

## WHAT MAKES A CLASSIC NOVEL A CLASSIC?

Observations by Novelist Italo Calvino.  
Commentaries by Linda MacAfee

- 1) *“The classics are those books about which you usually hear people saying: ‘I’m rereading...’, never ‘I’m reading...’”*

Classics (modern or not) have a timeless quality to them—they never seem to get old. Individuals, especially teens, will repeatedly read a novel in order to recapture the first feeling they experienced when first engaged with the text and to slip into a world that is comforting and familiar.

- 2) *“Classics are those books which constitute a treasured experience for those who have read and loved them; but they remain just as rich an experience for those who reserve the chance to read them for when they are in the best condition to enjoy them.”*

Sometimes teens are not ready to read a classic novel. The text may be too difficult, the mood not right, the topic too sensitive, etc. When suggesting classics to teens keeping this idea in mind is really helpful—giving them a few choices of classics with a similar theme will allow them to choose one that “speaks” the most to them at the time. Sometimes we need time to grow into reading a book, and then it will inspire us as much as it did others.

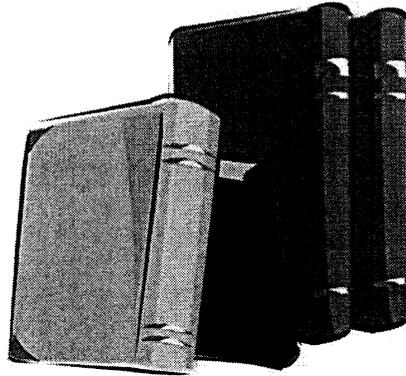
- 3) *“Classics are those which exercise a particular influence,... when they imprint themselves on our imagination as unforgettable, and when they hide in the layers of memory...”*

Classics are influential—they alter people’s perceptions about themselves and others in both simple (ex: first time immersion in a fantasy world) and complex (ex: recognizing political undertones) ways. Teens will learn about life by reading the classics and

will remember the lesson/feelings long after they have finished reading the story.

4) *“A classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading... [and ] has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers.”*

People change over time, and so too will their perceptions about events and characters that appear within a novel. Librarians must be careful to not to pressure teens into constantly reading different books. Returning to an old favourite at the age of 18 might be an entirely different reading experience than it was at 17 or 15. New insights into meaning or pleasure is what keeps classics (modern or not) exciting and relevant.



5) *“A classic is a book which even when we read it for the first time gives the sense of rereading something we have read before.”*

Classic texts have long standing reputations—both good and bad. They have pervaded society to the point where many are recognizable and we know something about them without ever having read them. Teens may know the

basic plotline of a classic and experience a sense of both familiarity and excitement when reading it for the first time.

6) *“The classics are those books which [have] previous interpretations, and [leave] traces in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed.”*

Classics impact larger society and contribute to the greater good of culture. They tackle difficult issues and have a long

history of discussion. Educating teens that the historical, political, or social depth of a novel is important can be difficult, but at the same time might just enrich their reading and library experience.

7) *“A classic is a work which constantly generates a... cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off.”*

Classics stir up opinions and create controversy, but are never diminished by it. While librarians can inform readers about the “critical discourse” surrounding a book, it is valuable to tell the teen why the book is such a great read. It’s important for teens to know that classics aren’t just about what’s taught in schools and can be enjoyable on one’s own terms.

8) *“Classics are books which, the more we think we know them through hearsay, the more original, unexpected, and innovative we find them when we actually read them.”*

Sometimes the surprise is reading the text and realizing that it is nothing like how it has been characterized on the *Simpsons* or in other popular culture contexts.

Oftentimes, classic texts are far more than we could possibly imagine. It is only in reading the classics that we understand how its contents become fodder for spoofs, hearsay, and opinions that propagate through our society.

9) *“A classic is ... any book which comes to represent the whole universe...”*

Classics can be representative of a host of feelings, beliefs, memories, and observations about the world. A single text can become a representative of an individual’s teenage “universe,” wherein years later the book (and its contents) can become a catalyst for transporting individuals back to the time in their lives when they read it.

10) *“Your’ classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which*

*helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it.”*

Classic texts teach us about ourselves—about who we are and the way we choose to interpret the world around us. These insights are provided by identification or disagreement with the plot, characterization, setting, pacing, and language of the novel. We may learn about our stance on equality, freedom of speech, and other important issues just by the feelings the text evokes within us. Teens can learn from classic texts that they are not alone in their turmoil—especially when they think adults and peers do not understand them. What a classic text has to teach can be different for each person, but the uniqueness of the messages prove it has an enduring and inescapable quality.

*11) “A classic is a work that comes before other classics; but those who have read other classics first recognize its place in the genealogy of classic works.”*

As readers we learn certain texts came before others. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* was influenced by the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, the Norse *Hervarar Saga* and *Volsunga Saga*, the *Poetic Edda*, and the *Prose Edda*. Most teens will read the *Lord of the Rings* before *Beowulf*; however, being aware that while both are considered classic texts, *Beowulf* comes before *Lord of the Rings*. The order in which teens read the classics does not matter, but knowing their connection to each other enhances the reading experience.

*12) “A classic is a work which relegates the noise of the present to a background hum ....”*

Classic texts lend themselves to total immersion into the world created by the author. It gives individuals a chance to escape from modern society with the bonus of (perhaps) being enlightened and amused by the politics, attitudes, and beliefs of another era.

13) *“A classic is a work which persists as background noise even when a present that is totally incompatible with it holds sway.”*

Classics never go away. Even as the world changes, classic texts continue to be quoted and recognized for their relevance decades, centuries, and millennia later. They are there to be rediscovered by new readers, offer new insights, and remind individuals of their past. Sometimes the language is outdated, the situations no longer as dire, and the characters unrecognizable, but we still identify with the classics on some deeper level. Classics are always ready to be reintroduced back into mainstream society, and their effect on us can be unforgettable.

■ Italo Calvino (1923-1985) was an Italian journalist, novelist, and short story writer. He is known for his imaginative and postmodern style. His most famous works

are *Cosmicomics*, *Invisible Cities*, and *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

## WHAT ARE THE APPEALS OF CLASSIC NOVELS?

By: Linda MacAfee

A novel's appeals allow us to determine if a book is a good suggestion for reader's advisory, an appropriate choice for display, or an apt addition to a reading list or book club discussion. What exactly is it about a classic novel that makes it appeal to young adults? A great way to engage teens with classic texts is by focusing on their individual appeal factors.

### Setting/Frame

The time and place of a novel are crucial for establishing the suspension of disbelief that is necessary for immersing oneself wholly into a book. Some of the classic texts (certainly not an exclusive list) that establish an unforgettable setting are

