

SELLING THE Classics

BRAD HOOPER is Adult Books Editor for *Booklist* magazine of the American Library Association; bhooper@ala.org. He is reading *The Emperor* by Ryszard Kapuscinski.

Not long ago I recommended to a friend that she read one of my favorite novels, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.¹ I told her of its universal recognition as a first-tier classic, and I hoped to convince her further by offering what I thought at the time was an intriguing hypothetical scenario: How impressive she would be at her next social event by being able to say, "*Madame Bovary*? Why, of course, I've read *Madame Bovary*."

She accepted my challenge to take up this reading opportunity, keeping me informed of her reaction at various points. "It's like watching a train wreck," was her first critical statement. Another one: "I gather from the cover copy that she kills herself, and I'm going to be furious if she does." And finally: "The details were beautiful, but I'd never read it again. It's ancient women's history, and it makes me angry."

But the point is she *did* read it. She spent considerable time and thought engaged with one of the best novels ever written. In my capacity as adult books editor at *Booklist*, I am charged with informing librarians in their task—no, their *joy*—of staying aware of forthcoming books that—incidentally—they might enjoy reading but—more importantly—should consider adding to their collection, for educational purposes or strictly entertainment value or anything in between. Like any readers' advisory librarian, I am almost annoying in my endless suggestions to friends and family of what they should read.

So, my friend completed *Madame Bovary*, ultimately pleased that she had read it but nevertheless "sore" at Flaubert for feeling the need to kill off his heroine for her "sin" of adultery. I took that as a perfectly fine response, to bring a contemporary sensibility to a century-and-a-half-old novel. It *is* a reaction, which is what any readers' advisory librarian—or book review editor—seeks in placing a book in the hands of a reader. But my strategy with my friend vis à vis *Madame Bovary*, although successful in its goal of convincing her to read the book, was misguided, as I realized later. My strategy worked with her only on a *personal* level; she understood from a well-read friend that here was a novel she might like to read. She knew me, she trusted me, she jumped right in. I had been mistaken to appeal to her by emphasizing any potential bragging rights. She didn't care about that.

On the other hand, a readers' advisory librarian cannot count on a successful classics recommendation based on friendship. A readers' advisor cannot leave classics counseling to a personal level. A professional stratagem must be installed to "sell" a classic. And the stratagem is at heart no different than that employed in the successful placing of a contemporary, popular novel in the hands of an excited reader.

The Hard Sell of a Classic

Let's face the obvious truth. Books deemed "classics"—and I refer here only to classic novels—are intimidating. A novel dressed in the traditional Penguin paperback garb of a classic (someone who is well read can spot them a mile away) might as well be in many general readers' eyes marked with a skull-and-crossbones.

I hereby admonish readers' advisory librarians to throw caution to the wind. Read some recognized classics yourself and with poise, knowledge, and self-assurance, advise your fiction-loving borrowers to read them as well.

So, my first suggested step in selling the classics is to develop an intimate familiarity with a pre-selected set of universally recognized classics. These are pre-selected by *you*, that is. I advocate having in your readers' advisory arsenal a good working knowledge of, say, ten classic novels that, by your familiarity with them, you can offer to good fiction readers. These would be good fiction readers looking for something embracing to read but nevertheless might easily shy away from a book about which you have made a big deal about being a classic.

My Psychology 101 professor in college cited a study done—how the study was conducted I don't recall—of new mothers administering medicine to their infants. It was found that the infant's reaction to the medicine reflected the mother's facial expression as she was shoving the spoon toward the infant's mouth: a smile on Mama's face and the infant proved much more accepting, but a look of distaste on Mama's face, as if *she* were taking the medicine and not finding it appealing, would set up an anticipatory *negative* reaction in the infant.

My point is that the readers' advisory librarian should never hand a classic, particularly a paperback copy all “tricked” out in recognizable Penguin Classics dressing, to a reader with the look on their face of “take this, it will be good for you.” If that were to happen, the librarian could expect an automatic refusal. “No, thanks I want something to read that has *life* in it.”

Aha! There in a nutshell is the problem for the readers' advisory librarian interested in “trafficking” in the classics: the preconceived notion on the reader's part that a classic is a stuffy read, with no relation to modern life, with no appeal to a contemporary readership, and not addressed to current issues.

Au contraire. Librarians, I challenge you to read, or reread, whichever the case may be, Flaubert's stunning *Madame Bovary* and see how untrue that is. It fairly *beats* with the pulse of life. But how to sell it? First and foremost—a reiteration of a point I mentioned previously—treat *Madame Bovary*, as with any classic, neither as medicine nor as sacred text but rather as simply a *good book*.

Secondly, when promoting a classic, the librarian should “sell” it no differently than when suggesting a work of contemporary popular fiction. A classic should be sold as a *real* book, which it is, and not a

piece of art. It is a real book that has a definite appeal to contemporary readers, as it has appealed to readers through the ages (or it wouldn't have passed the test of time.) In selling a classic, the sell should be swift and pungent, like a stiletto jab, so the potential reader won't have time to back away at what they initially may feel is a daunting prospect. Throw the appeal-factor net quickly and thoroughly over the patron, to seize the moment.

That is why I suggest organizing an “arsenal” of ten classics that you as a practicing readers' advisory librarian have read and enjoyed yourself, and consequently you feel adequate to discussing primary appeal factors as well as infusing the potential reader with the enthusiasm for diving in. Remember to make the novel's appeal relevant to contemporary times, issues, and readers. This is where your own personal reading of these classics comes into play: you've read your set of ten and taken good appeal-factor notes and generally you have committed your appeal-factor ideas to memory (or at least always have them close at hand in their written form).

The ideal situation, the most fun and satisfying to you as a readers' advisor, would be to choose ten classics that can be linked together into one big, wonderful reading program, stringing your ten classics together using various appeal factors as bridges from one to another: as in, this novel's appeal factor A is shared by that novel, which shares appeal factor B with the next novel on the list, and so on. That is how I will present here my selection of ten classic novels: a ten-part interconnected series.

Let's Begin

Madame Bovary (published in 1857) is, foremost, the story of an adulterous woman, who pays for her indiscretion with her life. Right there, of course, you have a handle on contemporizing the novel's appeal, especially to today's young women. But before attempting to successfully clear that hurdle, let us elaborate on who Emma Bovary is and what happens to her. Emma is a daughter of provincial mid-nineteenth-century France and she is no better or worse than her bourgeois surroundings. She marries an uninspiring, small-town doctor and establishes a comfortable, well-run household for him. Soon, though, she longs to be stirred by romance and passion, which she does not receive from her dull husband; and therein lays Emma's fate. Her desire for those twin emotions leads her, with her natural beauty, into liaisons outside marriage. Her lovers prove to be jerks, interested not in a romantic life but plain

sex; frivolous purchases and ill health pockmark her life now. Debts go completely out of control, a fact unbeknown to her husband, and Emma seeks release in the only direction she can think of: death, by killing herself with poison.

Her decline seems inevitable from the beginning of the novel; readers sense early on that the Bovary marriage is doomed to desiccation and that Emma, poor Emma, will not find the romantic and passionate life she so desperately wishes for. In other words, her decline is in the air from the outset. While Emma is not realistic in her wishes and desires, the *novel* is indeed realistic: the chief trait of Flaubert's presentation.

You relate all of this information to a reader whom you guess could be interested in embracing *Madame Bovary* (no pun intended), but how can you tell if she or he *is* interested? That is the point here: you *make* them interested! This is what I've been talking about: the "sell" of the classics. Remember to cast contemporary-interest light on them. And in the case of *Madame Bovary*? The big pitch here, the most salient appeal factor, is what happens to Emma Bovary. You can bet the contemporary reader will ask questions. Why did she have to die? To satisfy male readers of the time? Men can despoil women but women are the ones who have to pay for their spoilage? The price of adultery for women is death? Will contemporary readers, especially women, especially those women of thirty years of age or younger, want to be reminded of that kind of "ancient" history? Like my friend to whom I recommended *Bovary*, the reader could well experience reader rage.

But recommend *Bovary* on that very basis: the novel is an accurate depiction of middle-class women's place and responses and constrictions in the mid-nineteenth-century. Anyone is welcome to get angry over the situation. It is fine to be annoyed with *Bovary*. At least the reader, however annoyed, is *responding* to a good book, is being affected by it. Remember that Flaubert is known as both a realist and a stylist. Why the reader reacts to *Bovary* so strongly is because the author, in his capacious talent for salient and colorful detail—from what people wore to what their houses were like—gives the strongest impression from page one that his novel has captured authenticity to a fine degree; and his authenticity, accuracy, and authority come delivered in sheer prose. No fancy verbal pyrotechnics: no elaborate, convoluted, ultimately obscure sentences. Make certain, as a readers' advisor, that you explain all this, and explain it in quick time and certain voice. You *know* what you're talking about: let the patron

draw no other conclusion about your recommendation than that. As Flaubert was in the writing of his masterpiece, *you* are the authority in getting it read.

Don't Be Scared of Henry James

The second novel in the set of ten classic novels I would recommend if I were a practicing readers' advisory librarian is Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (published in 1878).² Any readers' advisor who has an undergraduate degree in English would have certainly encountered the name of this giant of American letters, even if he or she has so far avoided actually reading a writer who, to this day, has a reputation for being a very difficult read. James is a master stylist, but his command of language led him in a direction different from Flaubert. James proposed fiction as high art and he practiced the writing of it with an increasingly elaborate prose style. Whereas Flaubert thought and thought out beforehand every word he put down on the page, arriving at the exact one he wanted and needed—his famous *mot juste*—James left a trail of words on the page as he sought the way he could best express a character's way of thinking, way of acting, and way of appearing to others.

Despite James' tendency to elaborate too much, *Daisy Miller* should not prove a difficult "sell." It is a precise, straightforward portrait of an easily understood but not facilely created female character, who, like Emma Bovary, flouts convention. This relatively short novel is a working out of James' favorite theme: the clash between brash American culture and the more sophisticated European one, as Americans and Europeans began mixing quite freely by the mid-nineteenth century, with many young American women marrying into British and Continental upper-class families. Readers' advisory librarians should underplay the novel's classic status in favor of emphasizing the immaculately wrought character study it presents.

The eponymous main character in *Daisy Miller* is a young American woman visiting Rome with her mother. Daisy is fresh, not in the sense of being smart-mouthed but as in "untried" and "untarnished," and she is receptive to the European social customs she sees around her. Daisy, like Emma Bovary, takes a social misstep. Daisy fraternizes too openly with an Italian suitor, her conduct considered out of line by the American community resident in the Eternal City. Daisy requests that her Italian gentleman-caller take her to view the Coliseum by moonlight, and consequently she contracts the dreaded Roman fever and is dead within days. Unlike

Emma Bovary, however, Daisy Miller flouts convention by simply choosing to act the way she wants to act, not out of a growingly desperate need to satisfy ill-defined romantic impulses. This is a novel of ostracism, as the American community in Rome literally turns its back on Daisy for behavior that is simply not “done.”

In summary, the beauty of *Daisy Miller* will be deeply appreciated by avid fiction readers who see it as it is: a sharply cut character study and, at the same time, a study of ostracism. Anyone who has ever been through grammar school and high school can easily identify with being socially snubbed. The reader will appreciate Daisy as a heroine who values, and stands by, her freedom. Although Daisy dies at the end, her death is not “punishment” for her sins, as Emma Bovary’s death signified a punishment for her; so Daisy’s death, if assigned a purpose, is so that the people around her can appreciate her independent spirit.

Perhaps the most famous novel of social repudiation is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (published in 1850), number three in my cycle of ten recommendable classic novels.³ This definitely

is a novel that should be *underplayed* as a classic, certainly not trumpeted to a timid potential reader as an often-cited answer to the question, just what *is* the Great American Novel? Too many people have had a bad experience long ago with *The Scarlet Letter*, having been assigned to read it by unimaginative, uninspiring teachers in high school. Consequently, this perhaps will be the toughest “sell” of all ten classics I have selected to be my “sell-the-classics” program.

The letter “A,” in scarlet cloth, is the punishment that must be borne by Hester Prynne, a woman living in early Massachusetts Colony, who has committed adultery. The marking is to shame her; she is, thus marked, made to stand before the community, accompanied by the child that is the product of her transgression. She is asked by the town’s religious fathers to name the child’s father, a request—a demand—she refuses to honor. A man by the name of Roger Chillingworth shows up, claiming ability as a physician. He is, in truth, and the truth is concealed by him and Hester, Hester’s husband, thought to have been shipwrecked. Hester would not divulge to him, either, the name of the man with whom she had dis-



IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES

BranchAnywhere brings your library to the community

A fully automated library machine, BranchAnywhere opens up new levels of access and convenience for library patrons.

Check Out
BranchAnywhere
at PLA

VISIT OUR BOOTH

#2133

- Handles checkout and return of materials
- Supports various-sized books and audiovisual media
- Accessed 24/7 using a library card
- Connects & integrates with your ILS system

Find out more, visit www.evancedsolutions.com/plm
Or call toll free 888-519-5770



Solutions for 21st century libraries™

graced herself. Chillingworth—not his real name, of course—will not rest until he has learned the identity of his transgressor.

Hester, shunned by society, condemned forever to wear the scarlet “A,” rears her daughter, Pearl. Chillingworth comes to realize that Pearl’s father is the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. As physician to the ailing Dimmesdale, Chillingworth exerts evil power over him. Hester and Dimmesdale, with Pearl, plan to escape to Europe. Unfortunately, Chillingworth has booked passage on the same ship. Before they can flee, however, Dimmesdale publicly admits to Pearl’s paternity and dies in front of the community, but not before exposing the stigmata on his chest: the letter “A.” Hester continues living in the town, over the years the scarlet “A” her badge of honor for all the good works she has done for people. She has outlived her shame.

Therein lays the appeal of this novel to the contemporary reader. If the library patron to whom the readers’ advisor is attempting to “sell” *The Scarlet Letter* has had a negative experience with it in high school, gently request that that person wipe the slate clean, delete the bad memory, and bring to the novel a fresh attitude. It is set in the relatively distant past, yes, but its theme of sin and redemption is timeless. Hester turns shame into honor, such a resilient character that she can overcome humiliation and, through good, bring honor upon herself. She is an inspiring character, regardless of her time and place. Readers will respond to her strength and survival. In modern eyes, her punishment for bearing a child by a man who is not her husband is antiquated at best. Admonish your readers to look beyond any old-fashionedness in that regard. See beyond that circumstance to what kind of character Hester is: one to be admired at any time or place.

An Honorable Man

Speaking of an admirable character leads easily to the fourth novel in my “arsenal” of ten classics to recommend, Willa Cather’s magnificent *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (published in 1927).⁴ With this novel, we move into the realm of “men’s” fiction, novels appealing not singularly but certainly inclusively to male readers. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is about the very Old West, with ranchers and Indians and spectacularly beautiful open country where heroines out of Henry James’ novels would not survive a day. Readers’ advisory librarians can sell the novel as a well-understood appreciation of the hardships endured by the first Europeans to venture into,

settle, and bring the Catholic faith to the American Southwest. Cather’s beautiful novel is a series of vignettes about colorful individuals set amid even more colorful scenery, all centered on the life, career, and adventures of Father Jean Marie Latour, vicar apostolic of New Mexico, a character Cather based on the real-life first archbishop of Sante Fé, Jean Baptiste Lamy.

Bringing order to recalcitrant, and even lapsed, priests, who for too long had followed their personal self-aggrandizing agendas, was the French-born archbishop’s central mission in being sent by Rome to the wilds of western North America. Rather than a character whose actions take him in the direction of flouting the moral fiber of his community, as was the case with Emma Bovary, Daisy Miller, and Hester Prynne, Father Latour *becomes* the moral fiber of his community. It is the talent of Cather to create him heroic but humble and empathetic; and it is Cather’s strong male character that is the primary appeal of this completely engaging novel.

The fifth novel in my selected series of highly recommended classics (still in the realm of “boy’s” fiction) is another novel with an intriguing male character, although one made of different stuff, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (published in 1925).⁵ Actually, two central male characters stand as major personalities in this novel’s pages, representing the good and the bad, or rather the upright versus the shady. Fitzgerald is, of course, the chronicler of the Jazz Age, the era in American history between the end of World War I and the Great Depression, which is symbolized in today’s public consciousness by speakeasies, flappers, the Charleston, Prohibition, Al Capone, and big, flashy automobiles. Fitzgerald wrote about all that in *The Great Gatsby*. The novel’s plot is complicated: essentially, the tale of a young man from the Midwest named Nick Carraway, now in residence in a wealthy Long Island community. (Nick commutes from there to his job in New York City.) On Long Island he meets the young, very rich, flamboyant racketeer Jay Gatsby. Sucked into Gatsby’s wild lifestyle, Nick is however never a true participant in this world of infidelity, murder, and suicide; and Nick eventually tires of the immorality and returns to the Midwest.

What we have here is a one-two readers’ advisory punch. This carefully observed, beautifully articulated novel is best tossed first into the potential reader’s hands on the basis of the wonderfully enticing figure of Jay Gatsby. I mean, who doesn’t enjoy reading about a well-dressed, fast-car-driving, women-chasing gangster? No, seriously, *Gatsby* is the primary

draw here, and quite a draw he is. The follow-up appeal-factor punch is this: that the book deserves great respect for its time-and-place authenticity. Readers' advisors should bring those two factors into their discussion with a potential reader in quick succession: Jay Gatsby as a character worth learning about, and the era and area are convincingly evoked. Who doesn't like to read about the Jazz Age? This may well be the easiest sell of all the classics on my list.

Reader Irritation

But, on the other hand, let the readers' advisory librarian beware. You may encounter the *Madame Bovary* effect: that is, reader irritation. In the case of *Madame Bovary*, the irritation, as we previously discussed, may arise over what happens to her. But remember, as we said, that is a perfectly fine response, because at least the reader *reacted* to the book and, chances are, will never forget it. A similar reader response may be elicited by *Gatsby*. A reader could come to you with annoyance at, or at least disinterest, in reading about people who are not legitimately employed—criminals, in other words. The same readers' advisory answer as that which was given to readers who had a problem with *Bovary* is the best answer. In other words, say this: You've just read a terrific novel and were provoked by it. That's what good books do.

The quick one-two punch would also prove to be an effective strategy for marrying reader to book when it comes to the next classic novel on my list, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (published in 1813).⁶ Granted, with Austen we move back into "women's" fiction. Few men—only the most ardent devotee of serious fiction—will consider reading Austen, and that is just the way it is. But offering *Pride* to your female readers will be a labor of love. The world of English country gentlefolk in the early nineteenth century is the milieu in which Austen existed and which she explored with humor, compassion, great authority, *and* a remarkably innate sense of novel structure. (That last item on the list, however, ought not to be tried as a selling point, because it is getting too close to literary theory for the comfort of the general reader.)

Of course, this novel presents one of the most famous romances in literature: between Elizabeth Bennett, one of five sisters whose need for marriage preoccupies their mother to the extreme, and the proud Mr. Darcy, who is attracted to Elizabeth but feels he must sup-

press his interest because of her inferior social status. Aha! That is the selling point—the romance, *and* the fact that Elizabeth Barrett is one of the most delightful and popular female characters in English literature. She is absolutely charming, and the winding path into the arms of Mr. Darcy is a delectable path of misunderstandings and eventual understandings. Elizabeth exerts herself, but *within* the conventions of the day, and she is definitely admirable for it, even to more cynical contemporary readers.

The second punch, as with *The Great Gatsby*, involves the readers' advisor quickly making it clear that this novel is a distinct, well-defined capture of its time and place. Emphasize this to a potential reader, immediately after citing how charming is the main character and arresting is her famous romance with the elegant Mr. Darcy: that Austen's depiction of country life in England in the early nineteenth century resembles a soft, subtle watercolor, vibrant in its own easy textured and gently colorful way.

Place, as every readers' advisor knows, is one of the strongest appeal factors for fiction. Sherwood Anderson's 1919 novel *Winesburg, Ohio*, as the title would indicate, is all about place.⁷ The book strikes a particularly resonant chord with small-

Cobá



Dirty Patron Records??

- Verify and standardize patron addresses
- Zip+4 enhancement
- One-time or ongoing cleanup
- Records checked against national database
- Prepare for an ILS migration
- Get the most out of GIS mapping software
- Custom programming also available



coba.quipugroup.com

Quipu Group, LLC
(800) 764-8018
thefolks@quipugroup.com

town Midwesterners, but as evoked in Anderson's measured, poetic prose, it is a place not limited in geographical appeal. *Winesburg* is a novel about America, period; it entices all Americans because of the universality of the characters with which Anderson inhabited this small Ohio town.

In structure a cycle of interrelated stories, *Winesburg* is a novel of desires and frustrations, which explains its widespread appeal: every reader will relate to thwarted love and crushed dreams. The central figure is young George Willard, a reporter for the local newspaper, who hopes one day to be a writer. To George the town's inhabitants confide their personal stories; these individuals include a berry picker driven from his previous hometown for alleged homosexuality, George's teacher, and the Presbyterian minister. George eventually makes his escape from Winesburg's confines and restrictions.

Small-town Midwestern life, characters whose plights closely resemble anyone and everyone's needs and disappointments: thus is the formula for this novel's continued popularity—and, importantly for our purposes here, the formula for a certain-to-be successful readers' advisory transaction. The librarian who recommends it can surely count on a pleased response when the book is returned.

(By the way, *Winesburg* is both a man's novel and a woman's novel, straddling that fence easily. There is a good mix of male and female characters and male-interest and female-interest plot situations to satisfy both sides of the "boy-girl" equation.)

Off to More Distant Locales

The Ohio town of Winesburg will strike a chord of familiarity with more American readers than the place in which our next highly recommended classic novel is set. *A Passage to India* (published in 1924)⁸ is the generally recognized masterpiece of very eminent English novelist E. M. Forster, author of such other highly regarded novels as *A Room with a View* (1908) and *Howard's End* (1910). The comedy of manners was his specialty. Forster, a shy and retiring man, lived for decades in the quiet confines of Cambridge University. Unassuming in personality, he nevertheless enjoyed meaningful travel experiences, including time spent in India, upon which he drew to write *A Passage to India*.

The time period in the novel approximates the time that it was published, the 1920s. Forster depicted an India that was still a British colonial possession. He weaves a beautifully articulated and understood social and political drama about the

clash between colonialists and native-born. A middle-aged English woman and a young Englishwoman arrive in a relatively unimportant Indian town to visit the city magistrate, who is the older woman's son and the younger woman's fiancé. The setting is evoked from the first sentence and the rub between Indian and English is soon obvious. When, on a sightseeing visit to the nearby Marabar Caves, the young woman accuses an Indian surgeon, who is in her touring party, of attacking her in one of the caves, the city divides even more sharply into opposing camps: the ruler and the ruled, that is. Forster poses his novel in answer to this situation: that when individuals from opposite sides respond to each other individually, the divide is *still* too great to bridge.

The primary sell here is its colorful setting indelibly mixed with the politics of racial, historical, and religious conflict. This is a personalized exploration of an episode (à la Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*) of bigotry starting out small but soon spreading to large.

The have-nots also feature in a giant work of social criticism, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (published in 1939).⁹ Noting the year in which the book appeared is the first clue to at least the novel's backdrop if not its absolute matériel: the Great Depression, of course. And, indeed, it *is* the matériel of which *The Grapes of Wrath* is constructed. It is *the* Depression novel. The Joad family—"Okies," in the pejorative term of the day—is paradigmatic of the plight of many small farmers in the southern Midwest—"the Dustbowl"—who, due to drought and the bad economy, were forced on the road to head westward to the promised land, California. Steinbeck, one of America's Nobel Prize in Literature winners, brought that very real story home to his contemporary readers, and this moving novel continues to bring the story to latter-day readers. Whether it is actually Steinbeck's best novel is an unimportant debate for our purposes here, and has no place in recommending it to fiction readers; its magnificence in depicting this particular segment and era of American socio-economic history is unparalleled. The Joads' search for employment and dignity as they endure a tortuous migration west is an immensely poignant story, one that should never be forgotten. It is an important story in American history.

This is a "boy's" and "girl's" novel. Don't hesitate to recommend it to male readers. Poignant that it is, it is not precious; it is a caring treatment but not a romantic one. I have, in my plot description, given away its chief recommendation "device." As the novel I previously discussed, *A Passage to India*, proffers a

view of the tensions in colonial India, *The Grapes of Wrath* opens a door on the tensions of a time quite relevant to contemporary American readers in the current downturn of the economy. You don't want to use the word "document" to a potential reader, because that term denotes something official and unreadable; but you as a readers' advisor understand that this novel is indeed a document in its accurate, authentic capturing of time as well as the characters of the time—it is a very *personal* document, rendered extremely readable.

The Russian writer Isaac Babel presents an interesting, if sad, case. Babel was born in the port city of Odessa in the last decade of the nineteenth century. His life was relatively short; he was killed by Stalin's secret police in 1940. If Stalin intended to silence him, which he obviously did, then it is greatly ironic that Babel's literary reputation has increased by leaps and bounds since his death. He is currently regarded as one of the world's supreme masters of the short story, his work in that form found in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* (published in 2002).¹⁰ His stories generally fall into two groups: one, the Odessa stories, depicting the city's Jewish gangster class; two, the Red Cavalry stories, based on Babel's experiences as a war correspondent traveling with the Red Cavalry into Poland, to bring Communism to the Soviet Union's neighbor. The publication of this latter group of stories in book form in 1926 brought the author immediate and international fame. The succinctness of his prose is remarkable in capturing the essence of character and situation.


The readers' advisor is all too aware of the difficulty of "selling" short stories. Generally, readers feel unsatisfied with a short story, wanting "more." Let's face it; this classic book will be an initial harder sell than the nine previous ones I have discussed because of that common reader prejudice. It would be easy for me to say that the readers' advisor can overcome readers' short-story phobia with this volume—easy to say, yes, but I believe accurate as well. The Odessa stories and the Red Cavalry stories each form an interlocking sequence and both tell more than a novel's worth of characters and incidents. Want more, you ask the reader? Then turn to the next story and you will get more, and the next story and the next, until you have finished the entire sequence and you will not feel shortchanged in narrative involvement.

Once past the issue of the short story form, a sell of the book will not be difficult, especially to seri-

ous male fiction readers. Gangster history and war history. Done with quick, lightning-bolt strokes. No messing around, in other words. Harsh conditions brought home in unelaborate prose. These stories, now classics, will continue to be regarded as among the best stories ever written by *anyone*.

Summary

In summation, the readers' advisory librarian interested in generating interest in classic novels among his or her serious fiction readers can conduct such a program most effectively by selecting a group of ten recognized classics and reading or rereading them to gain a good familiarity with them. The most interesting type of program for both librarian and library patron is one in which the librarian "pitches" a particular book by an appeal factor and link that appeal factor to another novel on your list, and so one.

Don't make a huge deal about labeling your classics as such. They are not sacred. They are not books that if you don't like them you're stupid. They *are* unforgettable reads to which you undoubtedly will have a reaction. Many, many readers have read these books and have especially strong reactions. The librarian should say to the reader, I would be interested in *your* reactions. 

References

1. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (New York: Penguin paper, 1992).
2. Henry James, *Daisy Miller* (New York: Penguin paper, 1986).
3. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press paper, 2007).
4. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Vintage paper, 1971).
5. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Penguin paper, 1994).
6. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Penguin paper, 2002).
7. Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Penguin paper, 1976).
8. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt/Harvest paper, 1984).
9. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin paper, 2008).
10. Isaac Babel, *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* (New York: Norton paper, 2002).