ABRIDGED CLASSICS

BRIEF SUMMARIES OF BOOKS YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO READ BUT PROBABLY DIDN'T

JOHN ATKINSON, creator of *Wrong Hands*

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HARPER DESIGN
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To Dylan, Jacob, and Madz

Epigraph

“Classic.” A book people praise and don’t read.

– MARK TWAIN

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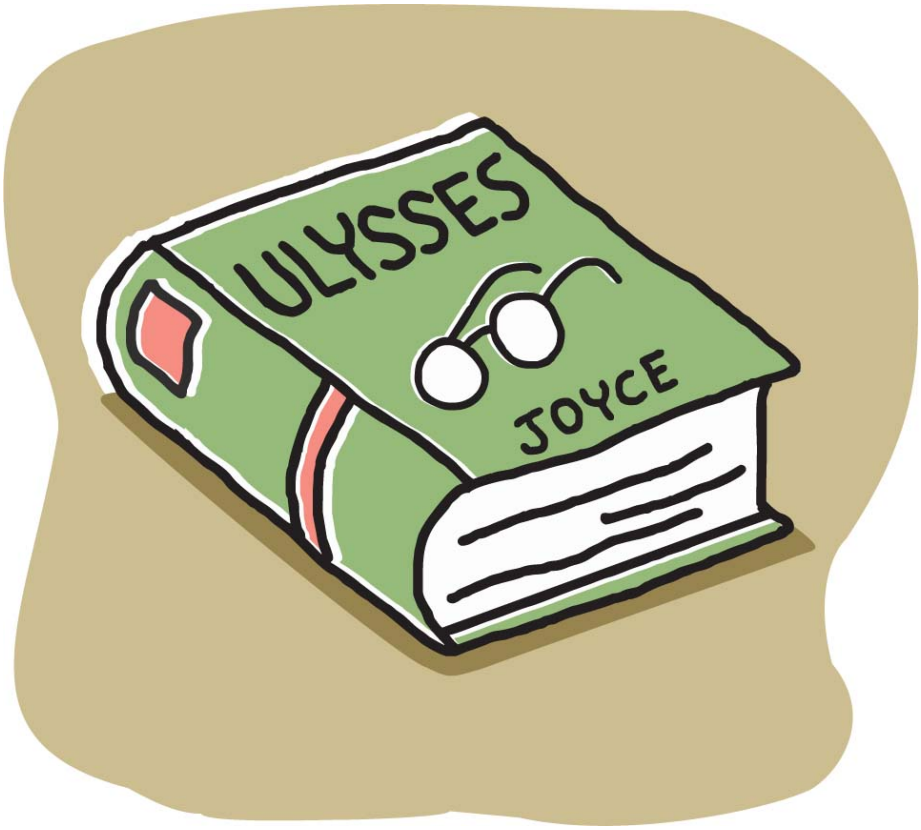
Ulysses

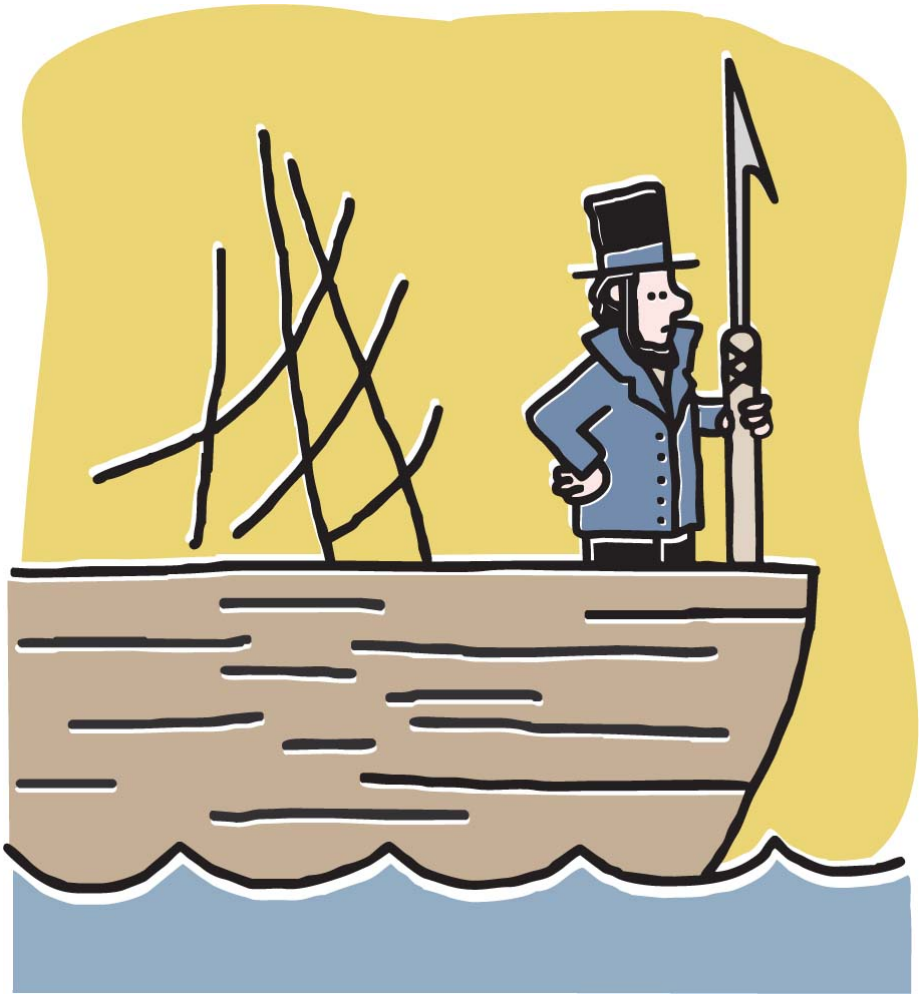
James Joyce



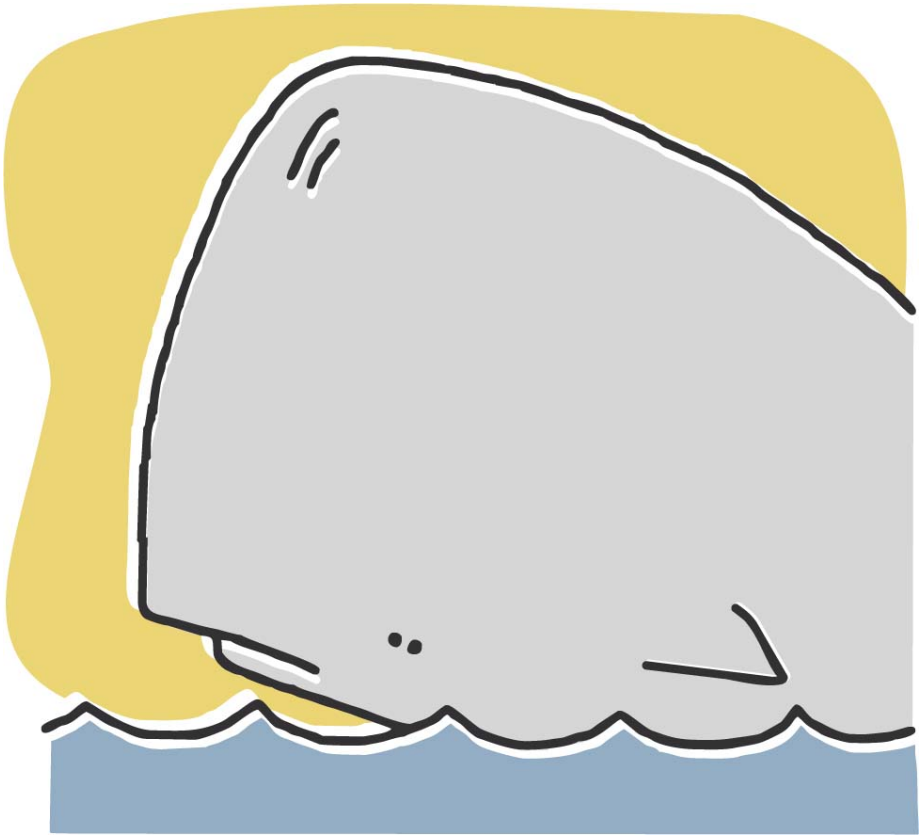
Dublin, something, something, something, run-on sentence.

Moby Dick

Herman Melville



Man vs. whale.



Whale wins.

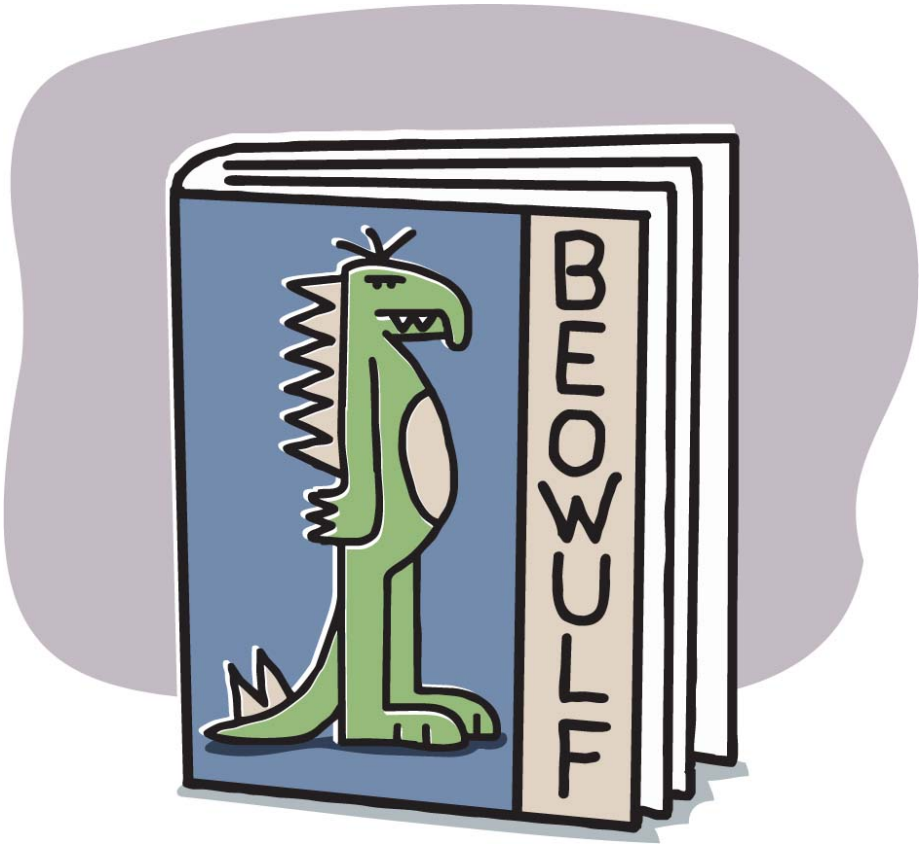
War and Peace

Leo Tolstoy

Everyone is sad.
It snows.

Beowulf

Unknown

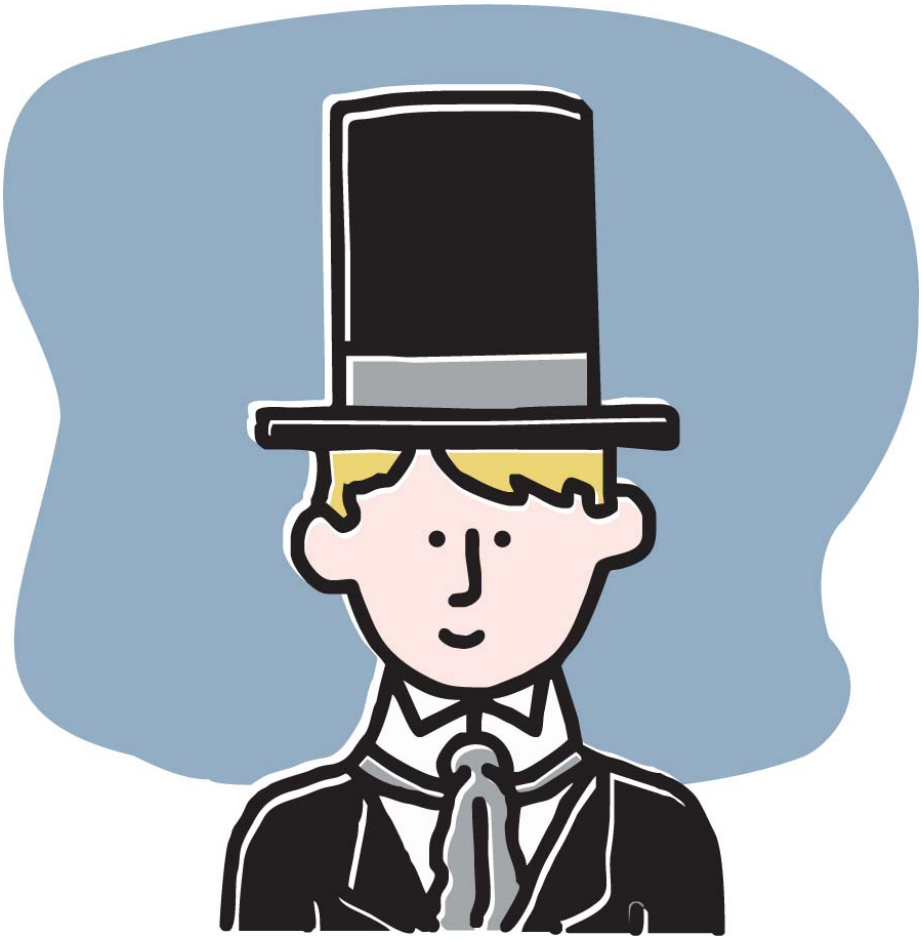


Hero kills monster.
Blah, blah, blah.
Dragon kills hero.

Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens

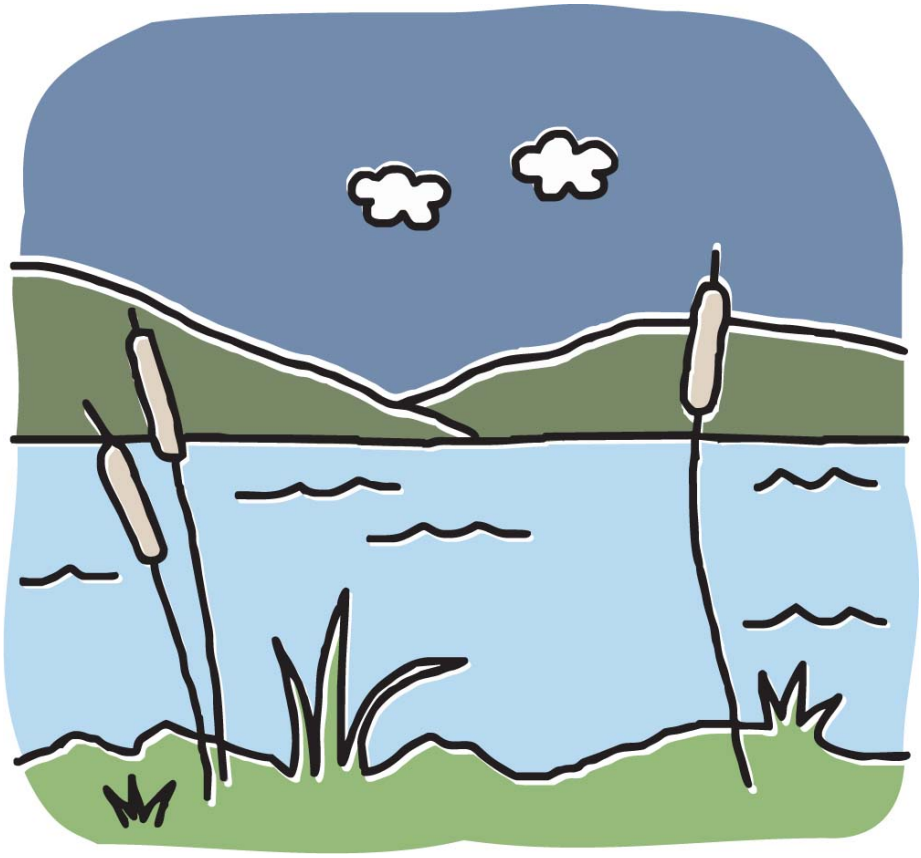
Orphan wants more.
He doesn't get it.



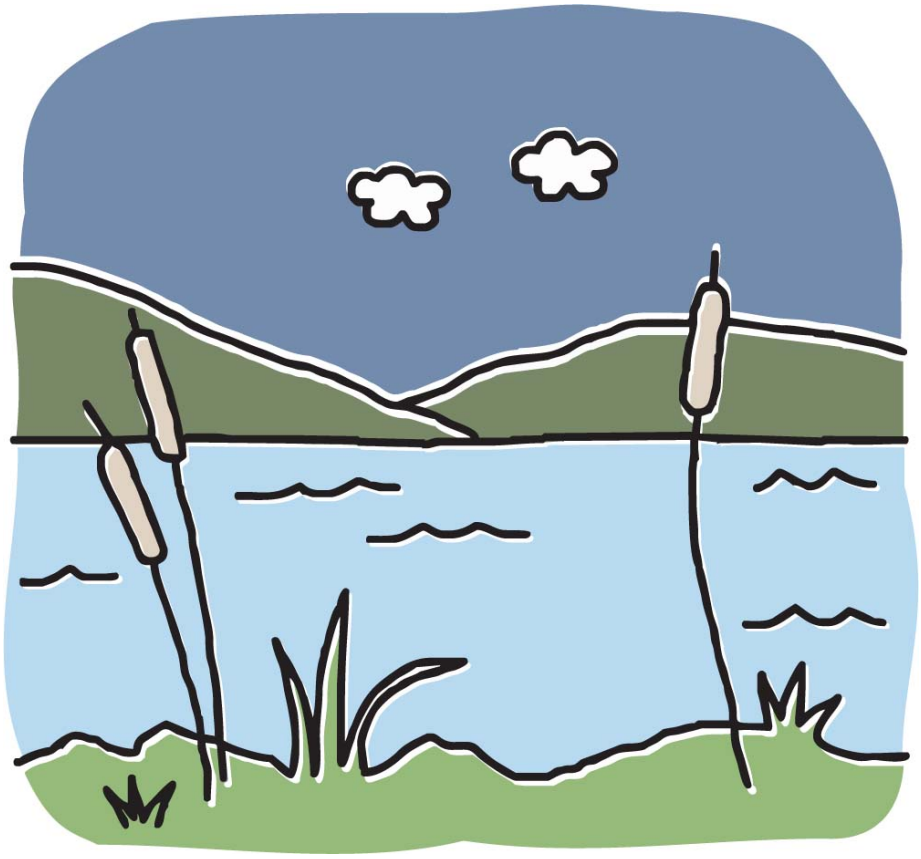
Wait, yes he does.

Walden

Henry David Thoreau



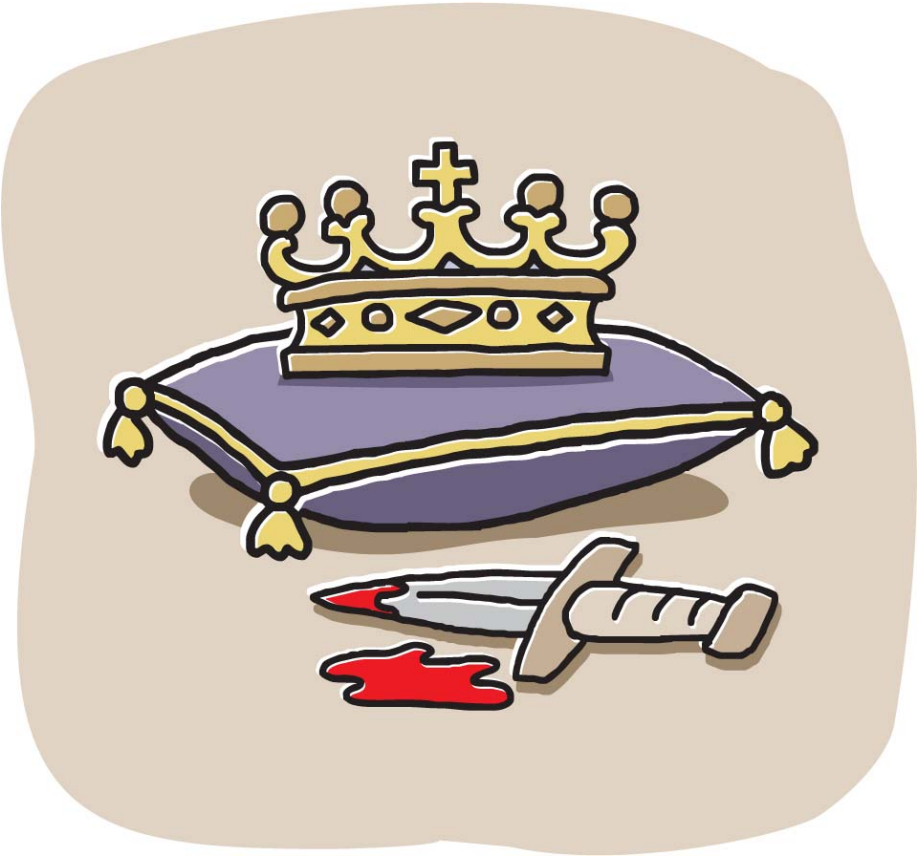
Man sits outside for two years.



Nothing happens.

Macbeth

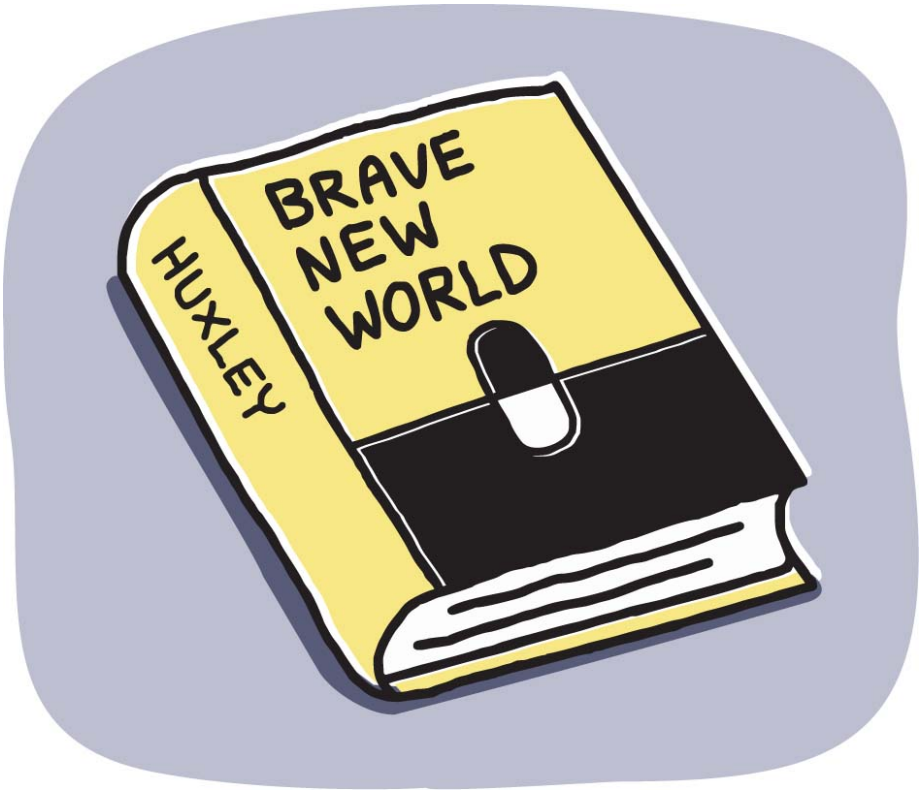
William Shakespeare



Old ladies convince a guy to ruin Scotland.

Brave New World

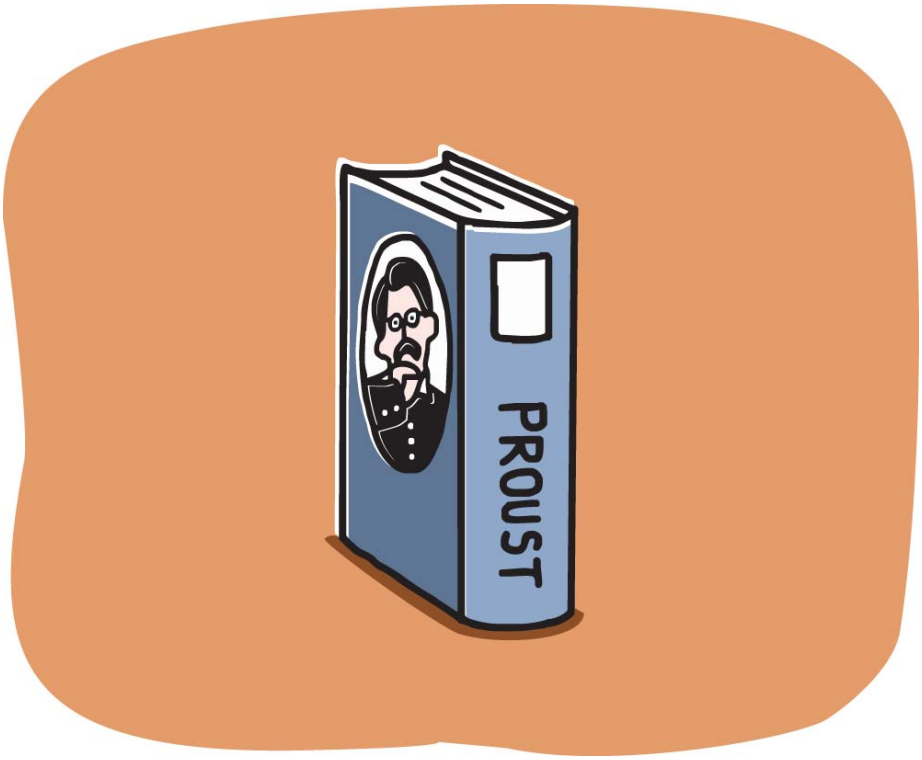
Aldous Huxley



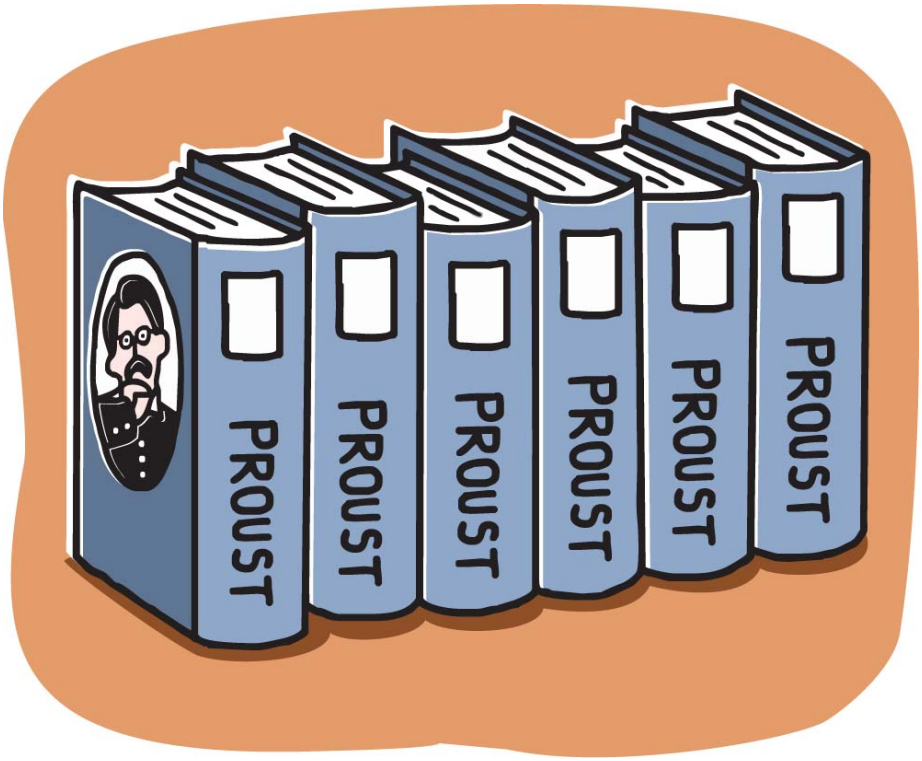
Everyone is high.
Nothing gets done.

In Search of Lost Time

Marcel Proust



Smell of cake reminds a guy of stuff.

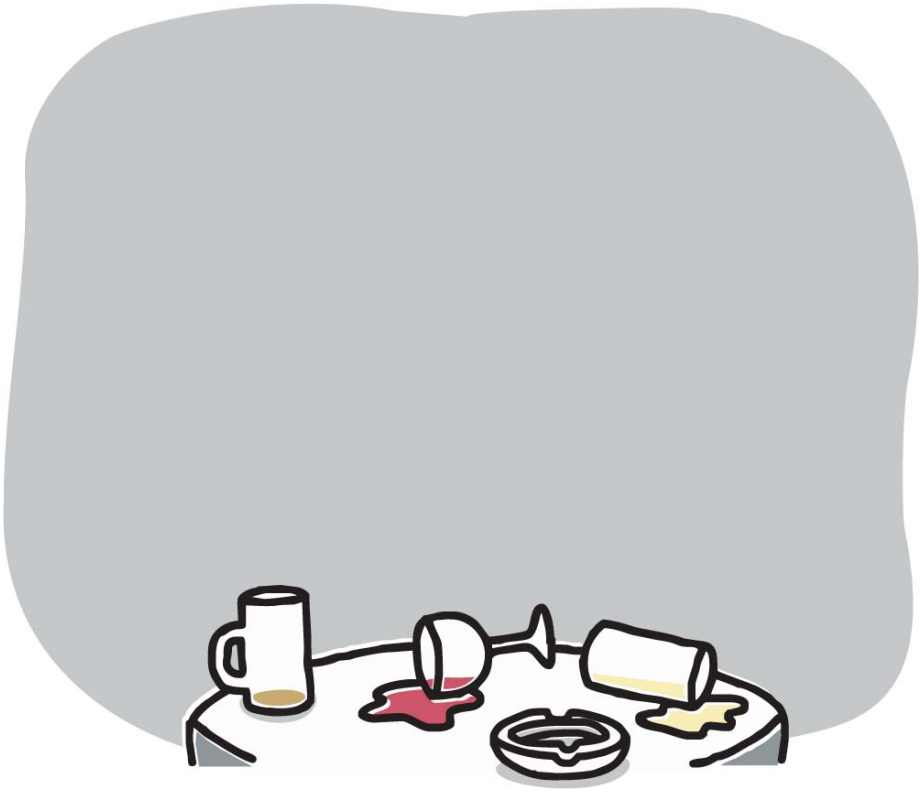


Four thousand pages of stuff.

The Sun also Rises

Ernest Hemingway

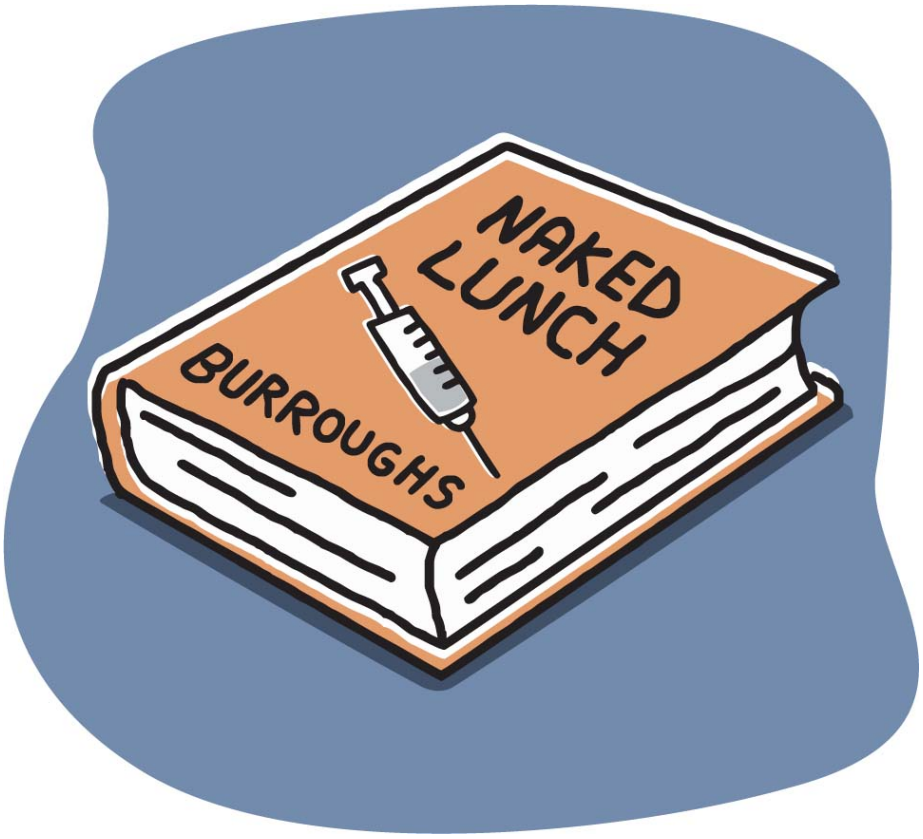
Lost generation gets drunk.



They're still lost.

Naked Lunch

William S. Burroughs



Heroin can really mess you up.
Anyway, here's an orgy.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Oscar Wilde

If looks could kill, they probably will.

The Brothers Karamazov

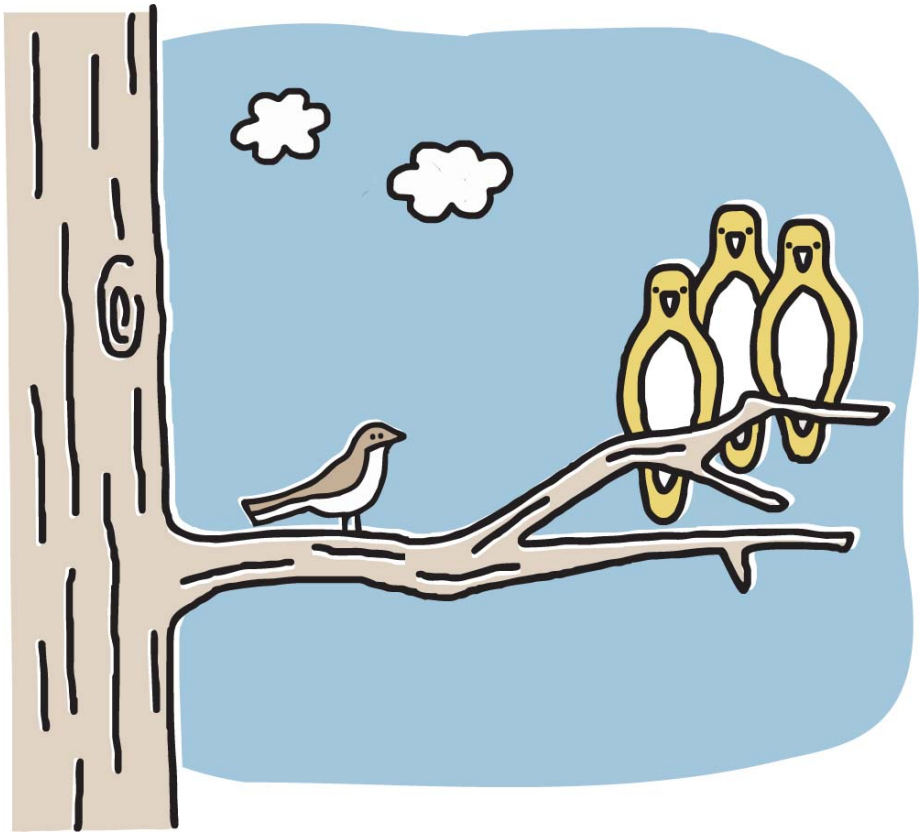
Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Brothers are very contentious, like their father.

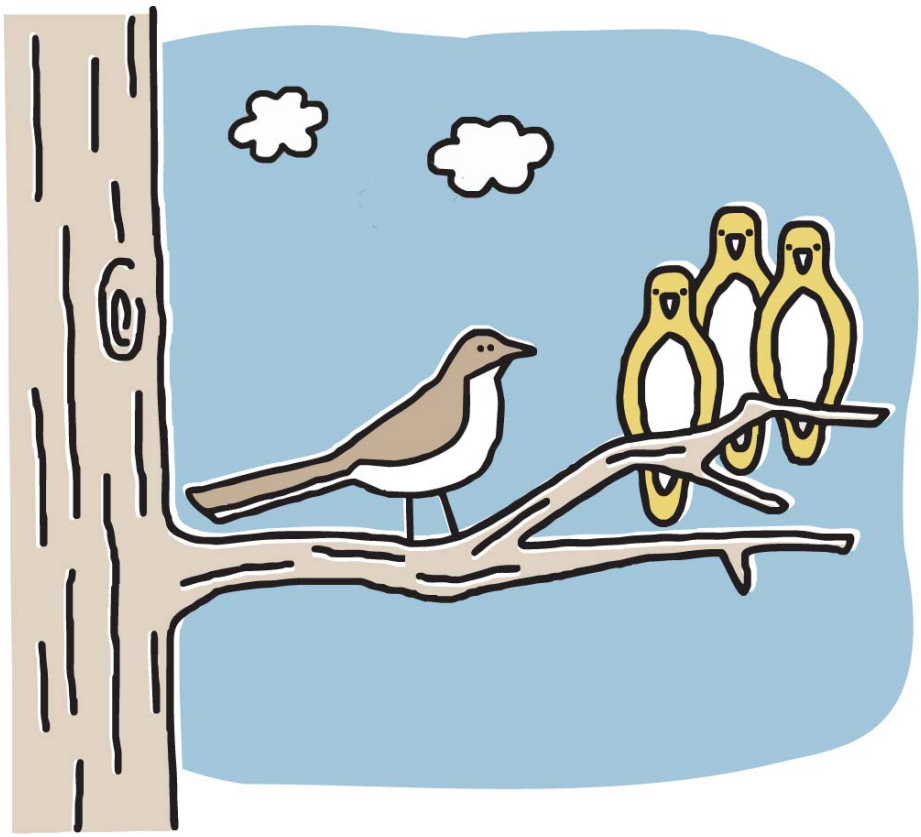
Also Russia.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Harper Lee



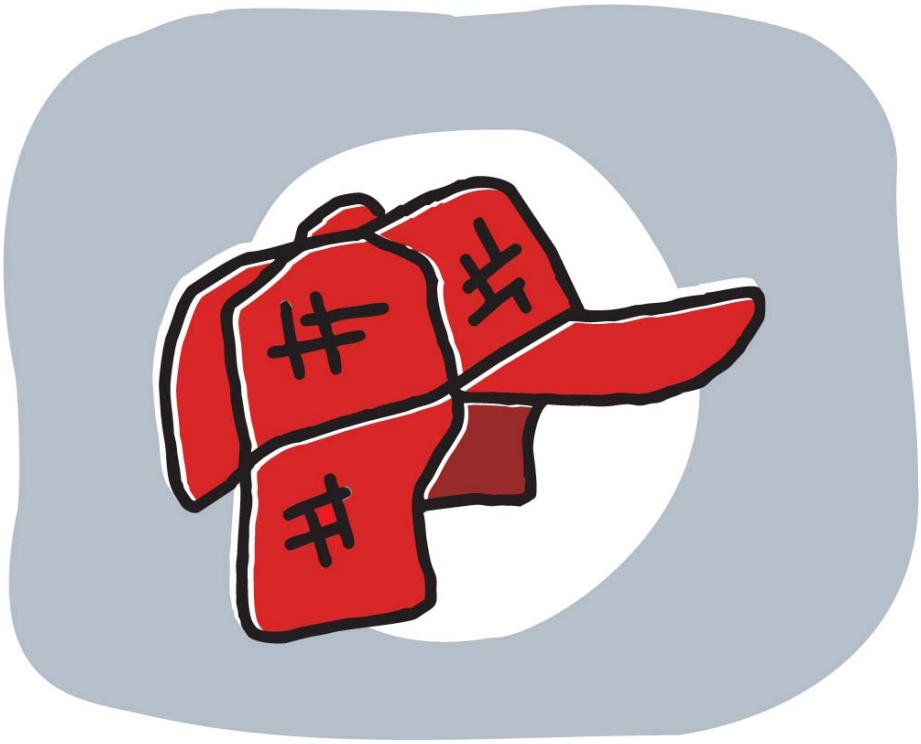
Kids don’t understand racism.



Adults don’t either.

The Catcher in the Rye

J. D. Salinger



Moody teen complains a lot.
He has a red hat.

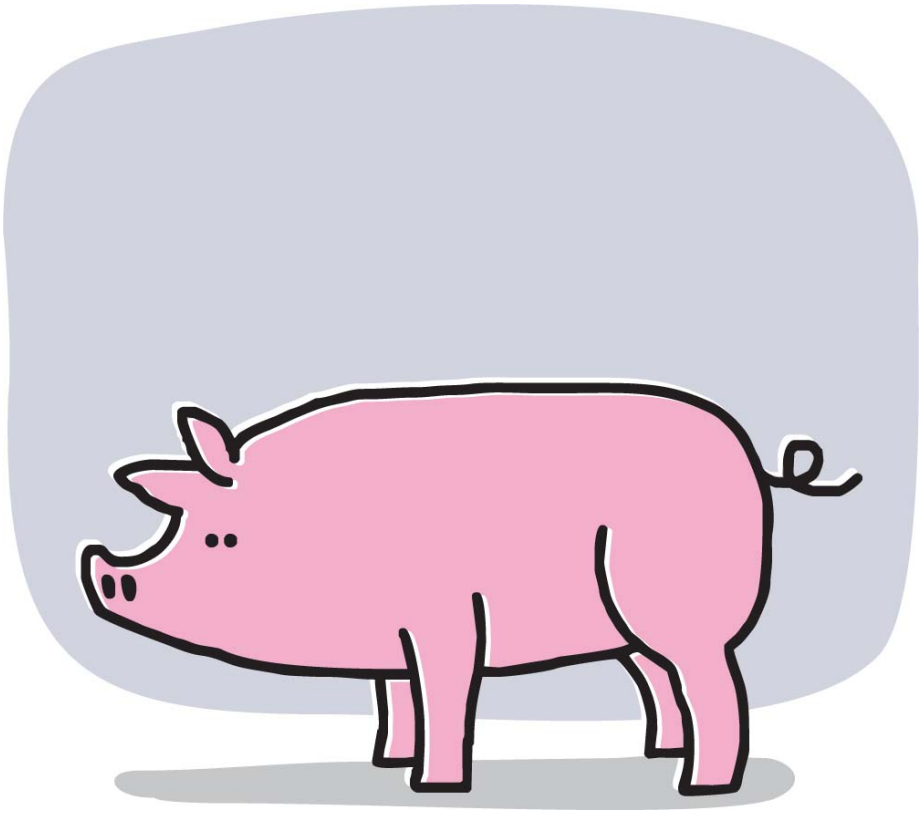
The Faerie Queen

Edmund Spenser

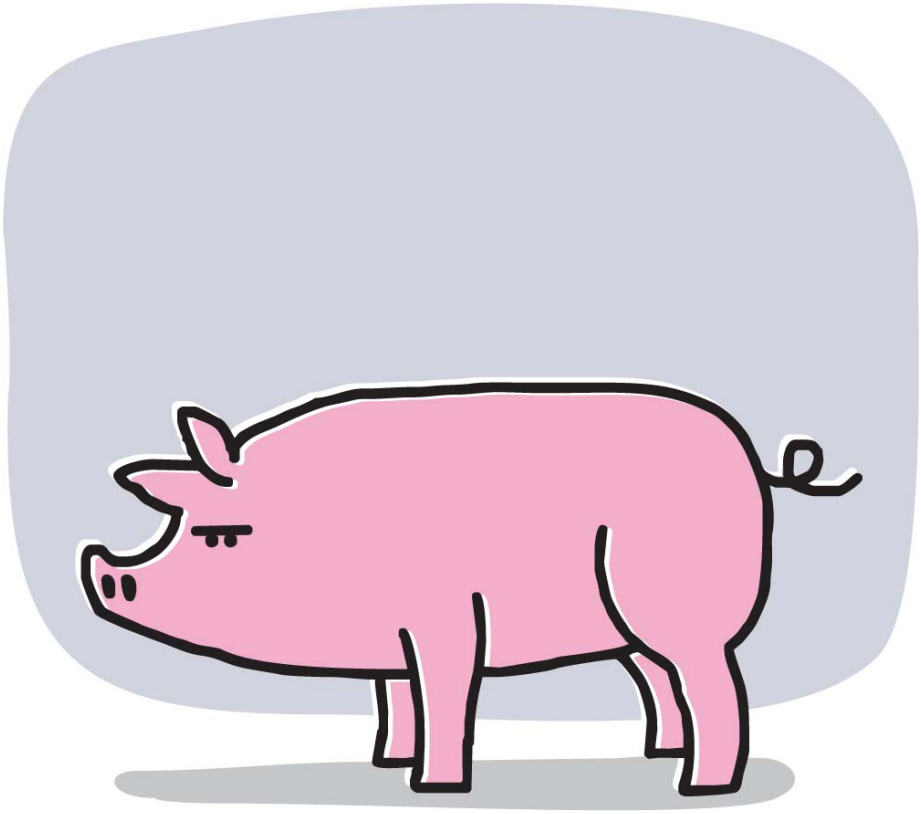
"How Not to Be a Jerk" for knights.

Animal Farm

George Orwell



Four legs good, two legs bad.



Then four legs bad.

Pride and Prejudice

Jane Austen

Girl hates wealthy aristocrat.

Wait, no she doesn't.

The Odyssey

Homer

War veteran takes forever to get home, then kills everyone.

The Iliad

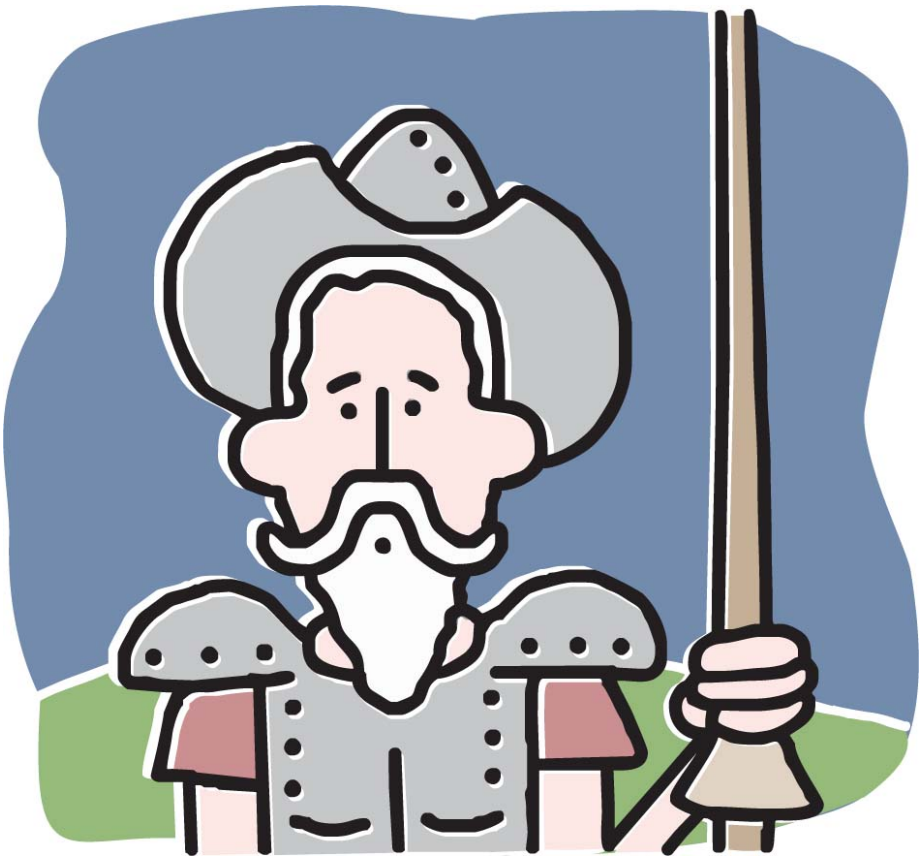
Homer

Not the Odyssey.

Don Quixote

Miguel de Cervantes

Guy attacks windmills.



Also, he's mad.

Crime and Punishment

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Murderer feels bad.
Confesses. Goes to jail.

Feels better.

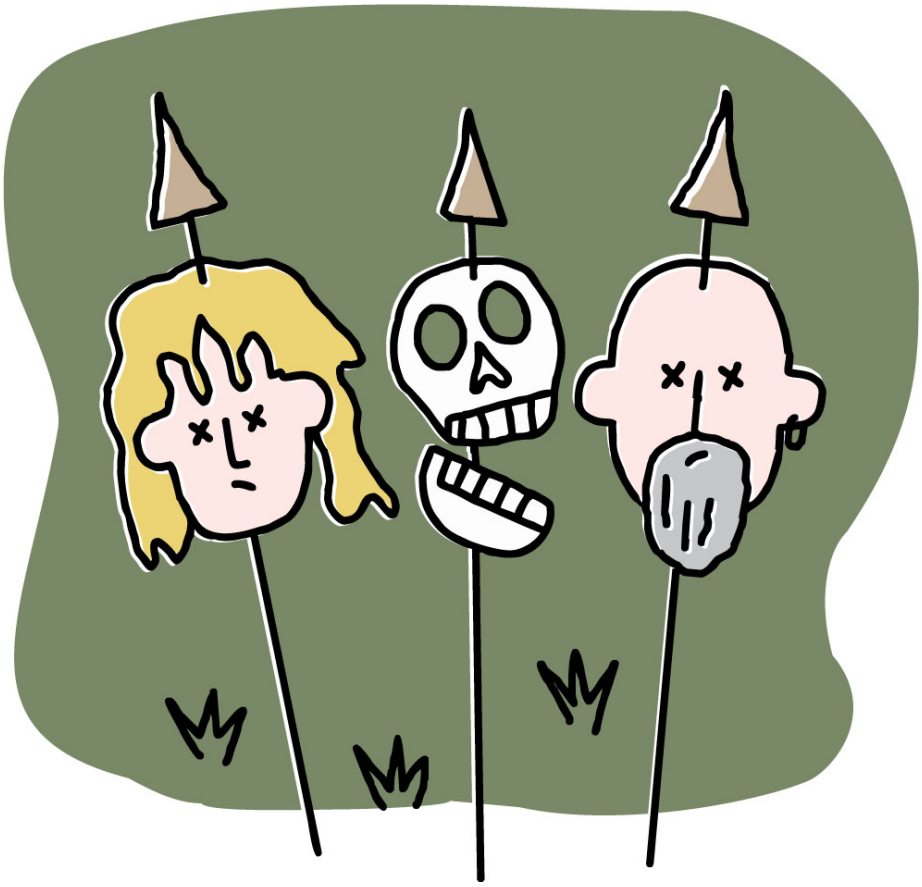
Catch-22

Joseph Heller

War is crazy, unless you are.
Orr maybe not.

Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad



Colonialism ruins everything.
Also jungle metaphors.

The Republic

Plato

A really, really long city council meeting.

Socrates is there.

Wuthering Heights

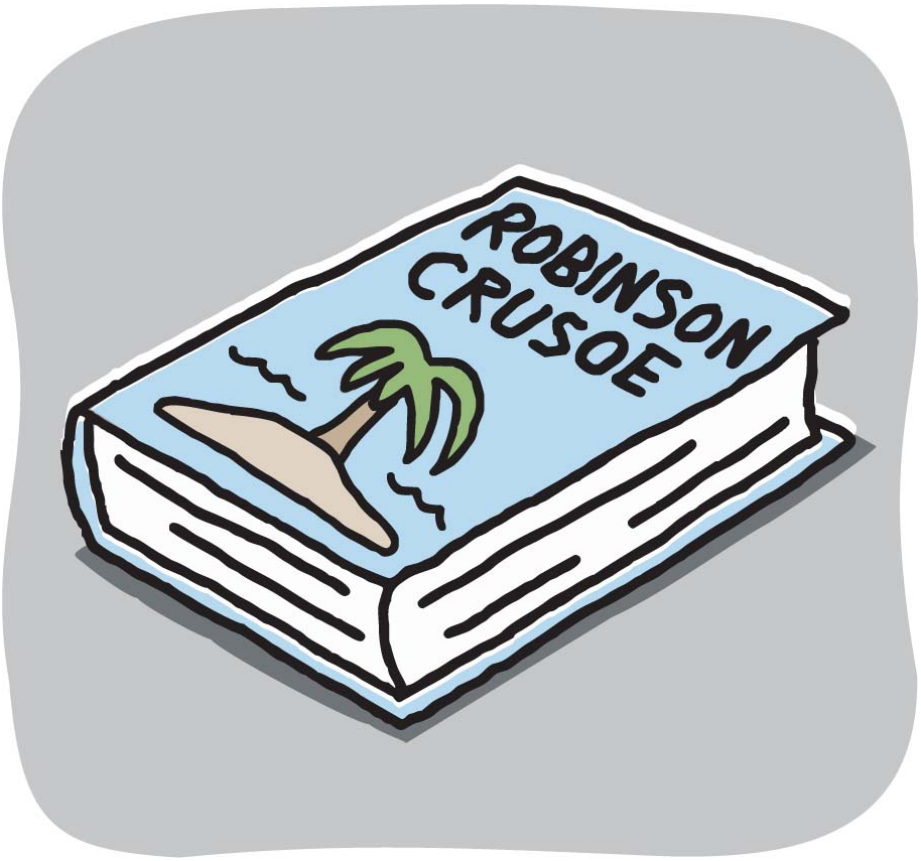
Emily Brontë

A sort-of brother and sister fall in love.

It’s foggy.

Robinson Crusoe

Daniel Defoe



Old-timey Gilligan's Island.

The Pearl

John Steinbeck

Owning stuff is problematic.

The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck

Farming sucks. Road trip!

Road trip sucks.

A Farewell to Arms

Ernest Hemingway

There are no winners in war.

And very few adjectives.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Old sailor kills a bird, then interrupts a wedding.

Othello

William Shakespeare

A lost hankie ruins everyone's relationship.

On the Road

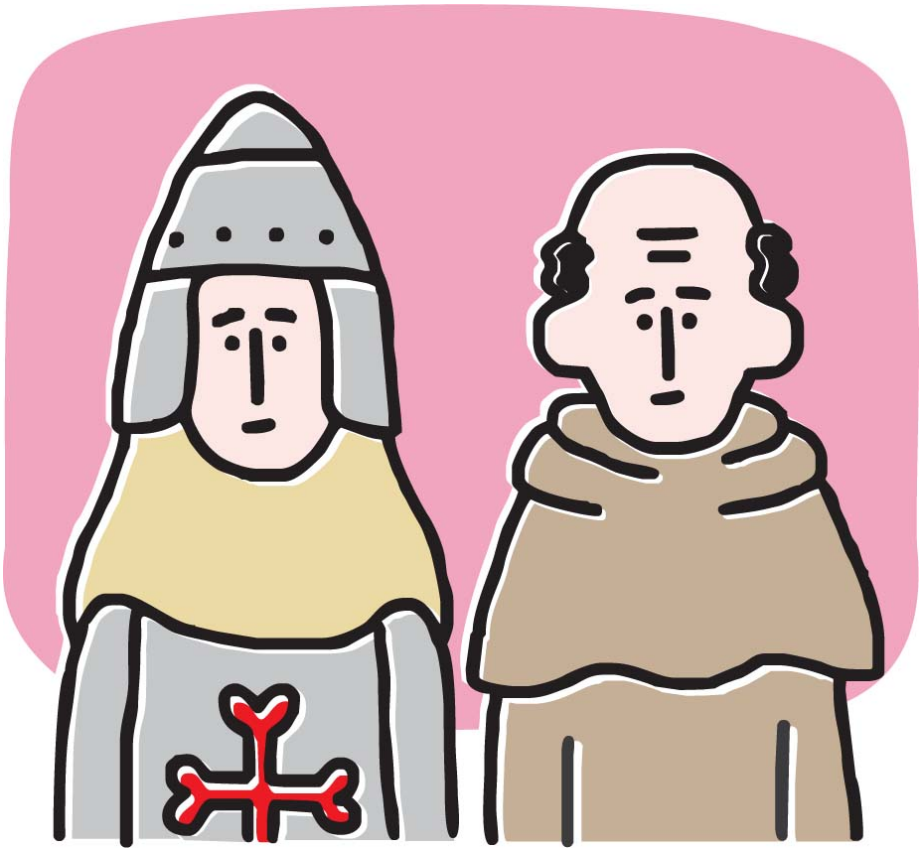
Jack Kerouac

Post-war America is complicated and depressing.

Booze helps.

The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer



Medieval version of "99 Bottles of Beer."

With sex and poop jokes.

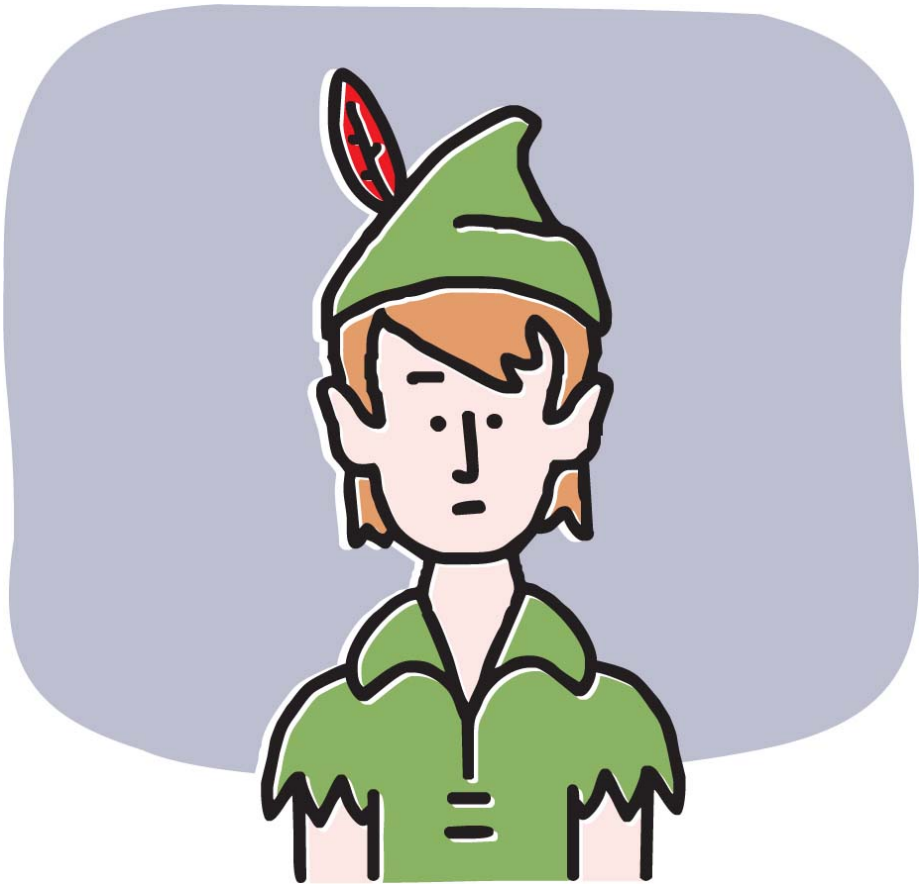
The Divine Comedy: Inferno

Dante Alighieri

All hell breaks loose.

Peter Pan

J. M. Barrie

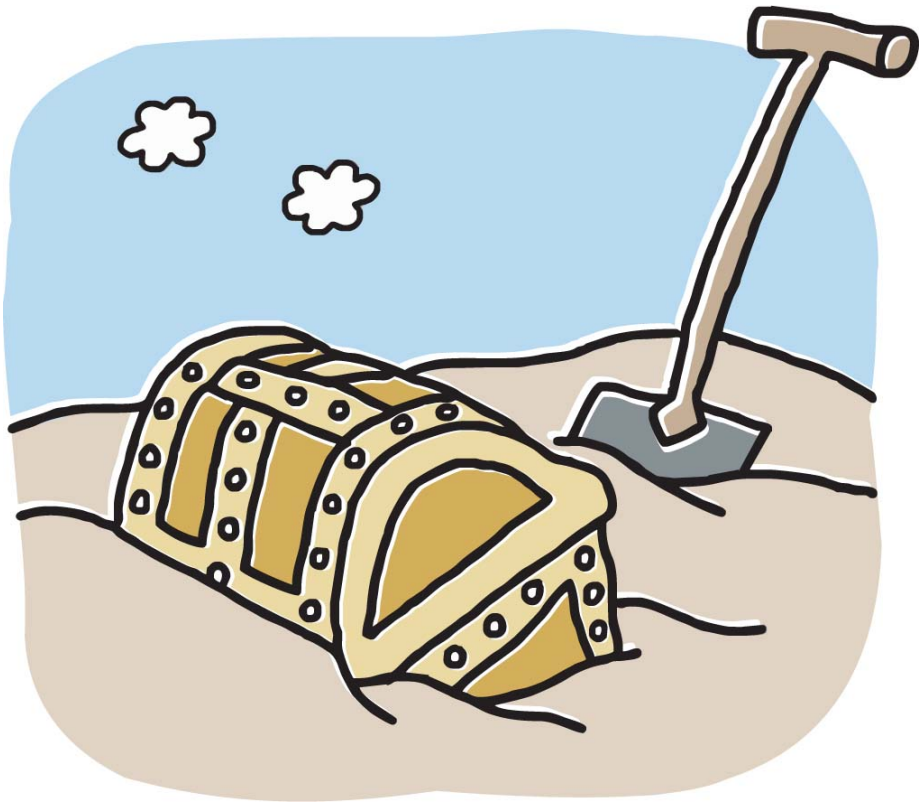


Some kids and a crocodile pester an amputee.

Treasure Island

Robert Louis Stevenson

Booty hunt goes awry.

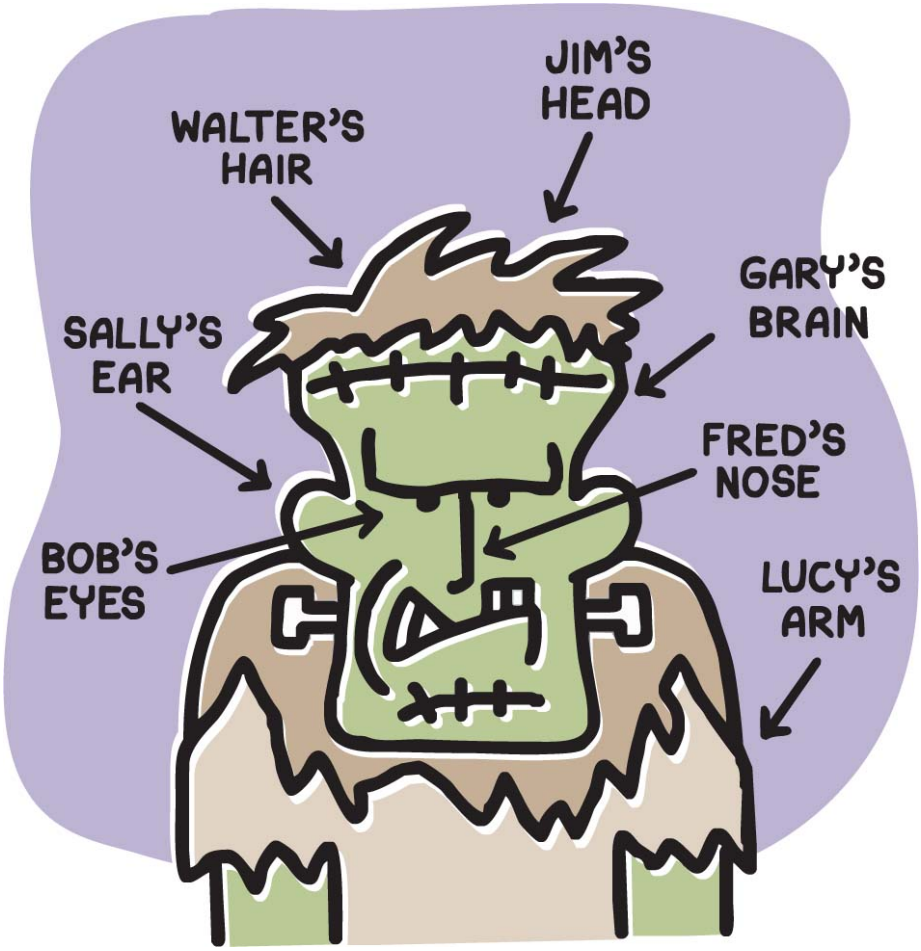


Then it doesn't.
Then it does. Then it doesn't.

Frankenstein

Mary Shelley

Monsters are people too.



Pieces of people.

Gulliver's Travels

Jonathan Swift

Hapless sailor is stranded on different lands inhabited by sociopolitical metaphors.

1984

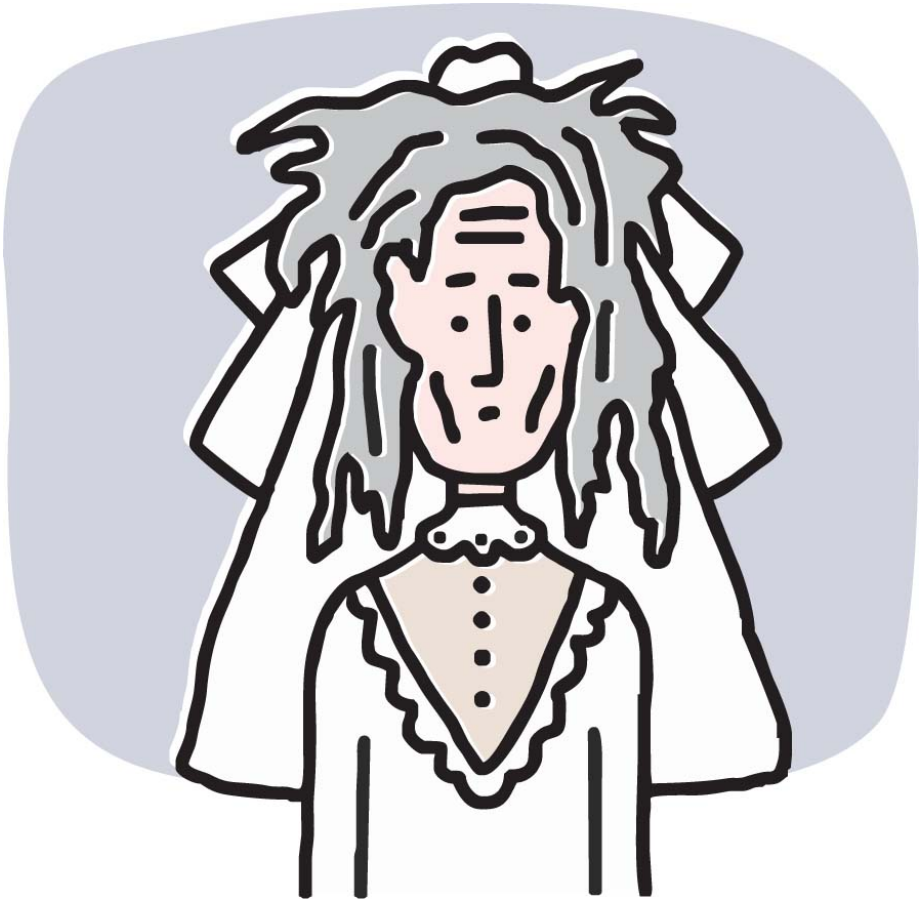
George Orwell

Vision of a dystopian future (*now called Tuesday*).

Great Expectations

Charles Dickens

Poor boy's benefactor is a crook.

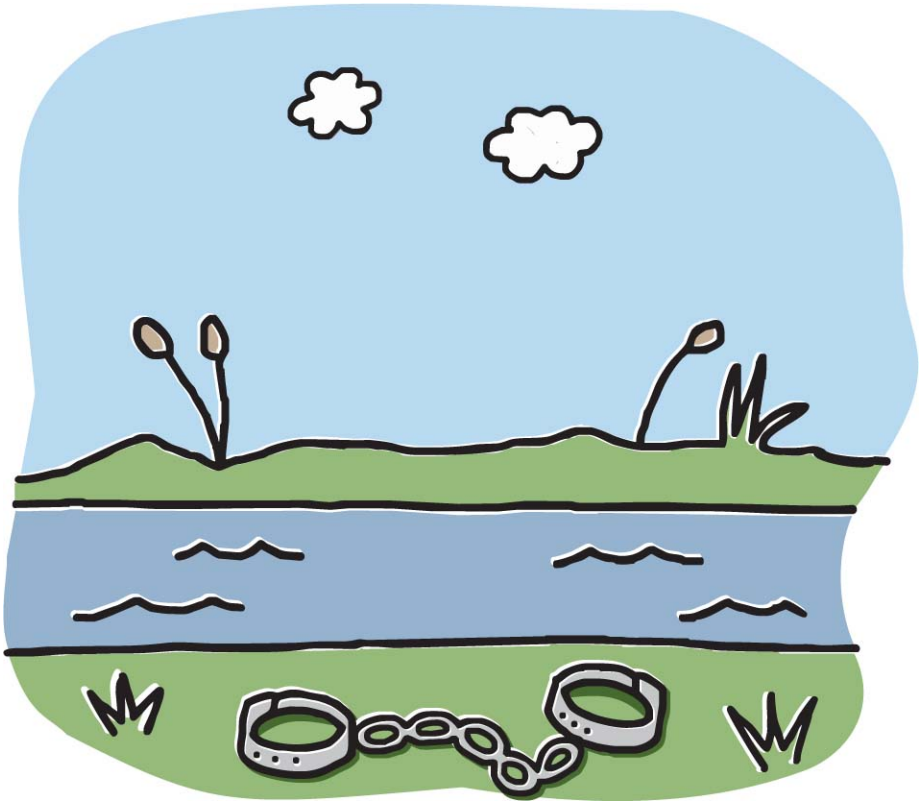


Old lady is no help at all.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain

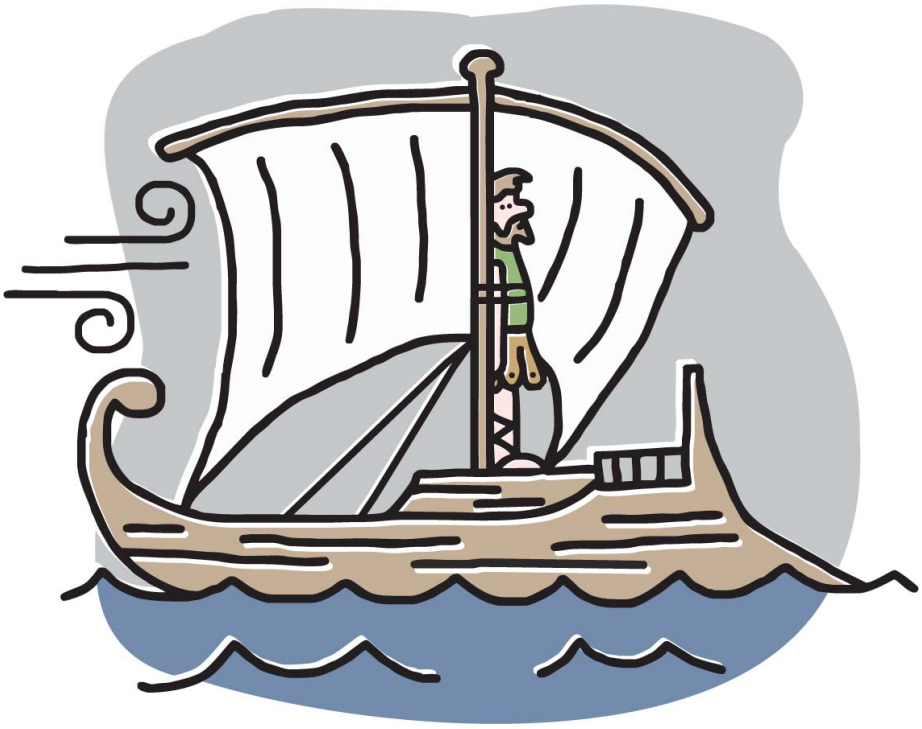
Kid takes a trip on a raft.
Hijinks ensue.



Also slavery.

The Aeneid

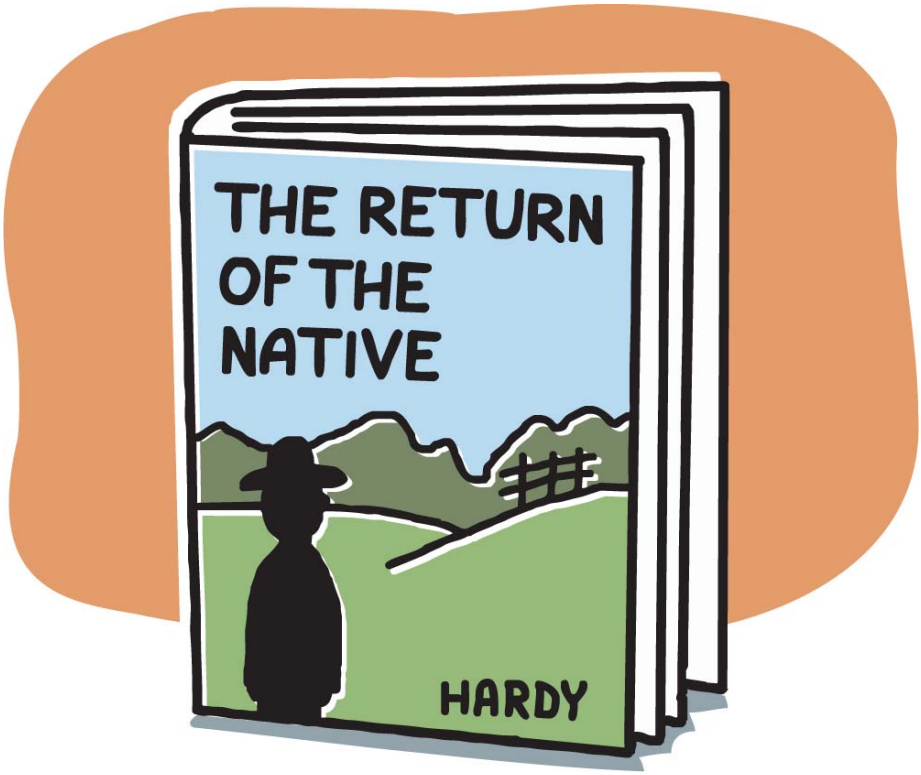
Virgil



Angry gods make guy's trip to Italy an epic ordeal.

The Return of the Native

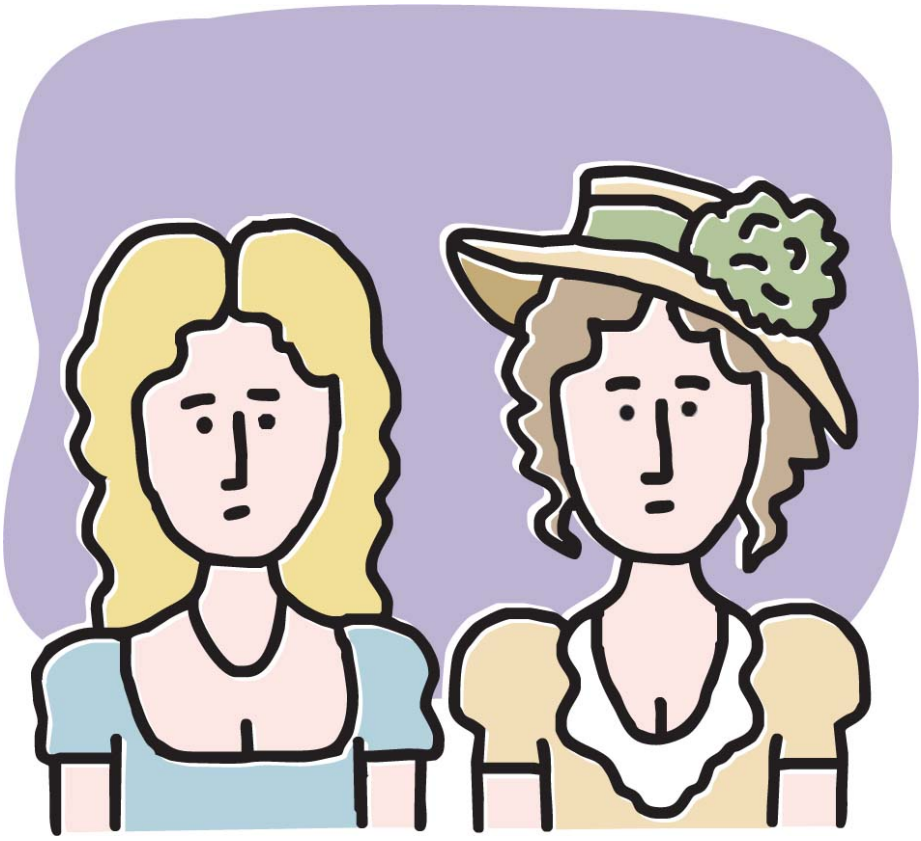
Thomas Hardy



Local man comes home and ruins everything.

Sense and Sensibility

Jane Austen

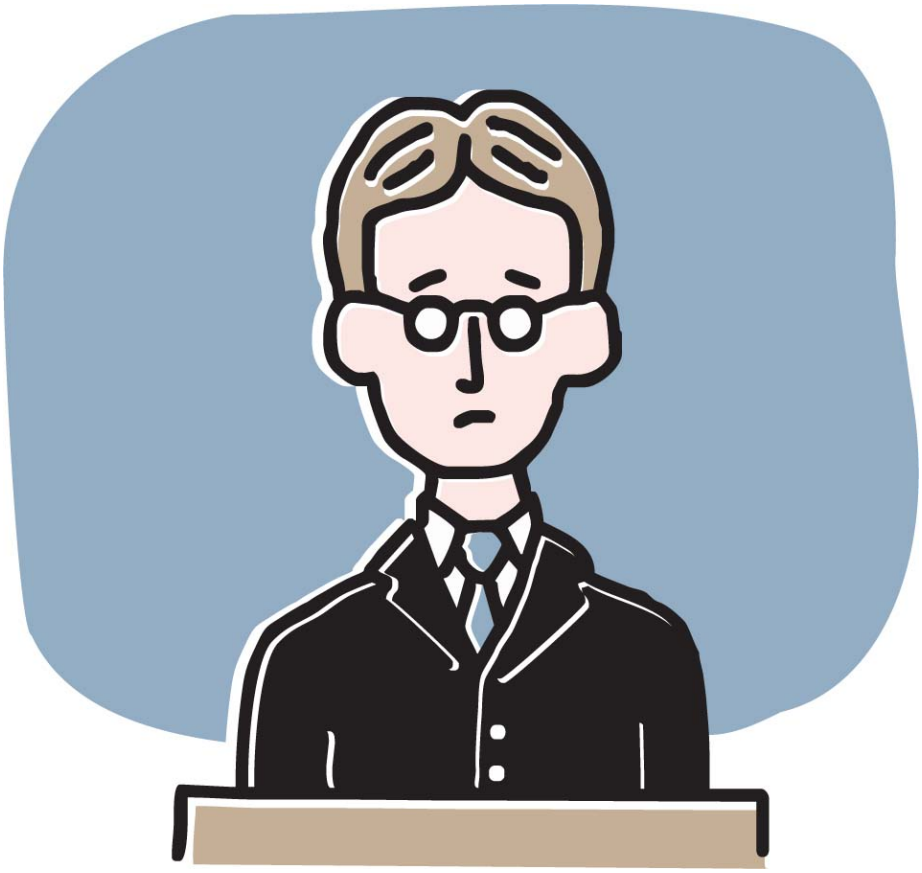


Two sisters catch husbands.

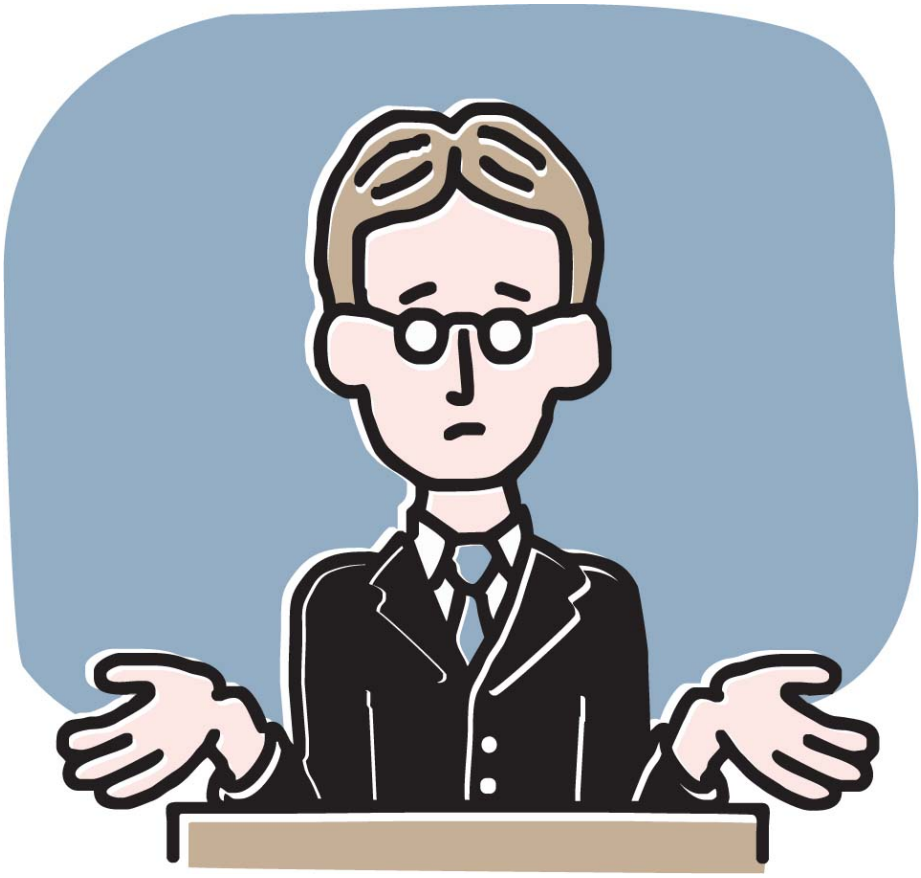
And one catches a cold.

The Trial

Franz Kafka



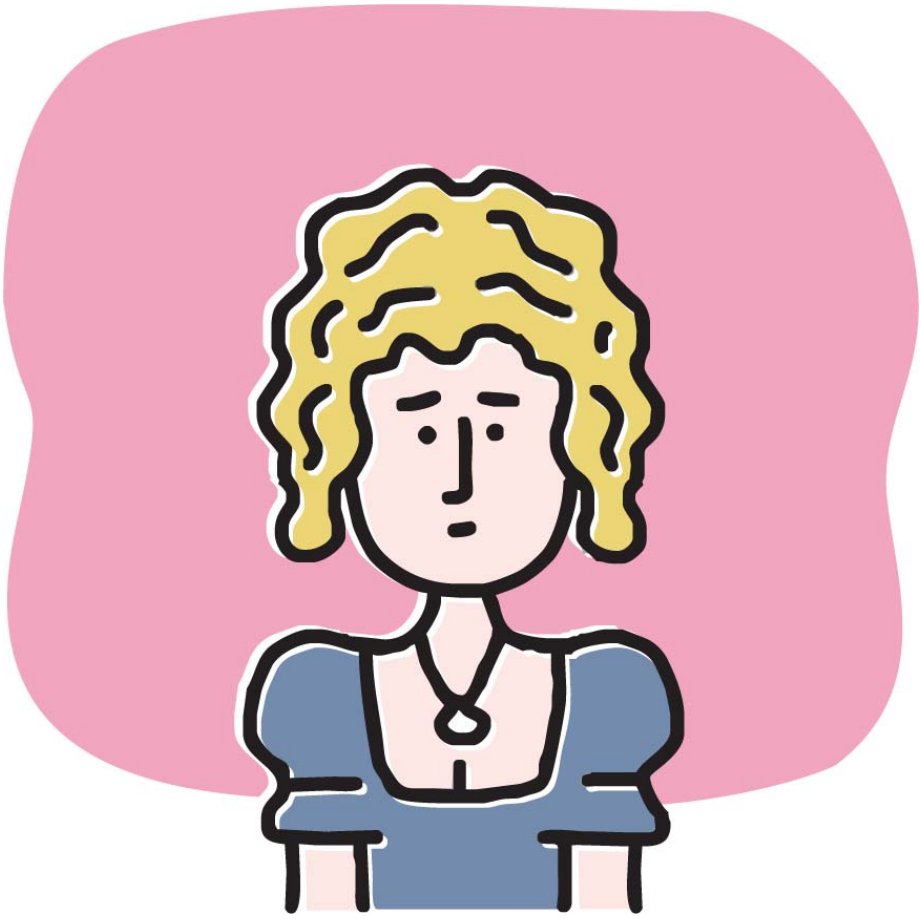
Guy is prosecuted.
No one knows why.



We don’t know why either.

Emma

Jane Austen



Busybody badgers everyone to get married.

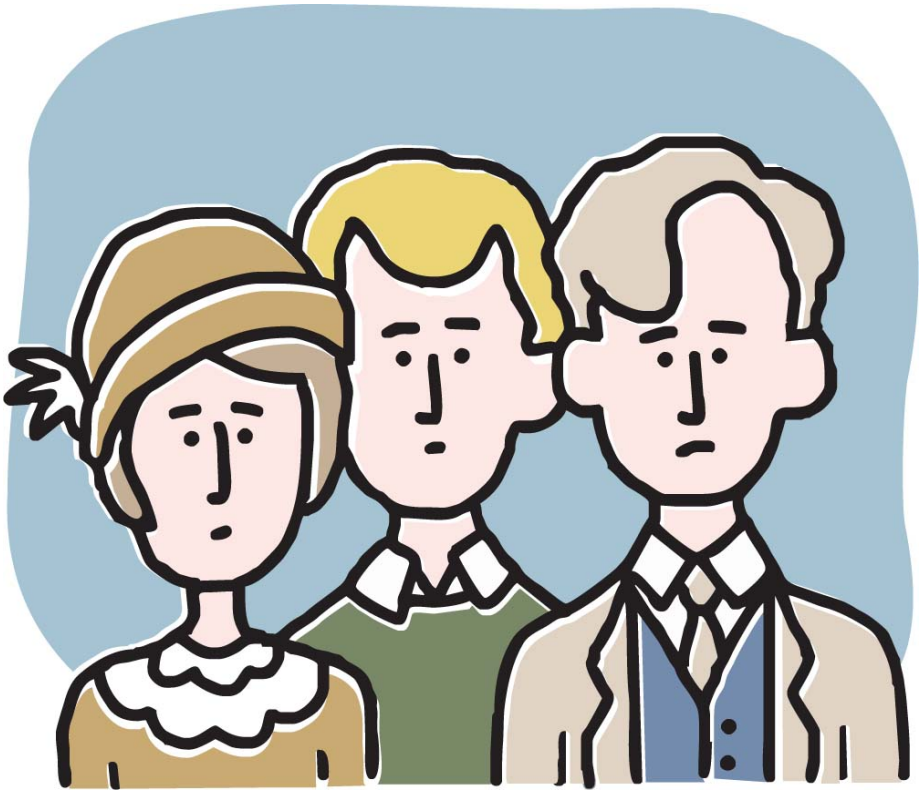
The Lord of the Rings Trilogy

J. R. R. Tolkien

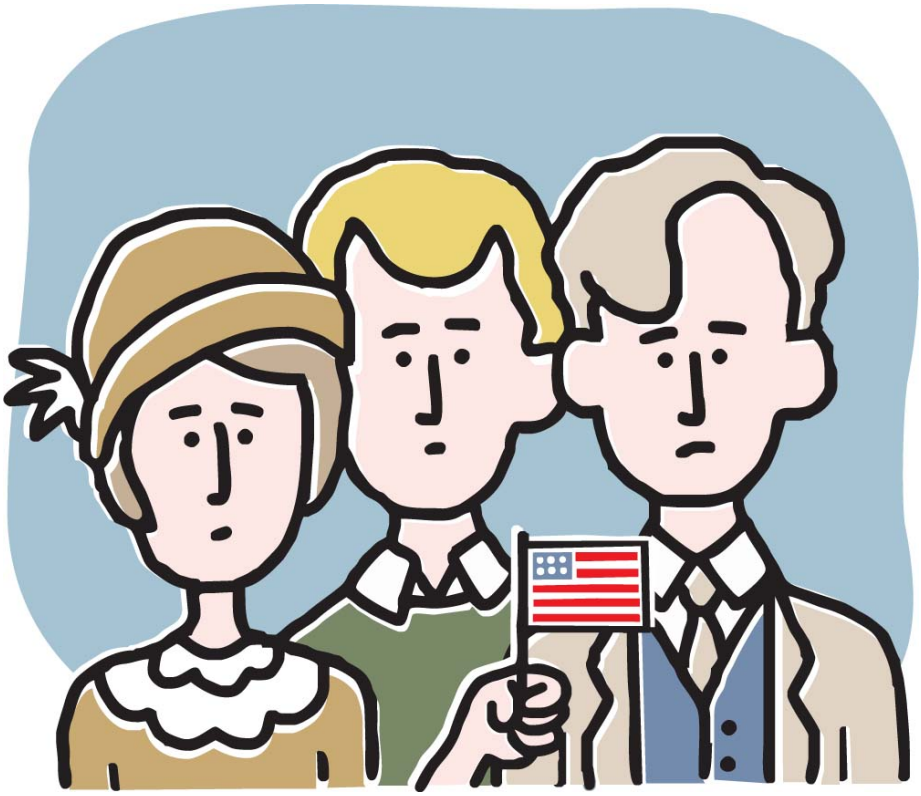
Middle-earth's epic jewelry return policy.

The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald



Rich, selfish people hang out.



Something about the American dream.

King Lear

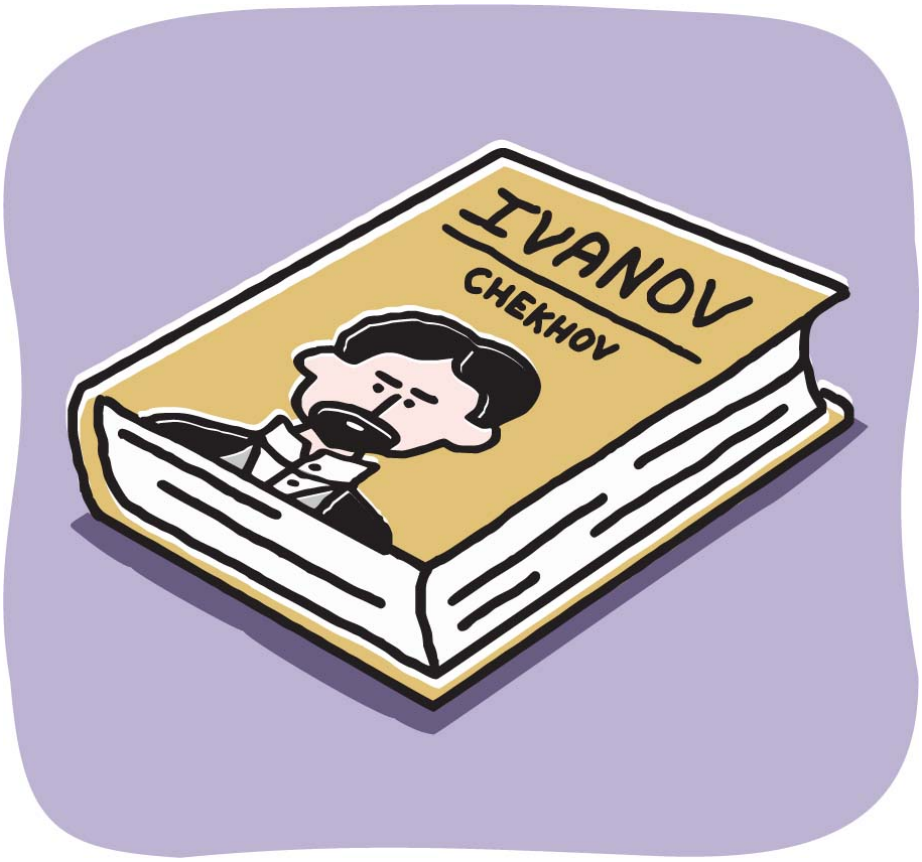
William Shakespeare

Old king goes mad.

Everyone dies.

Ivanov

Anton Chekhov



Guy hates everything.
Gets married. Kills himself.

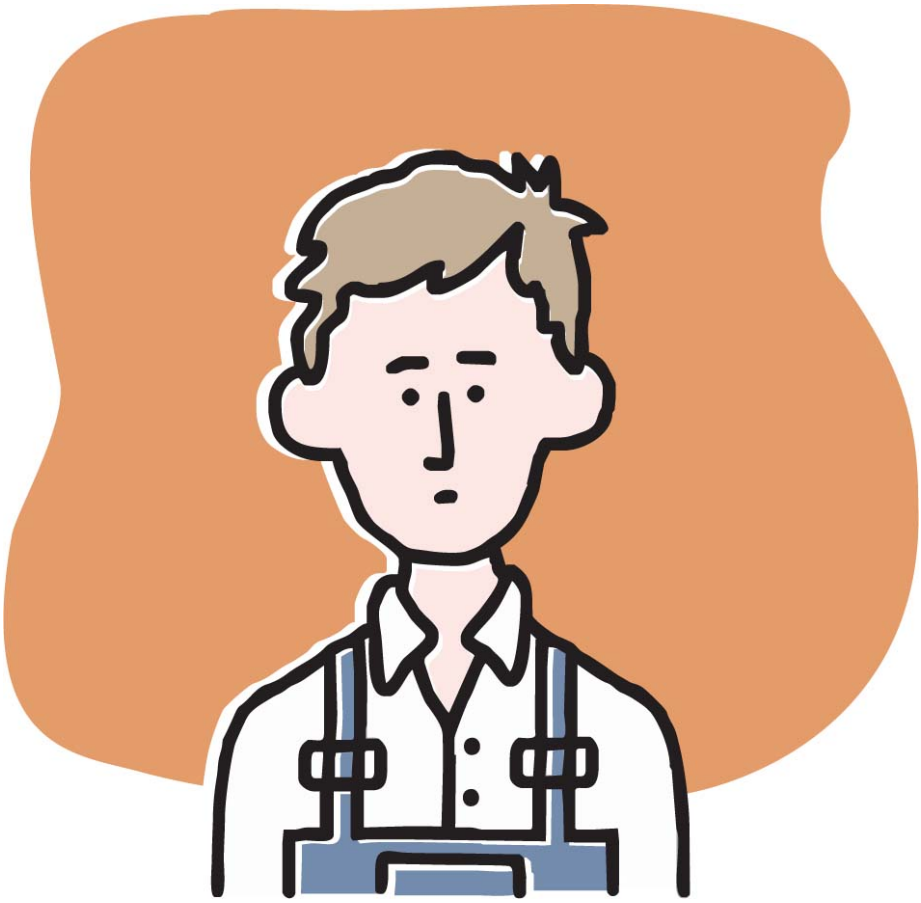
The Crucible

Arthur Miller

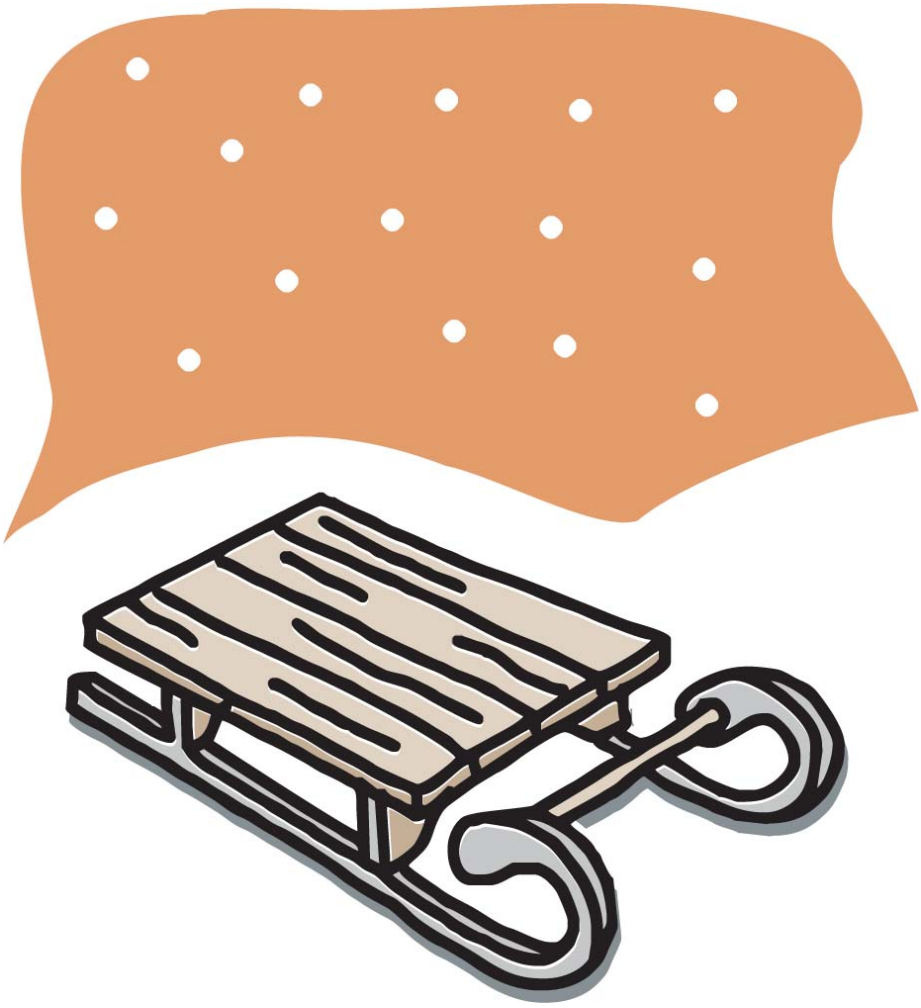
Hunt for witches turns into a witch hunt.

Ethan Frome

Edith Wharton



Farmer's life can't possibly get any worse.



Hey, a sled!

Anna Karenina

Leo Tolstoy

Woman has an affair.
Then it ends.

Then a train.

Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë

Workplace romance gets fiery.

Twelfth Night

William Shakespeare

Identity theft and cross-dressing causes confusion and marriage.

The Da Vinci Code

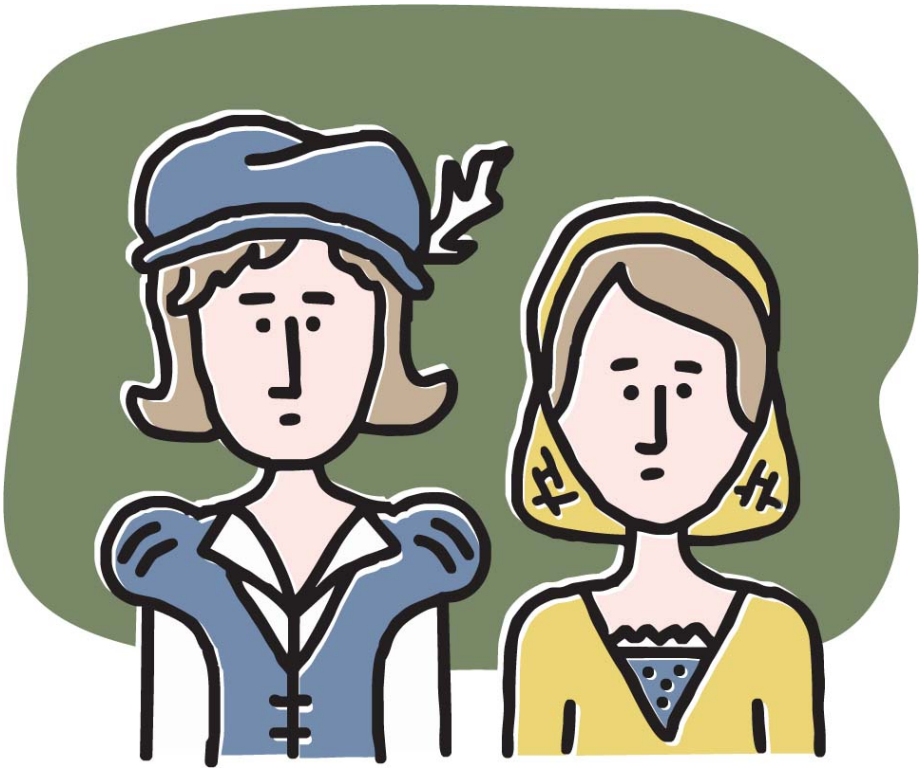
Dan Brown

Things are hidden in art.

Jesus things.

Romeo and Juliet

William Shakespeare

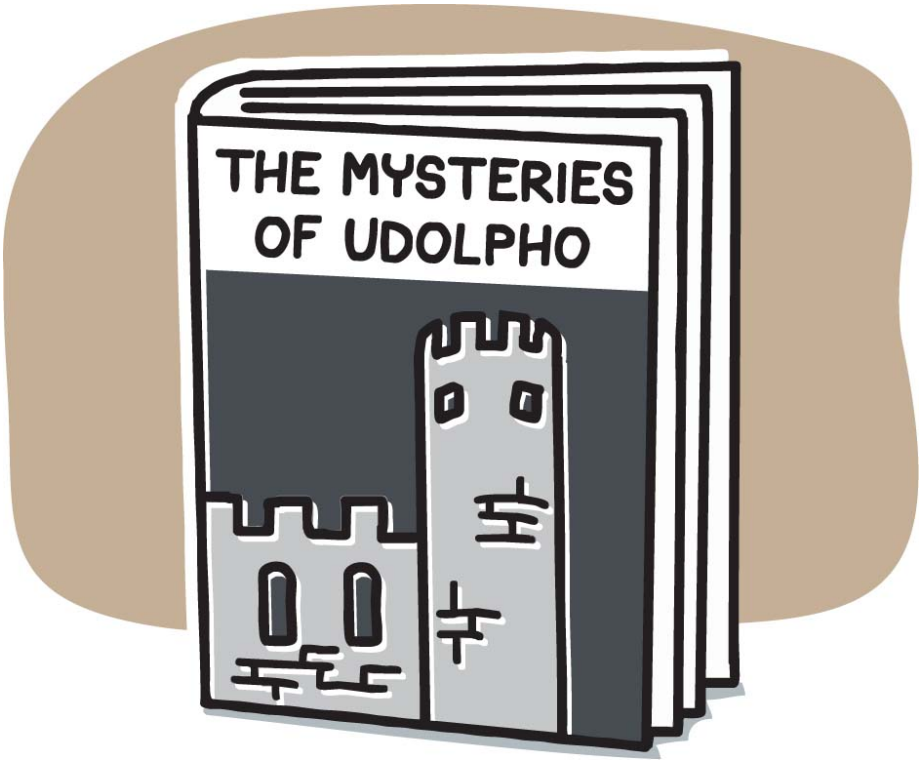


Teen lovers commit suicide.
Wait, no they don't.

Okay, now they do.

The Mysteries of Udolpho

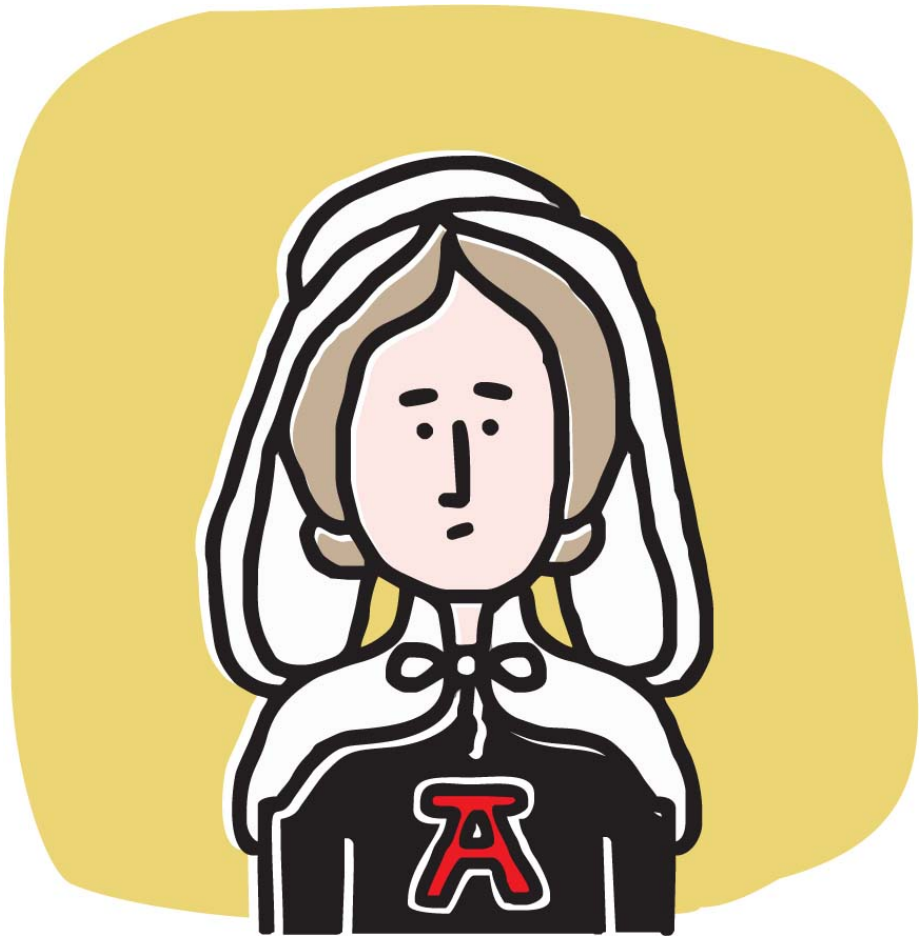
Ann Radcliffe



Gothic Scooby-Doo.
With lots of secret passages, fainting, and punctuation.

The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne

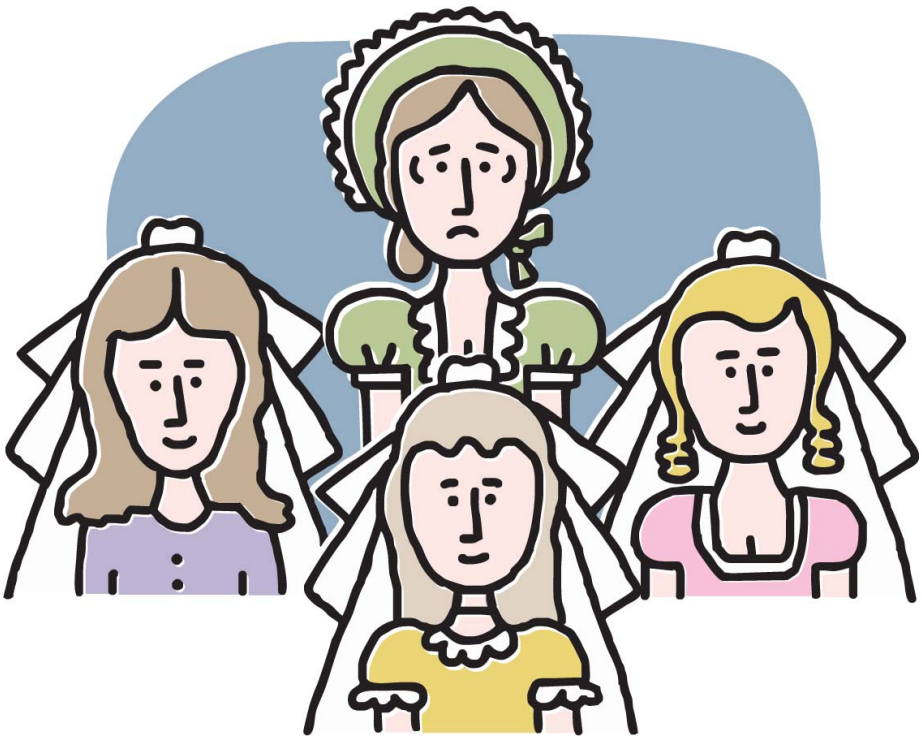


Puritan tale of adultery, mockery, and embroidery.

Little Women

Louisa May Alcott

Four sisters get married.



Except Beth.

The Pilgrim's Progress

John Bunyan

A guy named Christian walks to Heaven.

You get the idea.

Madame Bovary

Gustave Flaubert

Bored woman misbehaves, then kills herself.

The Stranger

Albert Camus

Mother dies. Stranger dies.
Existentialism lives.

To the Lighthouse

Virginia Woolf

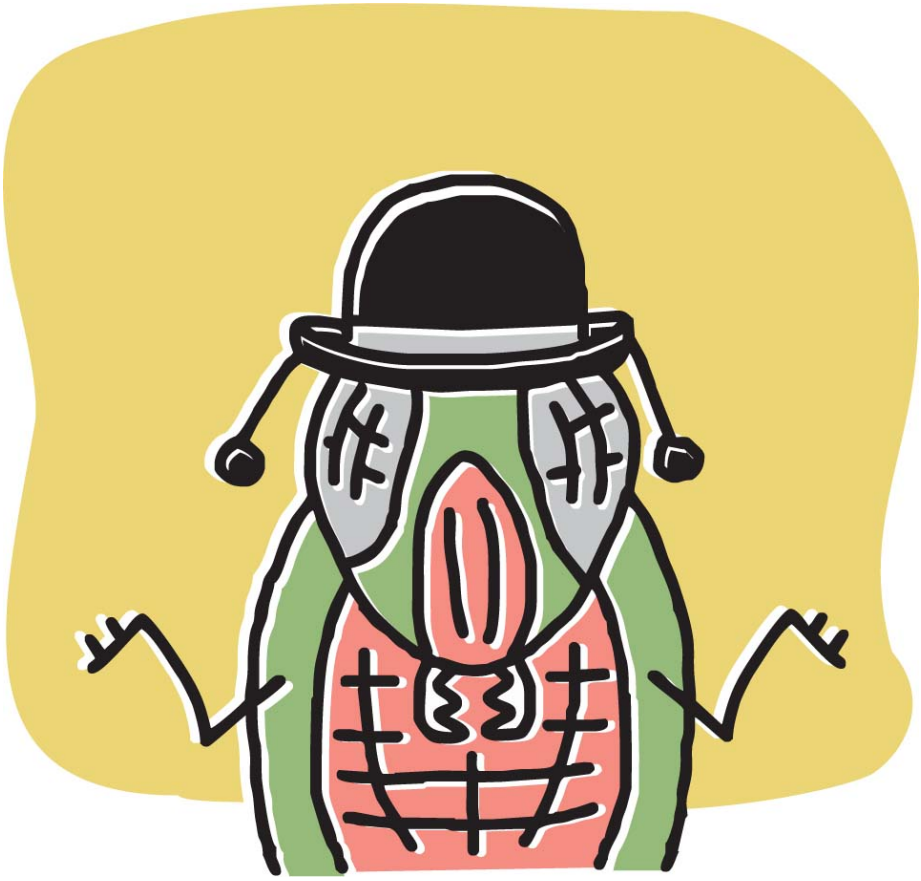
Boy wants to visit a lighthouse.

Ten years later he does.

The Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka

Guy becomes a giant bug.



And a metaphor for something.

Waiting for Godot

Samuel Beckett

Still waiting.

Hamlet

William Shakespeare

Guy with daddy issues mopes and whines about who to kill.

Of Mice and Men

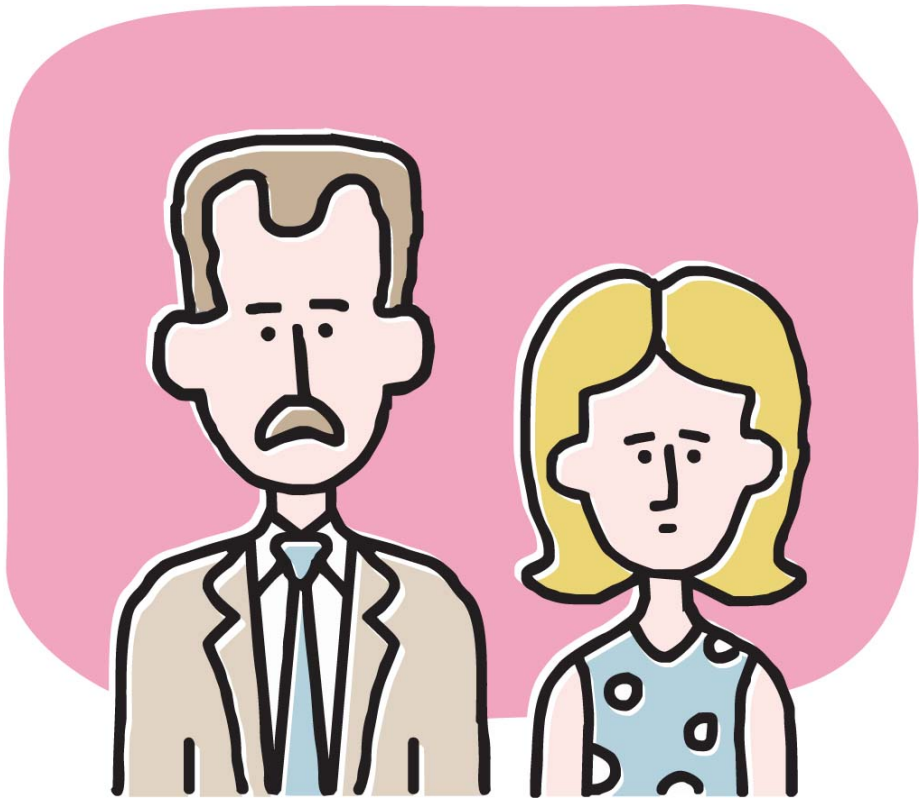
John Steinbeck

Two drifters.
Dumb one kills soft things.

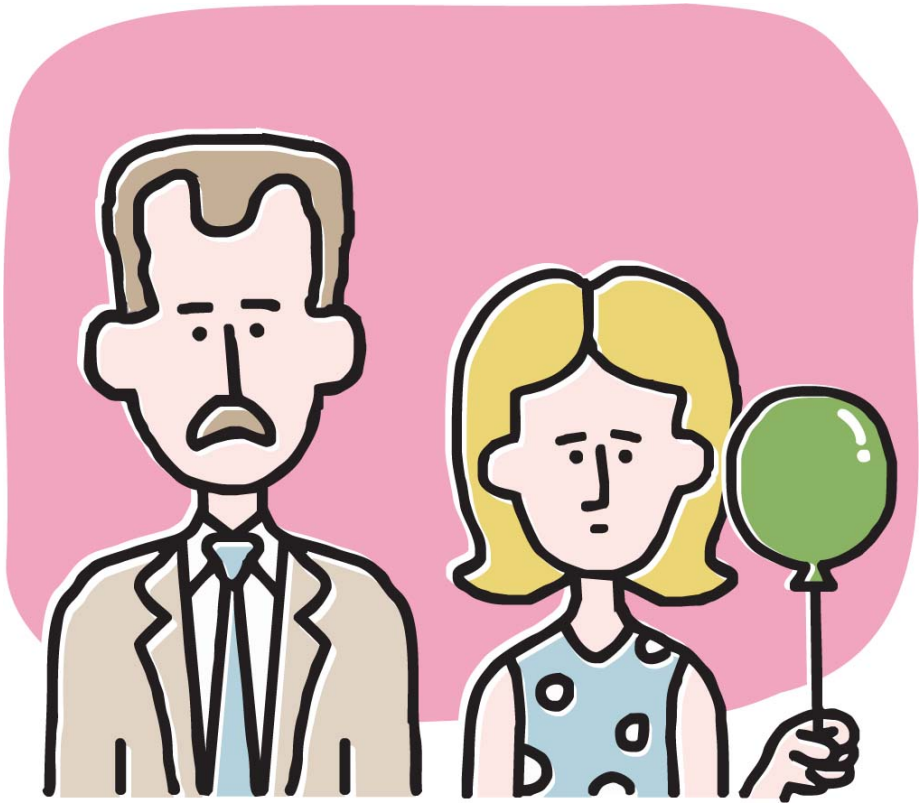
Smart one kills dumbs things.

Lolita

Vladimir Nabokov



Boy meets girl.



Except boy is 37 and girl is 12.

The Fountainhead

Ayn Rand

Architect-creep does whatever he wants and won't shut up about it.

Oedipus Rex

Sophocles

Patricide, incest, and self-mutilation: the play.

The Handmaid’s Tale

Margaret Atwood

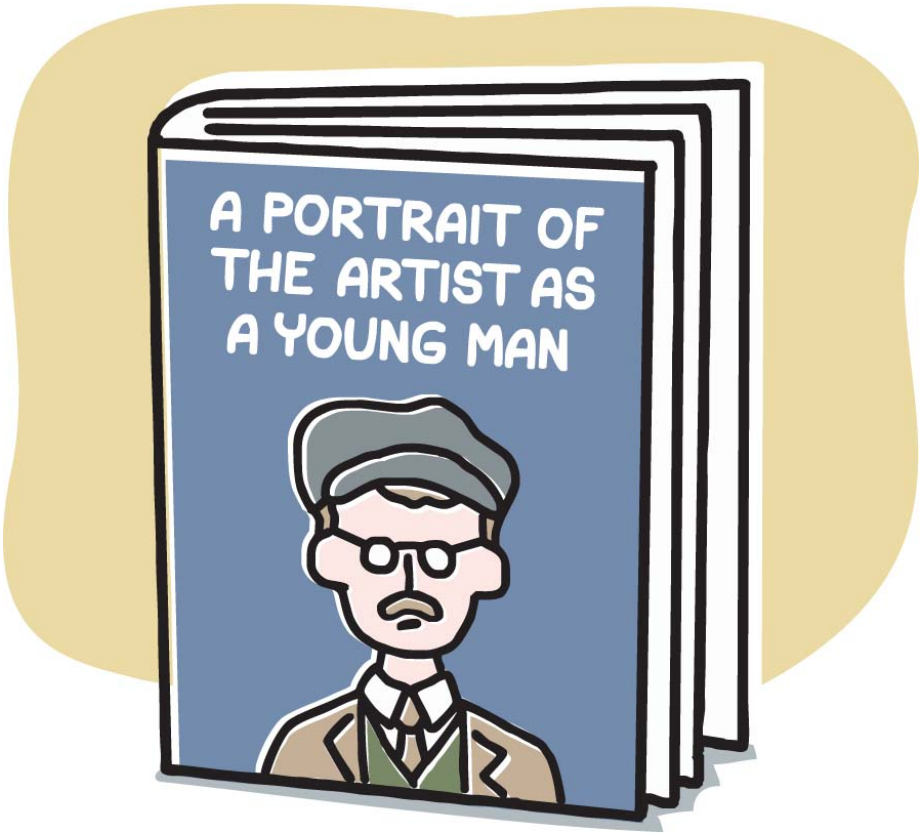
An oppressive patriarchy controls women’s bodies.

This book is also about that.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

James Joyce

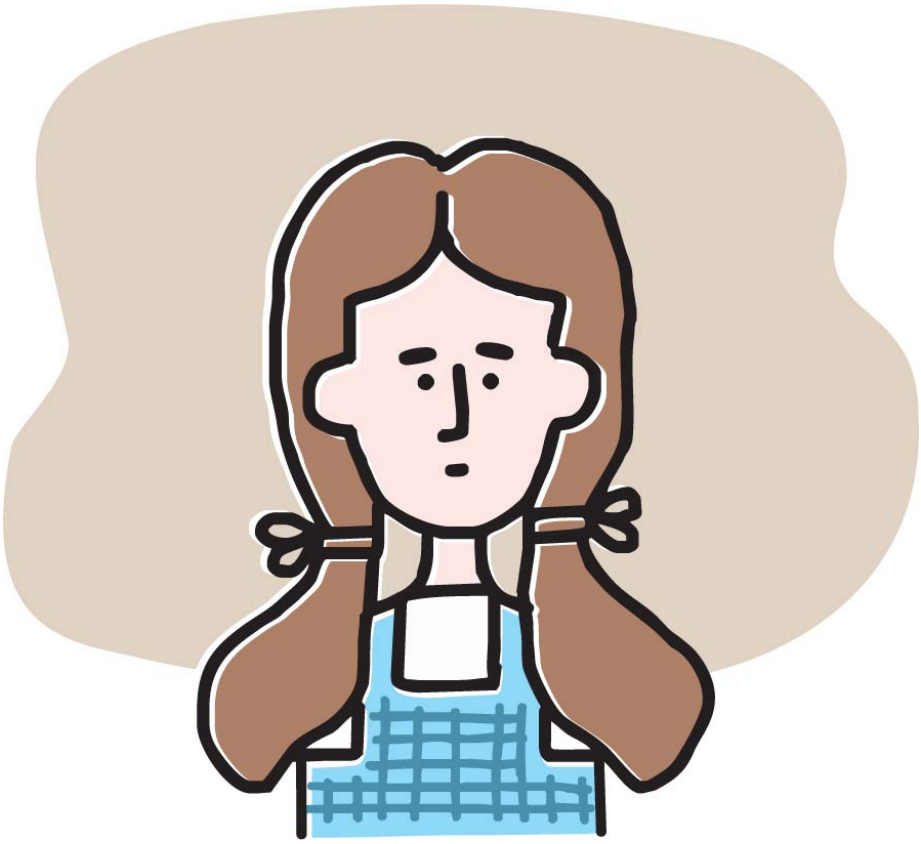
Irish lad is torn between the church and sex.



So he becomes a writer.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

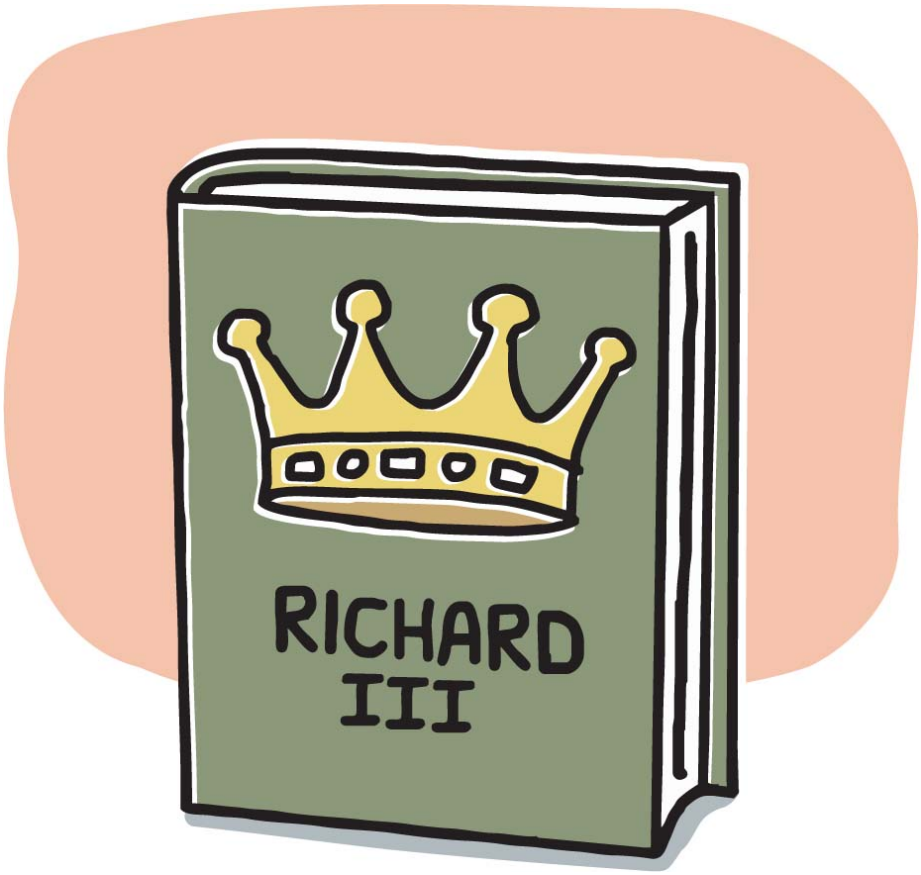
L. Frank Baum



Young girl's fanciful ordeal over footwear.

Richard III

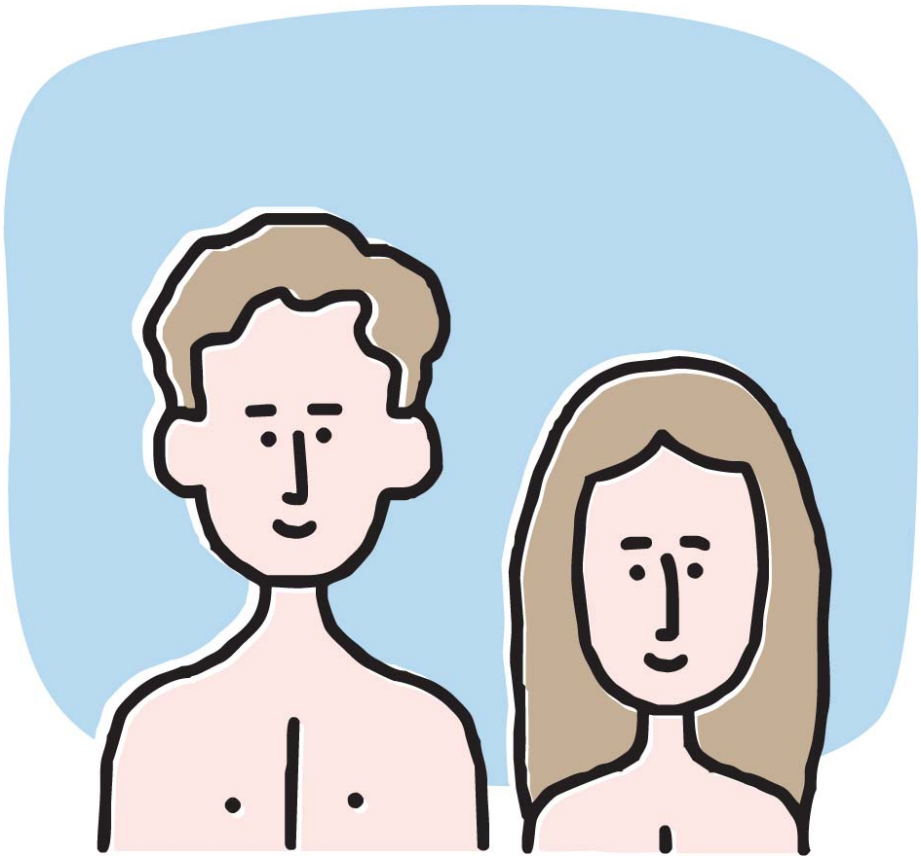
William Shakespeare



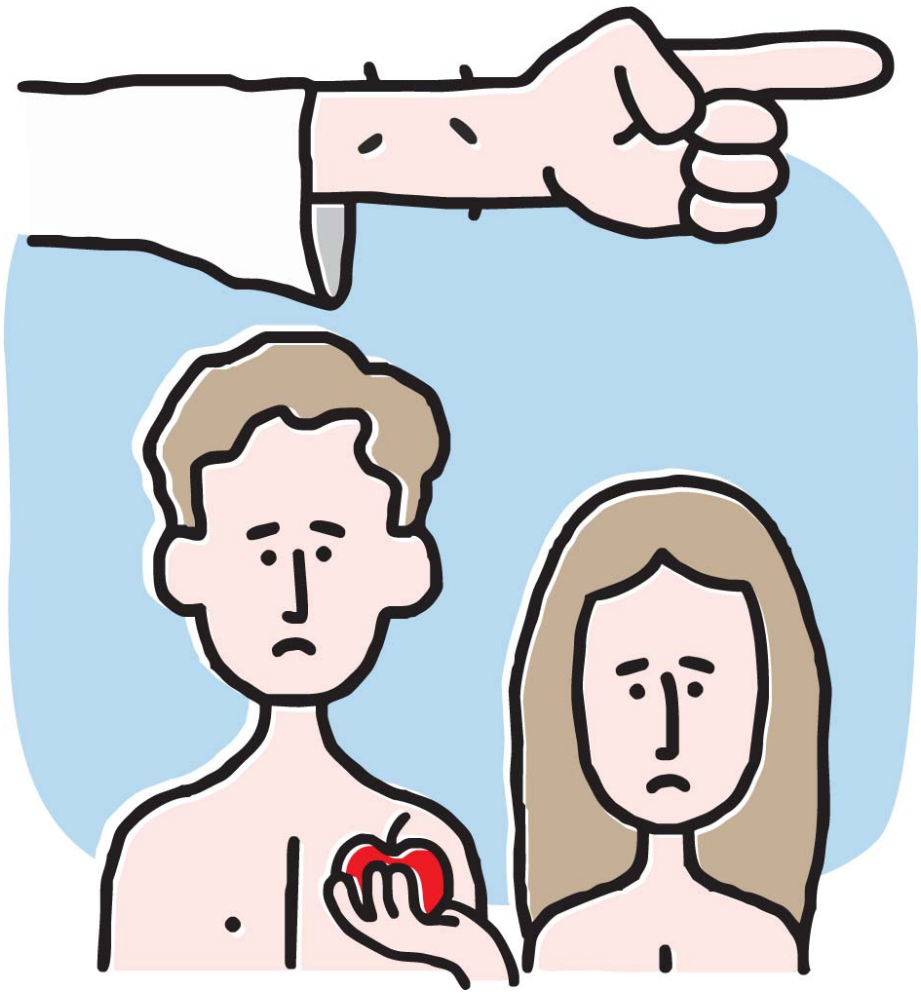
Jerk kills everyone until he's king (*see also* Macbeth).

Paradise Lost

John Milton



God allows free will.



Until you mess up.
Then he banishes you.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

C. S. Lewis

A lion eats a witch in a closet.
Some kids watch.

The lion is Jesus.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Victor Hugo

Deformed bell-ringer in a deformed society.

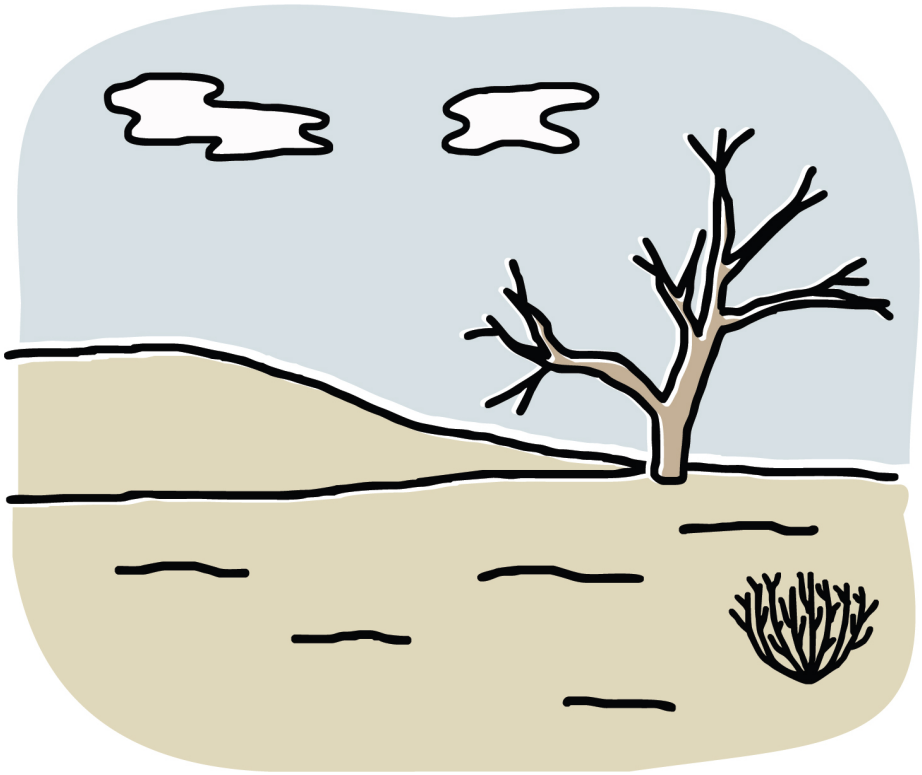
The Count of Monte Cristo

Alexandre Dumas

Guy escapes from jail and kills everyone who put him there.

The Waste Land

T. S. Elliot

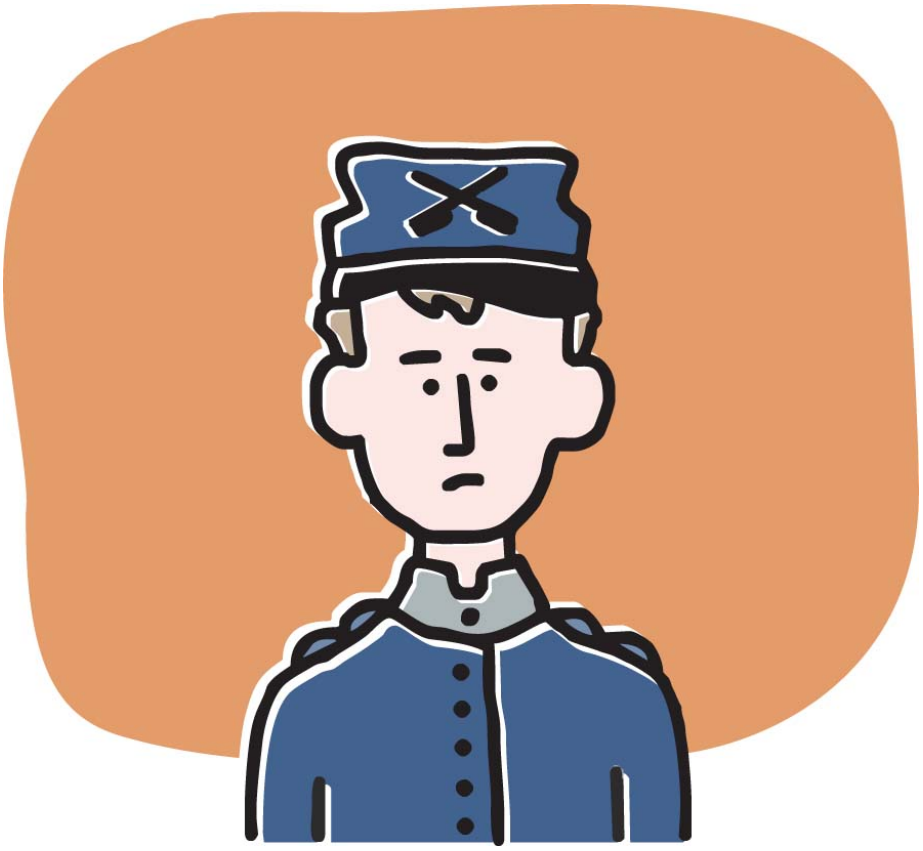


A modernist's plea for a smarter society.

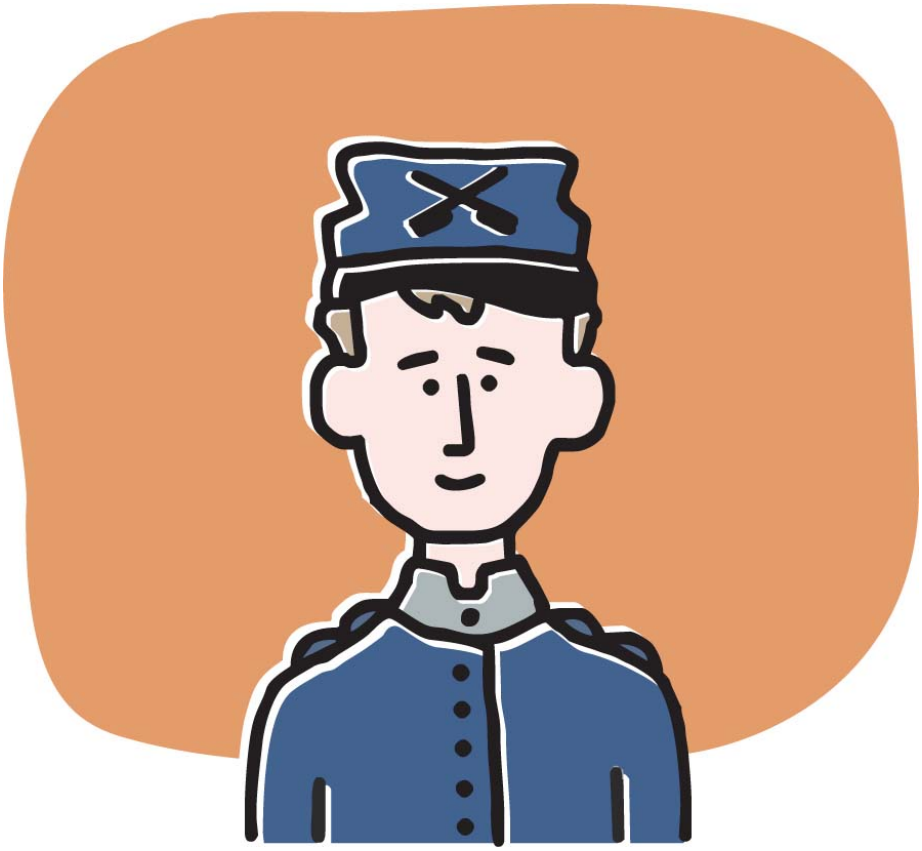
In a poem that makes everyone feel stupid.

The Red Badge of Courage

Stephen Crane



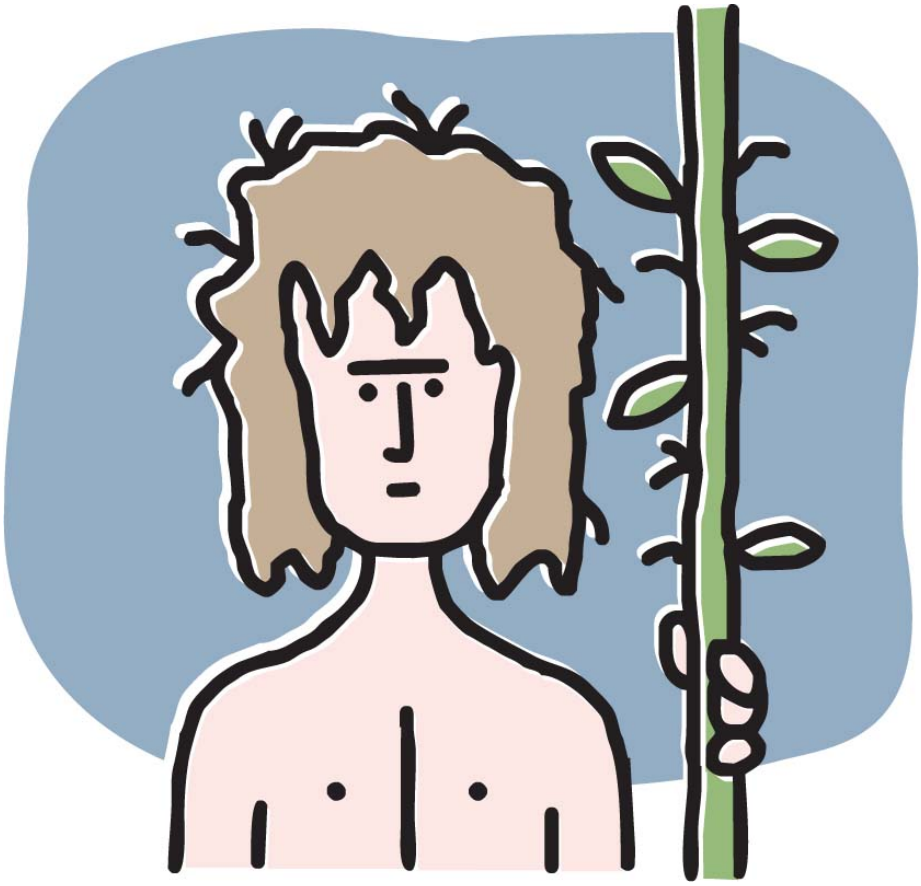
Young soldier is a hero.
Except he's not.



Then he is.

Tarzan of the Apes

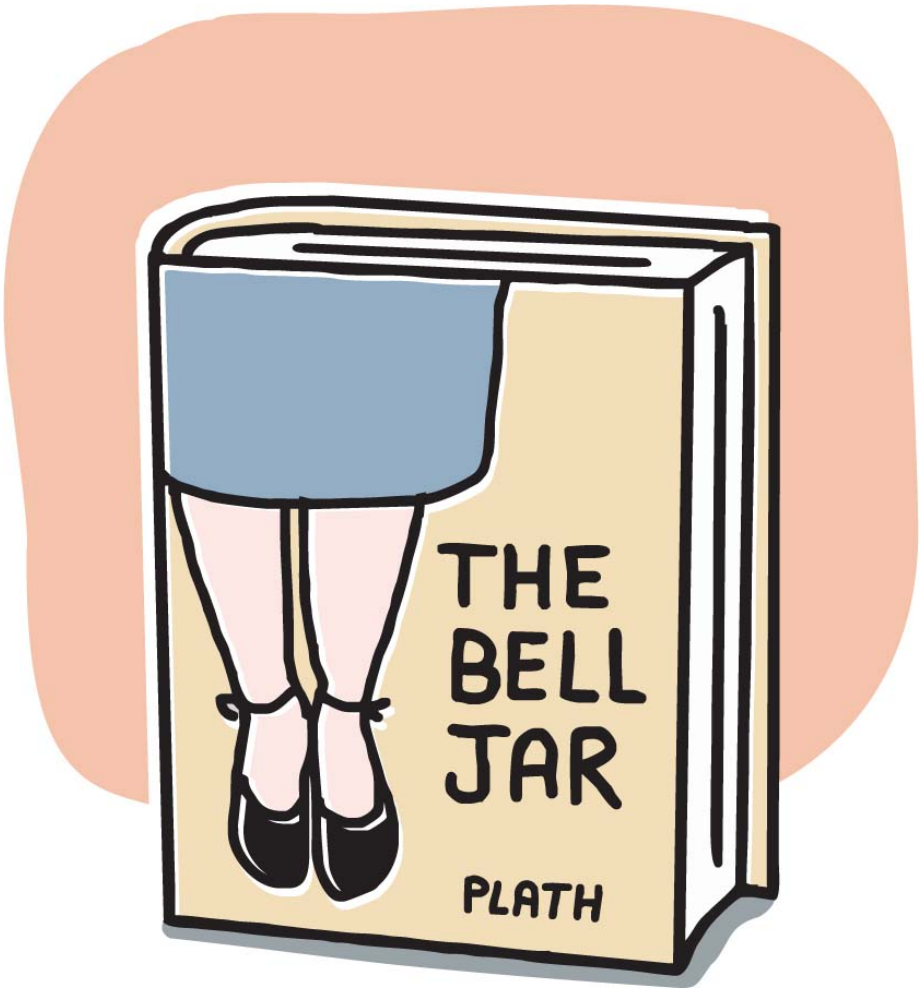
Edgar Rice Burroughs



Ape? Man?
Ape-man!

The Bell Jar

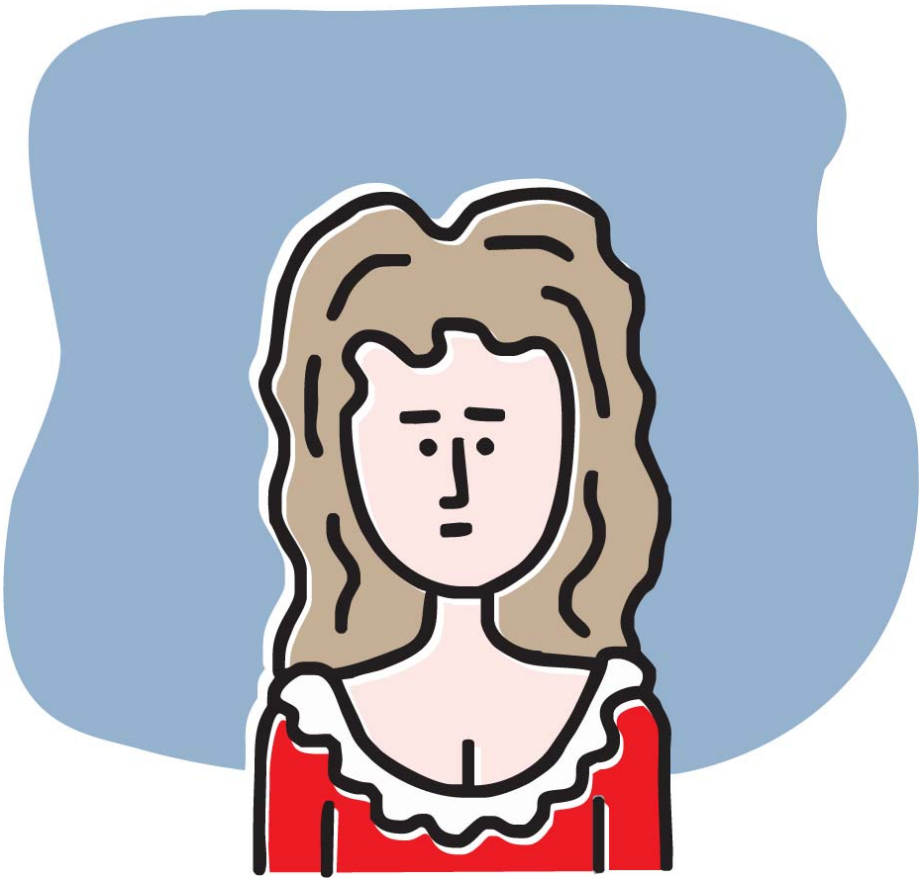
Sylvia Plath



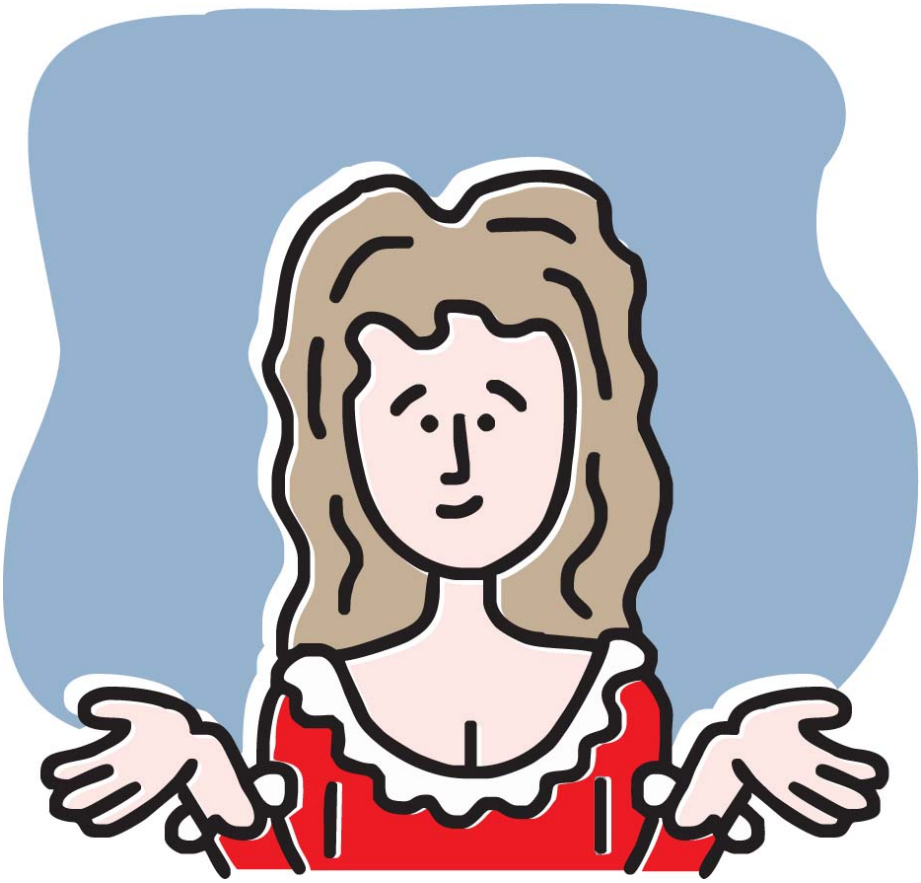
Young girl tries to fit in.
She doesn't.

Moll Flanders

Daniel Defoe



Thief cons everyone.
Repents. Ends up rich.

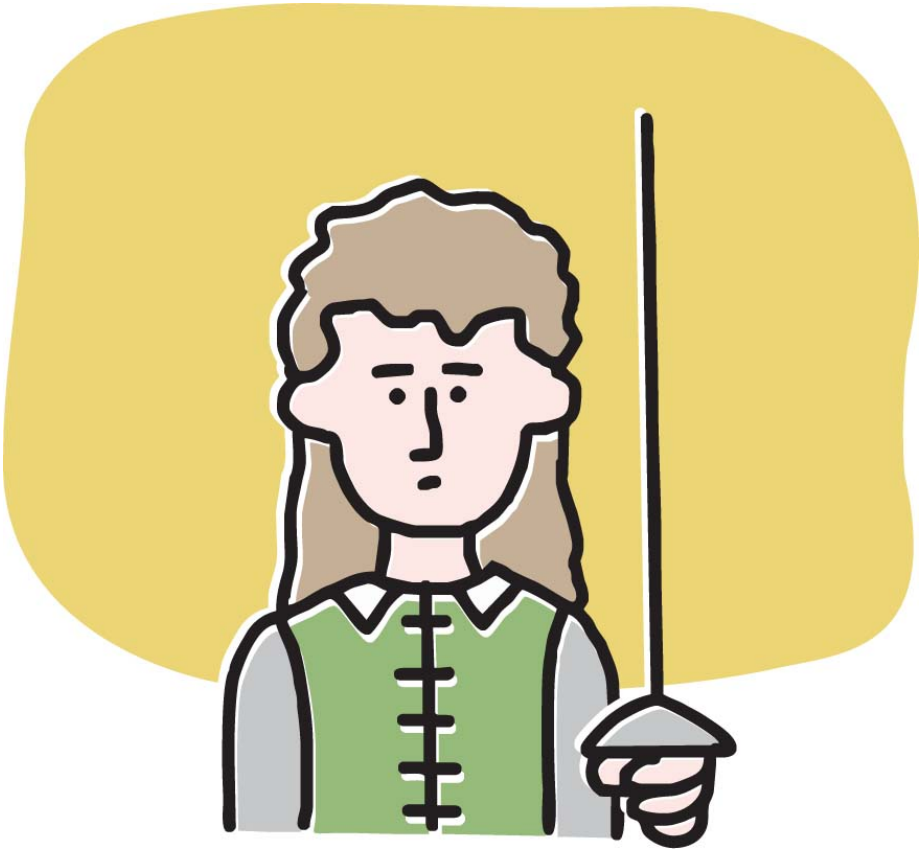


Yay?

The Three Musketeers

Alexandre Dumas

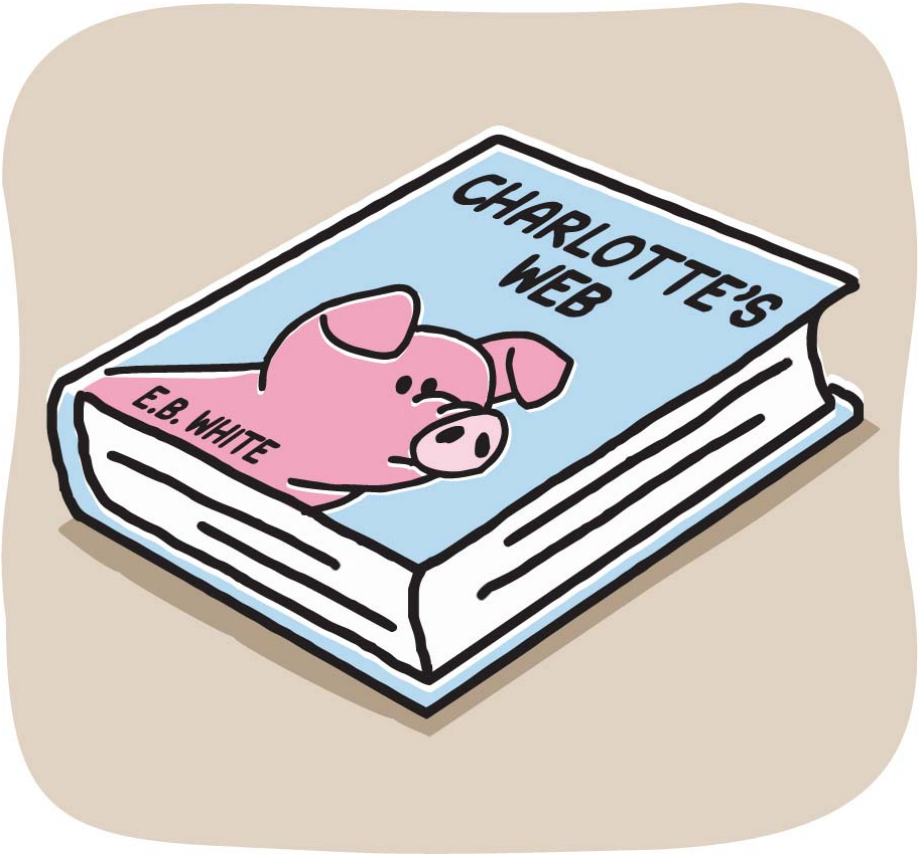
Three guys in big feathery hats have sword fights.



Another guy shows up.

Charlotte's Web

E. B. White



Clever web designer saves a pig.

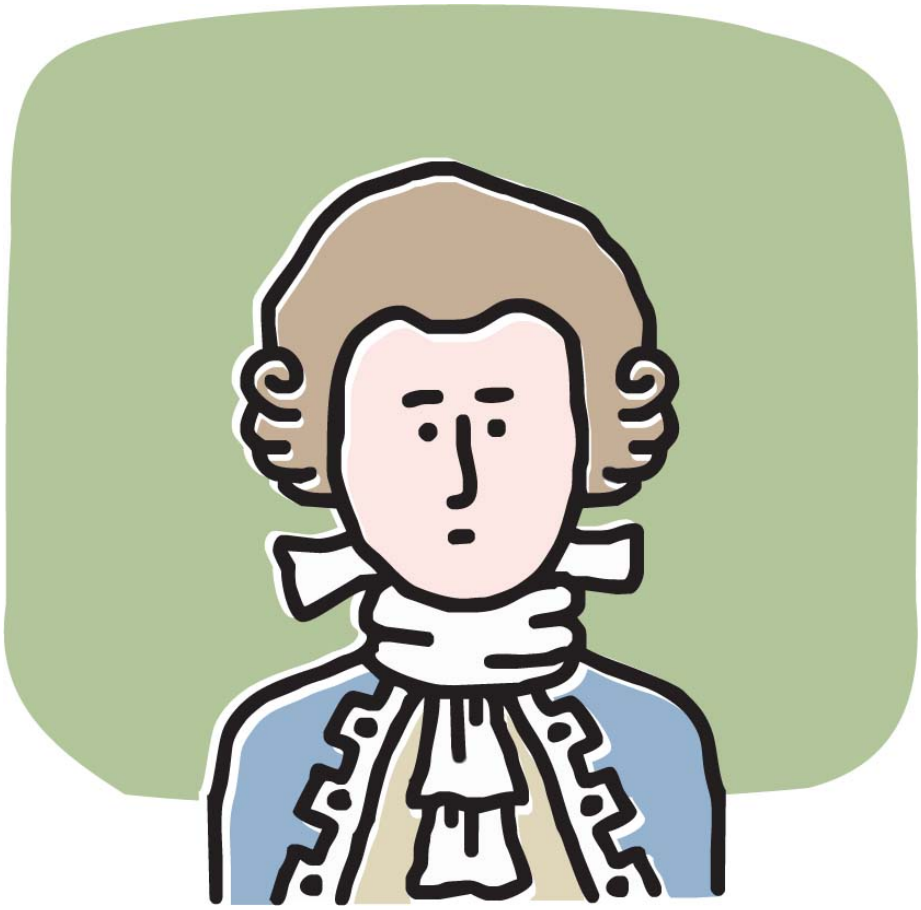
Julius Caesar

William Shakespeare

Story of political backstabbing.
With actual stabbing.

Candide

Voltaire

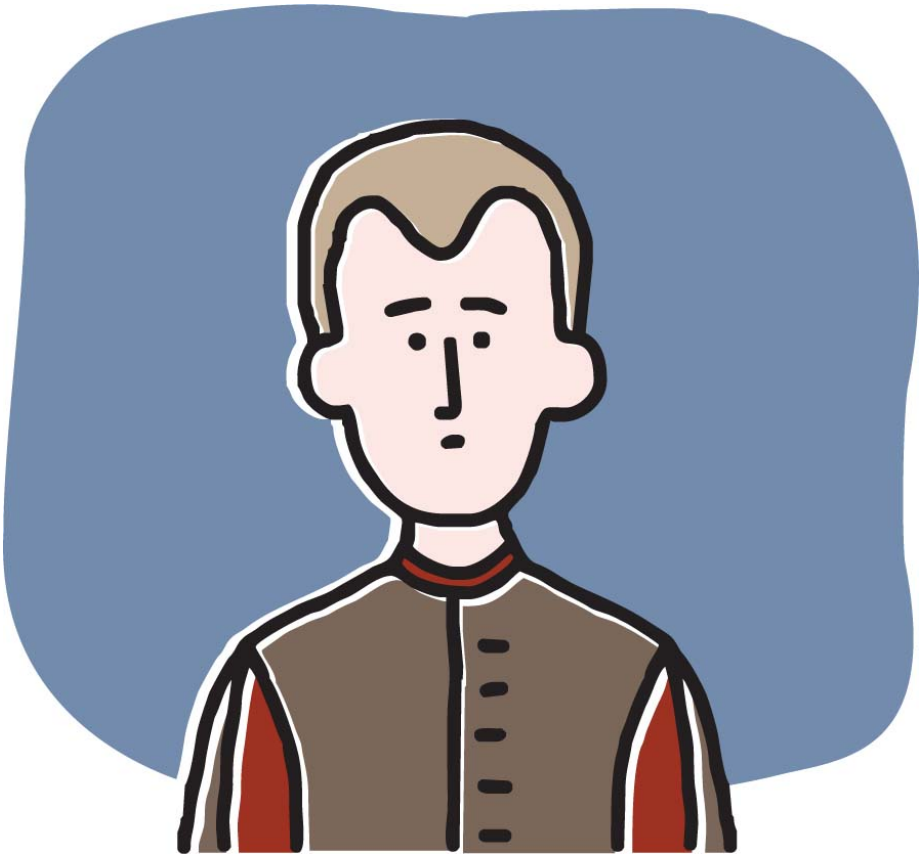


Life is horrible.

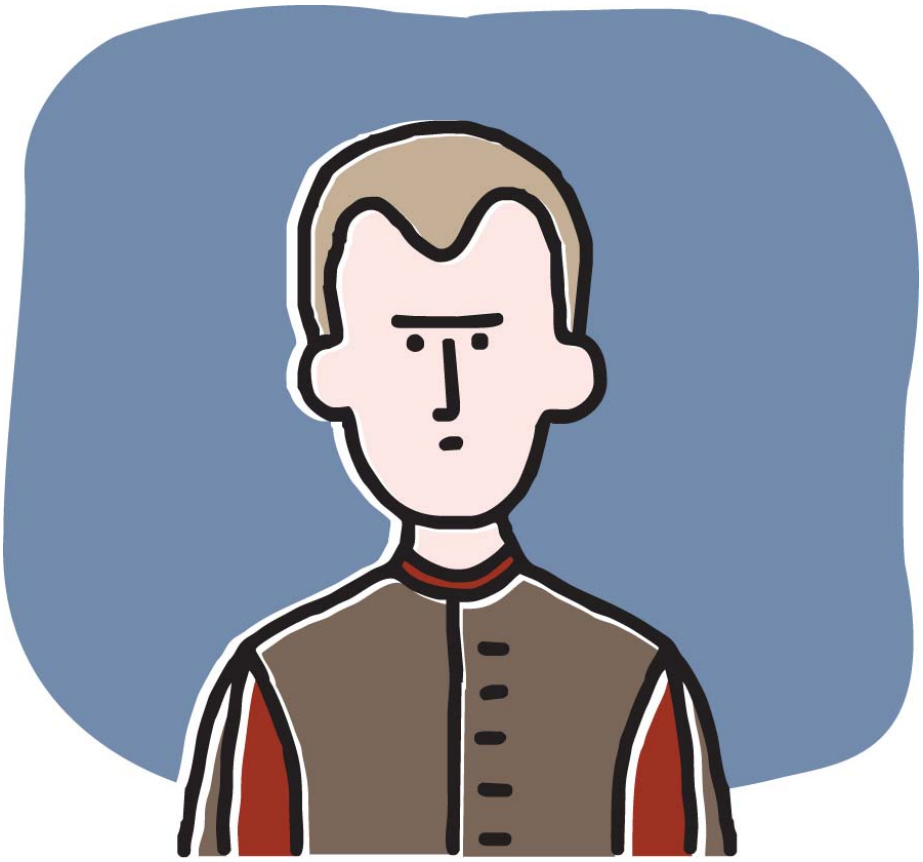
But gardening is fun!

The Prince

Niccolò Machiavelli



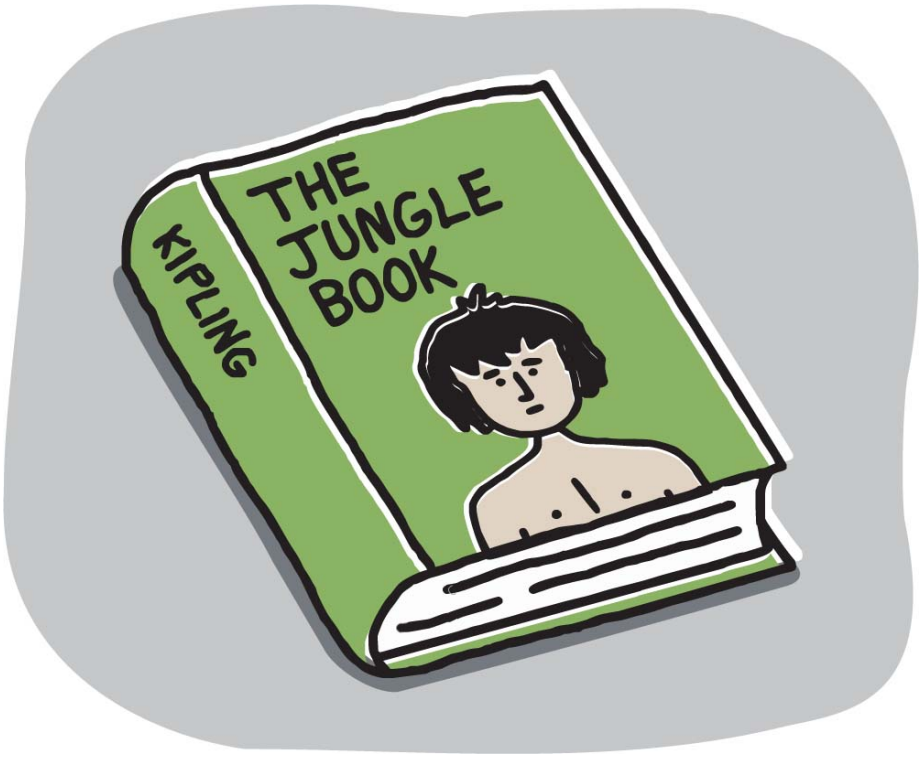
How to win friends and influence people.



Except with no friends and killing people.

The Jungle Book

Rudyard Kipling



Feral boy messes about in the woods then goes home.

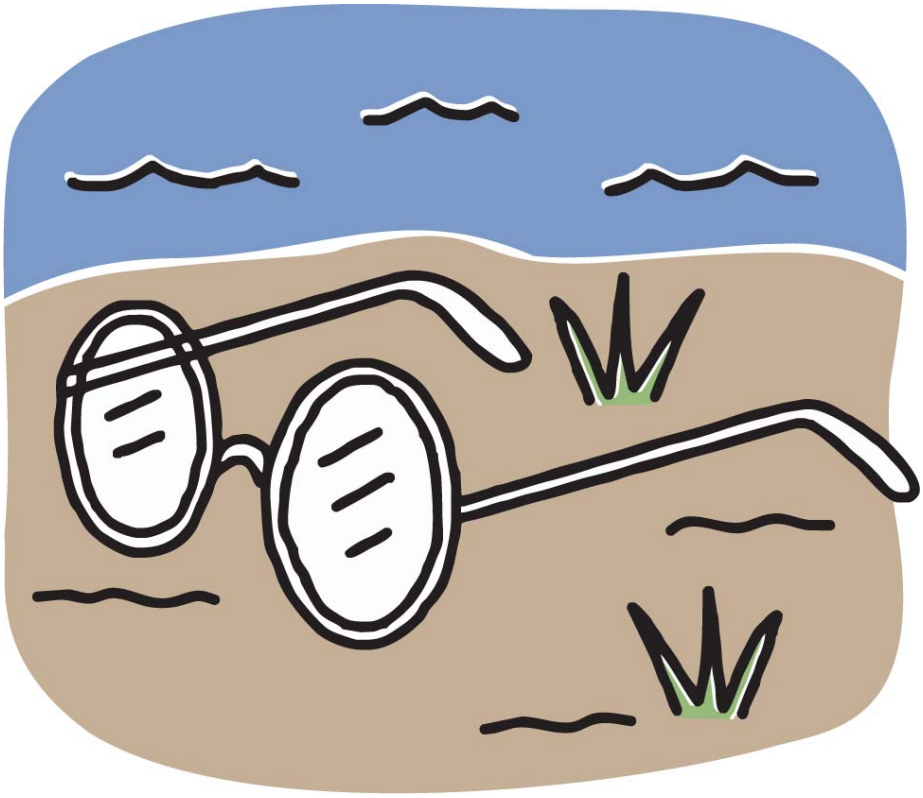
The Raven

Edgar Allen Poe

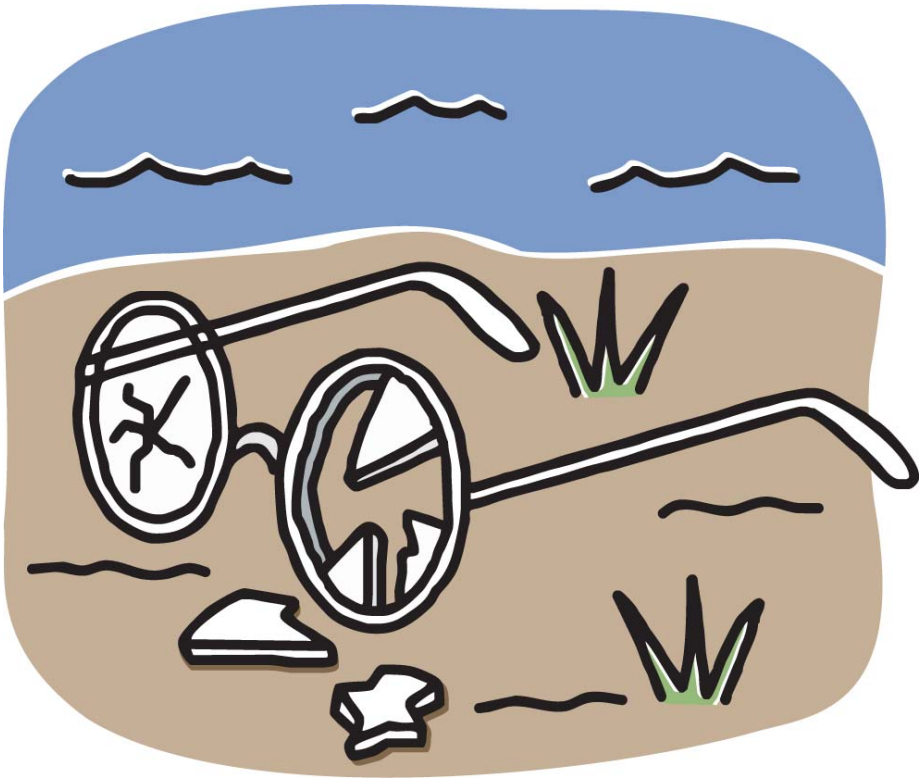
A bird flies into some guy's house and annoys him.

Lord of the Flies

William Golding



Marooned boys are bad at everything.



Except killing each other.

Anne of Green Gables

Lucy Maud Montgomery

Redheaded orphan's antics bother everyone.

Then they don't.

The Old Man and the Sea

Ernest Hemingway

Senior's dinner is eaten by sharks.

Tom Jones

Henry Fielding

Cheeky orphan comes of age.
With silliness and naughty bits.

Mrs. Dalloway

Virginia Woolf

Party planner's day ends with, well, a party.

Also a suicide.

Fahrenheit 451

Ray Bradbury

Fireman memorizes books.
People cause problems.

The world blows up.

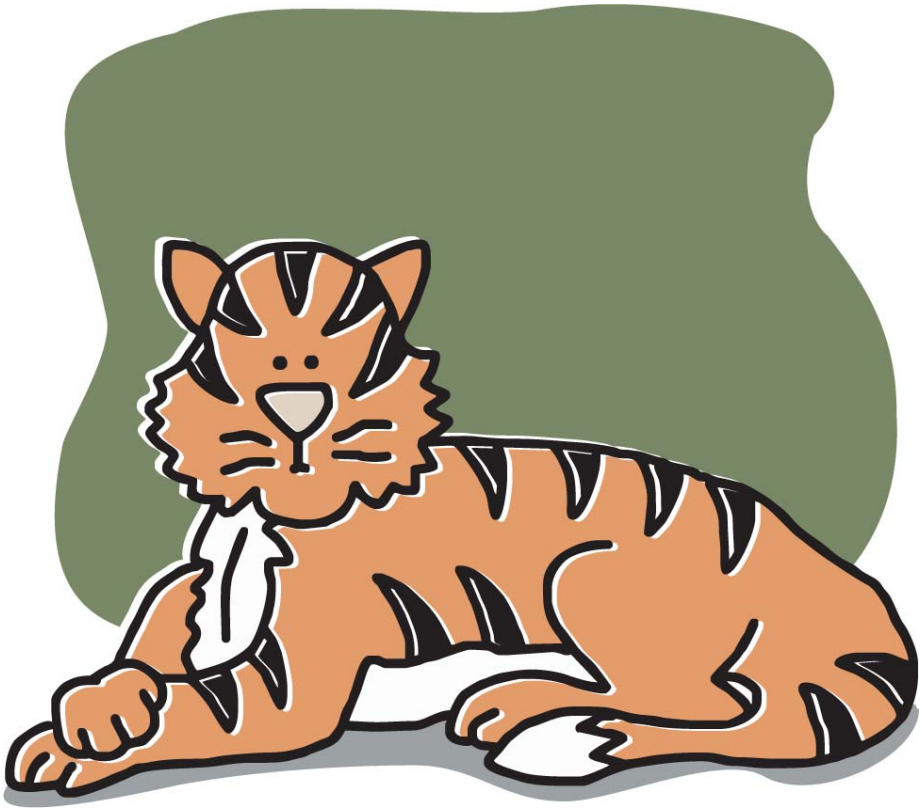
Tropic of Cancer

Henry Miller

A jerk visits Paris in the 1930s.

Life of Pi

Yann Martel



Boy is adrift with a tiger.
Or people. Or no one. Or God.

The Bible

Unknown

Be good or else.

Acknowledgments

To the dictionary for providing the words and to all of the authors who were able to put them in an interesting order.

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About the Author

JOHN ATKINSON lives in Ottawa, Canada. He is a voracious reader of cereal boxes, microwave instructions, and subtext. John is plagued by a recurring dream where he misses the Renaissance because of car trouble. He also claims to have coined the phrase, “I had a banana on the train,” which everyone tells him isn’t really an expression.

John’s cartoon *Wrong Hands* has been featured in numerous online and print publications worldwide and can be seen regularly in *Time* magazine. www.wronghands1.com

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