

Summary of 2022-2023 Reading Disciples Books

1. The Old Man and the Sea is a novella written by Ernest Hemingway in 1951 in Cay Blanco (Cuba). One of his most famous works, it tells the story of Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman who struggles with a giant marlin far out in the Gulf Stream off the coast of Cuba. In 1953, The Old Man and the Sea was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and it was cited by the Nobel Committee as contributing to their awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Hemingway in 1954.

2. East of Eden by John Steinbeck

Set in the rich farmland of California's Salinas Valley, this sprawling and often brutal novel follows the intertwined destinies of two families—the Trasks and the Hamiltons—whose generations helplessly reenact the fall of Adam and Eve and the poisonous rivalry of Cain and Abel. Here Steinbeck created some of his most memorable characters and explored his most enduring themes: the mystery of identity; the inexplicability of love; and the murderous consequences of love's absence.

This book is the hardest to give a summary on and still make it sound like a real page turner.

Whenever anyone asks me what this book is about I honestly cringe. Yes, it's about two families who reenact the fall of Adam and Eve, but it's about so much more than that.

Steinbeck's dedication really helps to set the stage, as he put everything he had into it.

In short, this book examines our human nature and what we're truly capable of. This is the age-old story of the struggle between good and evil, but with an interesting twist. Steinbeck sees the coexistence of good and evil as necessary for the emergence of character or greatness.

He lays the responsibility for that emergence squarely on the shoulders of the individual and shows that the exercise of free will (timshel) is the key to that emergence.

Some people possess within themselves only good or only evil. Achieving true character or greatness is an impossibility for them, because choice is not possible and is, in fact, meaningless. Rather than character or greatness, their lives lead inevitably to self-destruction.

For others good and evil constantly struggle for domination. Even when the good naturally dominates, one must exercise free will to exhibit character or achieve greatness.

"And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good."

3. The Bell Jar, novel by Sylvia Plath, first published in January 1963. The work, a thinly veiled autobiography, chronicles a young woman's mental breakdown and eventual recovery, while also exploring societal expectations of women in the 1950s. Plath died by suicide one month after the publication of The Bell Jar, her only novel.

Initially celebrated for its dry self-deprecation and ruthless honesty, The Bell Jar is now read as a damning critique of 1950s social politics. Plath made clear connections between Esther's dawning awareness of the limited female roles available to her and her increasing sense of

isolation and paranoia. The contradictory expectations imposed upon women in relation to sexuality, motherhood, and intellectual achievement are linked to Esther's sense of herself as fragmented. Her eventual recovery relies on her ability to dismiss the dominant versions of femininity that populate the novel.

4. The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Viet Thanh Nguyen's remarkable debut novel, "The Sympathizer." Nguyen, born in Vietnam but raised in the United States, brings a distinct perspective to the war and its aftermath. His book fills a void in the literature, giving voice to the previously voiceless while it compels the rest of us to look at the events of 40 years ago in a new light.

But this tragicomic novel reaches beyond its historical context to illuminate more universal themes: the eternal misconceptions and misunderstandings between East and West, and the moral dilemma faced by people forced to choose not between right and wrong, but right and right.

A profound, startling, and beautifully crafted debut novel, *The Sympathizer* is the story of a man of two minds, someone whose political beliefs clash with his individual loyalties. In dialogue with but diametrically opposed to the narratives of the Vietnam War that have preceded it, this novel offers an important and unfamiliar new perspective on the war: that of a conflicted communist sympathizer. It is April 1975, and Saigon is in chaos. At his villa, a general of the South Vietnamese army is drinking whiskey and, with the help of his trusted captain, drawing up a list of those who will be given passage aboard the last flights out of the country. The general and his compatriots start a new life in Los Angeles, unaware that one among their number, the captain, is secretly observing and reporting on the group to a higher-up in the Viet Cong. *The Sympathizer* is the story of this captain: a man brought up by an absent French father and a poor Vietnamese mother, a man who went to university in America, but returned to Vietnam to fight for the Communist cause. Viet Thanh Nguyen's astonishing novel takes us inside the mind of this double agent, a man whose lofty ideals necessitate his betrayal of the people closest to him. A gripping spy novel, an astute exploration of extreme politics, and a moving love story, *The Sympathizer* explores a life between two worlds and examines the legacy of the Vietnam War in literature, film, and the wars we fight today.

5. The Kite Runner is the first novel by Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. Published in 2003 it tells the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of Afghanistan's monarchy through the Soviet invasion, the exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime.

Hosseini has commented that he considers *The Kite Runner* to be a father-son relationship story, emphasizing the familial aspects of the narrative, an element that he continued to use in his later works. Themes of guilt and redemption feature prominently in the novel, with a pivotal

scene depicting an act of sexual assault inflicted upon Amir's friend Hassan, which Amir fails to prevent, and which ends their friendship. The latter half of the book centers on Amir's attempts to atone for this transgression by rescuing Hassan's son two decades later.

6. The Night Watchman by Louise Erdich

Based on the extraordinary life of National Book Award-winning author Louise Erdrich's grandfather who worked as a night watchman and carried the fight against Native dispossession from rural North Dakota all the way to Washington, D.C., this powerful novel explores themes of love and death with lightness and gravity and unfolds with the elegant prose, sly humor, and depth of feeling of a master craftsman.

Thomas Wazhashk is the night watchman at the jewel bearing plant, the first factory located near the Turtle Mountain Reservation in rural North Dakota. He is also a Chippewa Council member who is trying to understand the consequences of a new "emancipation" bill on its way to the floor of the United States Congress. It is 1953 and he and the other council members know the bill isn't about freedom; Congress is fed up with Indians. The bill is a "termination" that threatens the rights of Native Americans to their land and their very identity. How can the government abandon treaties made in good faith with Native Americans "for as long as the grasses shall grow, and the rivers run"?