longing for independence, the identity with

the natural landscape, the skepticism toward government and formal social institutions. From the libertarians to the civil rights marches, the right wing to the vegetarians, almost every organized (and disorganized) Americanism has found something to its taste in *Walden*, so wide is the net it casts.

*Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman (1855). This is the second of the unavoidable four. The 1855 edition was the first of many published during and after Whitman's lifetime, and the briefest. It contained only a dozen poems, most notable among them "Song of Myself"; it was in later editions that the author added "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "O Captain! My Captain!" and many others. These may or may not be the greatest of American poems, but it says here that they are the most American. No one knew this better than Whitman himself. He thought of the book as "the New Bible," and in the introduction to one edition he wrote: "I claim that in literature, I have judged and felt every thing from an American point of view which is no local standard, for America to me, includes humanity and is the universal. America (I have said to myself) demands one Song, at any rate, that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding as she is herself." The book is

indeed that; its ebullience and energy still echo in our lives and animate our literature.

*Ragged Dick, or Street Life in New York*, by Horatio Alger (1867). Alger was a whilom bohemian who turned after the Civil War to the Unitarian ministry, but in whom an artistic flame continued to flicker. It came fully to light in this, the first of more than a hundred books that sold more than twenty million copies altogether. They were read primarily by boys and young men, though strictly speaking they were not children's books, and they had an incalculable effect on the American psyche. They taught not merely the moral commonly associated with Alger—that, with pluck and luck, any fellow can make it from rags to riches—but also a subtler lesson, that it is in a laissez-faire market where the talents of an independent soul flourish most healthily. The tradition of rugged individualism had been created generations before John Wayne came along to exploit it; and Horatio Alger was one of the principal architects.

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain (1884). Can you imagine this list without *Huckleberry Finn*, the third of the essential four? Of course not. This is the quintessentially American book, the one book without which we could not be said to have an American literature. Its immortal closing words—"I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before"—speak even more forcibly than



# Fannie Farmer is no longer fashionable in this age of boutique cookery.

Walden to the strain of independence that still, even when it seems invisible, identifies us as Americans. It is the one book that virtually every literate American is almost certain to have read, and thus is one of those shared experiences that help define us. A century after it first appeared, the book has still not lost its power to arouse and disturb us; only a couple of years ago a school committee in Virginia tried to eliminate it from the curriculum on the wildly mistaken grounds that this most egalitarian of novels is somehow "racist" because it uses the language of its time. Better judgment prevailed, and the Virginia schoolchildren still read it; but they will be adults before they can understand how much it tells them about themselves.

*The Boston Cooking School Cookbook*, by Fannie Farmer (1896). This beguiling and tremendously important book started a revolution in American life. It was the first cookbook to reach a significant nationwide audience and to maintain that audience long after the immediate interest surrounding its publication. It was the first cookbook to establish a uniform system of weights and measurements, an incalculable improvement over the old system of guess and feel. It was also the first cookbook to address itself directly to the American housewife; servants were rapidly disappearing from middle-class kitchens, and by the turn of the century it was Mom who had to bake the apple pie. Fannie Farmer is no longer fashionable in this age of boutique cookery and whole-grain self-righteous-

ness, but she is where it all started. Her good-humored, patient instructions taught the nation how to cook, and set it however uncertainly along the path toward something approximating sophistication in the dining room. For my money it remains the best American cookbook of all, not in the tarted-up revised edition issued a few years ago, but in the masterly original.

*The Theory of the Leisure Class*, by Thorstein Veblen (1899). By the narrowest of margins Veblen edges out Sinclair Lewis, largely because this study of the privileged in America antedates *Babbitt* by a quarter-century. It's almost impossible to read Veblen now, so tortured is his Scandinavian-influenced English, and it's a miracle that anyone could read him in 1899. But read him they did, and his message thundered through the thickets of his prose: That in order to maintain its position at the top of the heap, the leisure class must exploit all those below it, and that the conspicuous display of wealth is a condition of membership in this class. Thus were formed, almost overnight, attitudes that still have a powerful place in American life; they were emerging, even as Veblen wrote, in the campaign to break up the trusts, they can be found in the continuing strain of Populism in our politics, and they are perpetuated in the reflexive hostility

toward business and businessmen that characterizes our literature and popular culture. The book is also important as a pioneering venture in what eventually emerged, for better or worse, as the discipline of sociology.

*The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903). In the literature of black America there are more celebrated titles—*Notes of a Native Son*, *An American Dilemma*, *The Fire Next Time*, *Soul on Ice*, *Roots*—but this is the seminal one. Its publication followed by two years that of *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington's autobiography, and it offered a vigorous dissent from Washington's strategy of dignified black acceptance of segregation and menial or blue-collar labor. Du Bois was respectful in opposition to Washington but he insisted that blacks had to demand higher education in the sciences and humanities, and that they had to be able to compete with whites for white-collar jobs. He was considered a radical at the time, and late in life he became one; he joined the Communist party in 1961, at the age of ninety-three. But the views of black life that he advanced in *The Souls of Black Folk* had become civil rights orthodoxy by the 1920s, and in modernized form they remain so today.

*In Our Time*, by Ernest Hemingway (1925). This slender collection of fifteen short stories was Hemingway's first book to be published in the United States (a very differ-

ent version had been published in Paris the previous year) and, surprising though it may seem, is the last of the four obligatory books on this list. I have chosen it both because it is Hemingway's first book and because the stories in it are highly representative of his work, but the important point is that Hemingway wrote it; it could be replaced by *The Sun Also Rises*, or *A Farewell to Arms*, or *The Collected Stories*, but a book by Hemingway is absolutely mandatory. As one who has little admiration for his work and even less for the man, I say this without enthusiasm. There is no gainsaying, though, that in these stories we heard for the first time the voice that would forever change the way the American language is written—the spare, laconic, controlled, insistent voice that we now hear at every turn, in novels and stories, in newspapers and magazines, in advertisements and speeches, in movies and television. We also met for the first time the man who would similarly alter the American definition of ideal manhood: rough yet gentle, violent yet tender, athletic yet literary, and—this above all—graceful under pressure. It really matters little that the image of "Papa" Hemingway that began to define itself with the publication of *In Our Time* was largely a fabrication and, in the end, a fraud; what matters is that we believed in it a half-century ago and we still do, and it's the rare American who is unaffected by it.

*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie (1936). What do Americans want above all else from the books they read? They

4



So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send.

HUCK FINN

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time; in the day and in the nighttime, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my

watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell!"—and tore it up.

5



## To Fold and Turn an Omelet

Hold omelet pan by handle with the left hand. With a case knife make two one-half inch incisions opposite each other at right angles to handle. Place knife under the part of omelet nearest handle, tip pan to nearly a vertical position; by carefully coaxing the omelet with knife, it will fold and turn without breaking.

7



Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness . . . and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centred for thrice a hundred years: out of the nation's heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. . . . Would America have been America without her Negro people?

6



The generic feature of the physiognomy of machine-made goods as compared with the hand-wrought article is their greater perfection in workmanship and greater accuracy in the detail execution of the design. Hence it comes about that the visible imperfections of the hand-wrought goods, being honorific, are accounted marks of superiority in point of beauty, or serviceability, or both. Hence has arisen that exaltation of the defective, of which John Ruskin and William Morris were such eager spokesmen in their time; and on this ground their propoganda of crudity and wasted effort has been taken up and carried forward since their time.

ERNEST  
HEMINGWAY

8

In Our Time



They sat on the blanket without touching each other and watched the moon rise.

"You don't have to talk silly," Marjorie said.

"What's really the matter?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you know."

"No I don't."

"Go on and say it."

Nick looked on at the moon, coming up over the hills.

"It isn't fun any more."

He was afraid to look at Marjorie. Then he looked at her. She sat there with her back toward him. He looked at her back. "It isn't fun any more. Not any of it."

She didn't say anything. He went on. "I feel

as though everything was gone to hell inside of me. I don't know, Marge. I don't know what to say."

He looked on at her back.

"Isn't love any fun?" Marjorie said.

"No," Nick said. Marjorie stood up. Nick sat there, his head in his hands.

"I'm going to take the boat," Marjorie called to him. "You can walk back around the point."

"All right," Nick said. "I'll push the boat off for you."

"You don't need to," she said. She was afloat in the boat on the water with the moonlight on it. Nick went back and lay down with his face in the blanket by the fire. He could hear Marjorie rowing on the water.

He lay there for a long time.

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# HOW TO WIN FRIENDS & INFLUENCE PEOPLE

## DALE CARNEGIE

THE FIRST—AND STILL THE BEST—  
BOOK OF ITS KIND—TO LEAD YOU TO SUCCESS

9

Colonel Edward M. House wielded an enormous influence in national and international affairs while Woodrow Wilson occupied the White House. Wilson leaned upon Colonel House for secret counsel and advice more than he did upon even members of his own cabinet.

What method did the Colonel use in influencing the President? Fortunately, we know, for House himself revealed it to Arthur D. Howden Smith, and Smith quoted House in an article in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

"After I got to know the President," House said, "I learned the best way to convert him to an idea was to plant it in his mind casually, but so as to interest him in it—so as to get him thinking

about it on his own account. The first time this worked it was an accident. I had been visiting him at the White House and urged a policy on him which he appeared to disapprove. But several days later, at the dinner table, I was amazed to hear him trot out my suggestion as his own."

Did House interrupt him and say, "That's not your idea. That's mine"? Oh, no. Not House. He was too adroit for that. He didn't care about credit. He wanted results. So he let Wilson continue to feel that the idea was his. House did even more than that. He gave Wilson public credit for these ideas.

Let's remember that everyone we come in contact with is just as human as Woodrow Wilson.

DR. BENJAMIN SPOCK  
Completely revised and updated for today's parents

# Baby and Child Care

THE ALL-NEW EXPANDED EDITION OF THE CENTURY'S GREATEST BEST SELLER  
MORE THAN 280,000,000 COPIES SOLD

10

Though children do the major share in civilizing themselves, through love and imitation, it still leaves plenty for parents to do, as all of you know. In automobile terms, the child supplies the power but the parents have to do the steering. Children's motives are good (most of the time), but they don't have the experience or the stability to stay on the road. The parents have to be saying, "No, crossing the street is too dangerous," "You can't play with that, you'll hurt someone," "Say thank you to Mrs. Griffin," "You have to come in now because lunch is ready," "You can't take the wagon home because it belongs to

Harry," "You have to go to bed to grow big," etc., etc. How well the guidance works depends on such factors as whether the parents are reasonably consistent (nobody can be completely consistent), whether they mean what they say (are not just sounding off), and whether they are directing or prohibiting the child for a good reason (not just because they're feeling mean or bossy).



want self-improvement. Cast your eye over the best-seller lists and what you will find is book after book that offers the almost always false hope that if you just read it, you will be healthy, sexy, wealthy, and beloved. The first author to latch onto that longing in the American heart was Carnegie, who taught public speaking for the New York YMCA in the years before World War I. Eventually he went into the business of speech instruction on his own, over the years compiling enough strategies for profitable ingratiating to fill a book. This he did in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which swept the nation into a frenzy of self-improvement from which it shows no signs of recovering. All the others stand forever in Dale Carnegie's debt: Norman Vincent Peale, Leo Buscaglia, Helen Gurley Brown, Richard Simmons, Alex Comfort—had there been no Carnegie, they and all their vast tribe almost surely would be otherwise (and less lucratively) employed, and the nation, to its eternal sorrow, would be far less improved than now it is.

*The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, by Benjamin Spock, M.D. (1946). Take it from *Advertising Age*: "The baby boomers appeared between 1945 and 1959. Today there are approximately 56.6 million 25- to 39-year-olds or 24.2% of the U.S. population." And what do the members of this vast army of affluent, self-preoccupied Americans have in common? Dr. Spock, the kindly fellow who raised them all. His book appeared when the first of them were one year old, and within a few years

their mothers were turning to it for the advice that shaped a generation. The pejorative term for it, when the boomers were making such an unholy scene in the 1960s and 1970s, was "permissive"; more flattering, and perhaps more accurate, would be "liberating." It was Dr. Spock who told us that Mother knows best—that the maternal instinct is often more sound than the physician's counsel—and who then told Mother what to do when she *didn't* know best. Because of Dr. Spock's advice, an entire generation grew up unacquainted with the thwack of paddle against bottom, and firm in the conviction that it was just as important and worthwhile as its elders, if not more so. The consequences of this for the nation—and someday, one shudders to imagine, for the world—remain to reveal themselves, but when they do, one thing is certain: we will have Dr. Spock to thank for them.

So there they are: ten books that shaped America. My choices entirely, and I take full responsibility for them, just as I do for this list of also-rans:

*The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington*, by Mason Locke Weems (1800). The cherry tree, and all that.

*The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon (1905). A pathfinding enterprise in viewing the Old

South through moonbeams and magnolia; D. W. Griffith filmed it as *The Birth of a Nation*.

*Main Street*, by Sinclair Lewis (1920). An unsparing look at small-town piety, self-righteousness, and hypocrisy that was a huge success.

*Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage*, by Emily Post (1922). The ultimate reference book on manners for the upwardly mobile middle class.

*Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis (1922). What Lewis did to small towns in *Main Street*, he did to provincial businessmen here.

*The Man Nobody Knows*, by Bruce Barton (1925). An exquisitely vulgar book, widely read in its time, in which Christ is revealed to have been an exceptionally successful advertising man.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck (1939). The plight of the Okies, as described in a book that helped mobilize public sympathy.

*Hiroshima*, by John Hersey (1946). The first important book about the human cost of nuclear war.

*The Lonely Crowd*, by David Riesman (1950). The study of social types that taught the middle class how to examine itself.

*The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger (1951). Teen-aged angst in a novel that is still an American rite of passage.

*Peyton Place*, by Grace Metalious (1956). The erotic life of the provinces; an early skirmish in the sexual revolution.

*Catch-22*, by Joseph Heller

(1961). War as black comedy in a novel that became a bible for its decade's college students.

*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, by Jane Jacobs (1961). The call to arms of the urban renaissance.

*The New York Times Cookbook*, by Craig Claiborne (1961). No more canned mushroom soup: the American obsession with better cooking begins.

*The Feminine Mystique*, by Betty Friedan (1963). Steinem, Millett, Brownmiller: they all started here.

*Roots*, by Alex Haley (1976). At last: black Americans discover their own history, and white Americans discover it as well.

It is significant, I think, that all but one of these also-rans were published after 1900, and nine of the sixteen after World War II. We know these books have affected us, but perhaps we are still too close to them to understand precisely how: is it *Hiroshima* or *Catch-22*, for example, that has most influenced the attitudes of middle-class Americans toward warfare? It's too early to tell. The ten I have chosen, by contrast, have some age on them and have demonstrated their staying power. I have no idea what sort of nation we would be had they never been published, but this is certain: we would not be what we are now. ■

Jonathan Yardley is a book critic and columnist for *The Washington Post*. He is the author of *Ring: A Biography of Ring Lardner*, and in 1981 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism.