

Literature post-1900: Expanding your NEA library (July 2020)

Here at OCR, our A Level English Literature NEA is designed to give students and teachers scope to explore contemporary literature written in English. In discussions with our teachers, we're offering these twice yearly bulletins highlighting a range of texts for your consideration.

In this first bulletin, we really wanted to highlight an extended range of contemporary texts written by Black authors as part of our effort to support centres and students in selecting texts beyond those traditionally taught or chosen for non-exam assessment. We have endeavoured to focus on texts published within the last decade, with the occasional outlier.

This bulletin is by no means an exhaustive resource, but we've tried to offer a range of texts that will enable students to delve into language, form and structure while exploring perspectives they may not have encountered before.

Poetry texts

1. *A Portable Paradise* by Roger Robinson (2019, Peepal Tree Press)

Robinson's collection won both the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize for 2019 and the Ondaatje Prize 2020 and covers topics like the Grenfell Tower disaster, the Windrush scandal, and the Brixton riots with empathy and precision. Robinson skilfully plays with, and reacts to, language and its role in oppression, while also paying close attention to the everyday.

Themes: identity, conflict, family, racism, loss, love

2. *Teaching My Mother to Give Birth* by Warsan Shire (2011, flipped eye)

Shire was brought to the attention of many through her work with Beyoncé on the film *Lemonade* in 2016 but this first pamphlet really set her on the map. As a Somali-British poet, she explores her relationship with migration and community, love and family, loss and struggle, in a style that is direct and truly imaginative.

Themes: community, love, family, conflict, identity, migration

3. *Magical Negro* by Morgan Parker (2019, Corsair)

This collection, Parker's third, is frank, funny and profound. By cataloguing prominent figures and stereotypes in pop culture, Parker both depicts and reconfigures experiences of Black womanhood. The collection is impressive and raw, written with clarity and urgency.

Themes: loneliness, womanhood, racism, sexuality, time, violence

4. *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine (2015, Penguin)

Rankine's collection here is ever more timely. Winning the Forward Prize in 2015, the collection pushes the limits of poetic form while exploring clearly the insidious forms racism can take, both systemic and interpersonal. This is a collection that will really stretch student understanding of both poetics and Black experiences.

Themes: violence, loss, society, fear, pop culture, power

5. *The Healing Next Time* by Roy McFarlane (2018, Nine Arches Press)

McFarlane's second collection is a tour de force. One section, a poem sequence responds a question raised in Rankine's *Citizen*, writes about British victims of police brutality and deaths in custody. The collection explores pain and grief, but also growth, discovery, and resilience.

Themes: racism, violence, grief, change, love, community

6. *Homie* by Danez Smith (2020, Graywolf Press)

Smith's most recent collection, after being the youngest person to win the Forward Prize for 2017's *Don't Call Us Dead*, moves their work in a different direction. Focusing on excavating friendship, love and the personal, moving away from addressing the white gaze to a more inward-looking perspective, the collection has much to offer.

Themes: friendship, resilience, form, perspective, celebration, love

7. *Ordinary Beast* by Nicole Sealey (2017, ECCO Press)

In her first full length collection, Sealey offers up poems that question and reconstruct. The collection is both playful and formally inventive, engaging with multiple forms in truly innovative, groundbreaking fashion. Sealey's command of imagery is precise and poised, exploring a range of voices, topics and times.

Themes: innovation, time, memory, voice, race, imagination

8. *Gold from the Stone* by Lemn Sissay (2017, Canongate)

This collection offers both New and Selected poems from Sissay's career. From self-publishing his first book of poetry at 18, Sissay's work spans from the 80s until the late 2010s, exploring topics from the search for identity and selfhood, trauma and hope, mapping his development as a poet and as a person.

Themes: identity, loss, trauma, understanding, childhood, home

9. *Surge* by Jay Bernard (2019, Chatto & Windus)

Growing out of Bernard's performance work, archival research and community memory, they trace the silence and indifference that followed the New Cross Fire of 1981, setting this against more recent instances of institutional failure like the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the Windrush scandal. This doesn't do it justice but *Surge* is really worth picking up.

Themes: tragedy, institutional racism, loss, memory, community, voice

10. *The Tradition* by Jericho Brown (2019, Picador)

Brown's third and most recent collection is an evolution of style and form. Working with a multi-layered idea of 'tradition' and what that means in terms of form, of storytelling, of culture, Brown crafts a collection that is both intimate and expansive. Its scope ranges far and wide, offering students so much to explore.

Themes: masculinity, LGBT+, race, love, death, progress

Drama texts

1. *The Convert* by Danai Gurira (2012, Oberon Books)

Often described as inspired by *Pygmalion*, the play is set in late 1895 at a time of great unrest as Mashona and Matabeleland in Southern Africa is soon to be forcefully renamed Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). It focuses on Chilford, recruited by Jesuits as a child, and Jekesai who seeks refuge in service at his home and the rising tide of resistance.

Themes: identity, faith, language, change, conflict, colonialism

2. *Barber Shop Chronicles* by Inua Ellams (2017, Oberon Books)

This ensemble comedy focuses on the same day between barber shops Peckham, Lagos, Accra, Kampala, Harare and Johannesburg. Exploring masculinity, family, what it means to be a father, and football this play is spry, tender and insightful. A welcome change to stage masculinities of the past.

Themes: family, masculinity, responsibility, betrayal, comedy, language

3. *Nine Night* by Natasha Gordon (2018, Nick Hern Books)

The play follows one family as they mourn the recent death of their Jamaican matriarch Gloria. Set against the backdrop of the traditional Nine Nights celebrations, Gordon explores the impact of Gloria's life on her family and friends. Both poignant and funny, Gordon skilfully weaves together a real family drama full of love, loss and life.

Themes: loss, grief, tradition, family, generational change, migration

4. *Sucker Punch* by Roy Williams (2010, Methuen Drama)

Williams excavates the boxing careers of and relationship between two young Black men, Troy and Leon, in the 80s. Initially training together in South London, Troy pursues opportunities in the US while Leon stays at home. However, both are used, manipulated, and searching for something until they finally meet again, back in the ring.

Themes: masculinity, manipulation, betrayal, racism, loyalty, violence

5. *truth and reconciliation* by debbie tucker green (2011, Nick Hern Books)

debbie tucker green is a powerhouse of a playwright and *truth and reconciliation* is no diversion from form. green uses the structure of truth and reconciliation committees in vignette form in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Bosnia, Rwanda and Northern Ireland, to explore the lasting effects of violence on individuals and communities.

Themes: violence, conflict, genocide, (in)justice, society, testimony

6. *Girls* by Theresa Ikoko (2016, Methuen Drama)

Ikoko's play centres on three abducted Nigerian girls as they plan to escape. It's a play that centres on hard themes, but we are first and foremost focused on who these girls are and the friendship between the three: Tisana, Ruhab and Haleema. At turns funny, tragic and violent, Ikoko's play is fresh and sharp, giving these girls behind a hashtag a voice.

Themes: friendship, violence, abduction, justice, loss, survival

7. *The High Table* by Temi Wilkey (2020, Methuen Drama)

When Tara comes out to her Nigerian parents after her girlfriend Leah proposes, a council of her ancestors is called in the afterlife to decide if they will bless the wedding. The play switches between those two worlds, the living and the dead, as Tara navigates the revelation of her uncle Teju's arrest at a gay bar and her wedding without her parents.

Themes: love, sexuality, family, shame, compassion, LGBT+

8. *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage (2008, Nick Hern Books)

Set in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in a bar run by the formidable Mama Nadi, Nottage explores the trauma of sexual violence in conflict and the ways in which women are both resilient and vulnerable. Based on Nottage's extensive interviews with Congolese women, the play is poignant, unflinching, and human.

Themes: violence, rape, conflict, betrayal, resilience, community

9. *Three Birds* by Janice Okoh (2012, Nick Hern Books)

A dark comic drama, the play is set in a Lewisham council flat where 16 year old Tiana is trying to look after her brother Tionne and little sister Tanika. Something strange is going on, outside forces are threatening to close in and Tionne's odd experiments need more supplied. Okoh treads a careful line between fantasy and reality throughout.

Themes: family, threats, growing up, fantasy, comedy, fragility

10. *Little Baby Jesus* by Arinzé Kene (2011, Nick Hern Books)

Poetic at its core, *Little Baby Jesus* gives the microphone to three teenagers, Kehinde, Joanne and Rugrat. Shedding light on school life, teenage worries, family, this is an energetic and considered play about how hard it is to grow up and find yourself. Funny and intense, it's a text that explores youth in all its complexity.

Themes: youth, family, growing up, infatuation, storytelling, loneliness

Prose texts

1. *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett (2020, Dialogue Books)

A really compelling novel following the lives, love and struggles of twin sisters Desiree and Stella. After disappearing one summer in 1954, Desiree returns with her daughter Ruby in tow while Stella has mysteriously disappeared. The book follows both generations through until the mid-1980s, exploring what it means to be human and to be whole.

Themes: love, family, betrayal, colourism, LGBT+, abuse

2. *The Old Drift* by Namwali Serpell (2019, Vintage)

Serpell's multi-stranded novel details three generations of three families on the Zambezi river. Blending historical fiction, magical realism and science fiction, Serpell weaves a story ranging from Dr Livingstone's search for the source of the Nile, Matha Mwambwa's training under Edward Nkoloso's Zambian Space Program, to the AIDS crisis, to the near future.

Themes: family, history, technology, change, colonialism, magic

3. *Ordinary People* by Diana Evans (2018, Vintage)

A novel that explores love, parenthood, and identity, Evans centres her story on two couples Melissa and Michael, and their friends Damian and Stephanie. Evans skilfully excavates marriage and raising a young family, life within and without London, and friendship, all while never heading quite where you'd expect.

Themes: parenthood, identity, love, music, change, domesticity

4. *Mr Fox* by Helen Oyeyemi (2011, Picador)

Oyeyemi's fourth novel plays with the very idea of writing in a somewhat meta-fictional fashion. St John Fox, a 1930s writer, is caught between his wife Daphne and his (imaginary) muse, Mary Foxe. Oyeyemi intersperses a series of stories reinventing fairytales and myths throughout the novel, all while refracting St John's Bluebeard tendencies.

Themes: infatuation, misogyny, comedy, mythmaking, infidelity, jealousy

5. *The Fishermen* by Chigozie Obioma (2015, One)

The story of four brothers, Ikenna, Boja, Omembe and Benjamin, who encounter darkness, prophecy and violence in their youth. Told to us from the adult Benjamin's perspective, Obioma explores their six week career as fishermen, their dreadful encounter with madman Abulu, and the ways in which fear, paranoia and fantasy can take over.

Themes: childhood, growing up, lost promise, violence, madness, loss

6. *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi (2018, Penguin)

Gyasi focuses on the lives and descendants of two half-sisters: Effia, who is sold as a bride to a slavetrader and Esi, who is sold as a slave. Moving from the 18th century, Gyasi details the subsequent three hundred years of the two branches of this family tree, exploring the impact of the slave trade and the ways in which colonialism and conflict shape lives.

Themes: slavery, love, conflict, family, power, history

7. *Half Blood Blues* by Esi Edugyan (2011, Serpent's Tail)

Set between Baltimore in 1992 and Berlin and Paris in 1939-40, narrator Sid recounts his experiences as a Jazz musician in Nazi-era Berlin and occupied France from the vantage point of his older age, long after his musical career has faded. At the core of this story is a friendship, a love triangle and a betrayal, showing how the past never really stays dead.

Themes: music, betrayal, violence, failure, mystery, ambition

8. *The Bone Readers* by Jacob Ross (2017, Peepal Tree Press)

The inaugural winner of the Jhalak Prize, Ross' novel offers Caribbean crime literature with depth and danger. Set on the small island of Camaho, Ross introduces us to DC 'Digger' Digson who has become a policeman almost by accident. With his colleague Miss Stainslaus, Digger explores dark secrets, cold cases, and the ways power can be wielded.

Themes: crime, religion, secrets, power, society, truth

9. *Blonde Roots* by Bernadine Evaristo (2009, Penguin)

Speculative historical fiction at its finest and most incisive; the Booker Prize winning Evaristo explores slavery through a very different lens. Imagining what history might look like had white Europeans been enslaved, Evaristo masterfully inverts current prejudices to expose our reality. Sharp, funny and clever, this novel provokes thought and admiration.

Themes: slavery, power, prejudice, history, community, oppression

10. *Nudibranch* by Irenosen Okojie (2019, Dialogue Books)

Okojie's collection of short stories is fantastic in every sense of the word. At turns strange and fantastical, surreal and hyperreal, this collection offers 15 gems for students to explore. From dimension-hopping monks, to heart eating goddesses, to love affairs in Berlin, Okojie's style is inventive, compelling and unpredictable.

Themes: love, time, magical realism, the supernatural, bravery, horror