

# PATRICK NESS'S TOP 10 "UNSUITABLE" BOOKS FOR TEENAGERS

My childhood reading was blissfully unchaperoned. My parents were just happy I liked to read, so I—in utter innocence—would wander into the public library and pick up any old thing. I read Harold Robbins when I was thirteen, for example. It was *very* educational.

I survived, though. When I asked on Twitter for other “inappropriate” books people had read way too young, the list included Jilly Cooper, Irvine Welsh, *Flowers in the Attic* (by practically everyone), and lots and lots of Stephen King. All bookish young readers overreach occasionally, and if they discover they like it, they keep on doing it. What a great way to establish reading as exciting and maybe even dangerous, eh?

But there's more to adult books than adult material. There are a number of books that are actually rather better if read when you're a teen, some because they're entertaining contraband, some because it can never be too early to read something so wonderful, and some because, if you wait, you'll miss your chance forever.



## 1. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger

The obvious first choice, but not necessarily because of its literary reputation. It needs to be read when you're young. If you first meet Holden Caulfield when you're too old, the desire to give him a good slap might impede your enjoyment.

## 2. *The Stand* by Stephen King

For his sheer ability to get teenagers to love reading, Stephen King is a saint. I did a book report on *Pet Sematary* in eighth grade. My English teacher, bless her forever, gave me an A. I pick *The Stand* because if you're an adult, it's a bit long. If you're a teenager, it's *War and Peace*. Scratch that, if you're a teenager, it's better. And that's no bad thing.

## 3. *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace

Speaking of 1,000+ page books, *Infinite Jest* is filled with all the things that are brilliant to read when you're young: unembarrassed cleverness, a cheeky take on the future, hilarious experiments with form, and a serious sense of accomplishment when you're finished.

## 4. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

I read *Beloved* when I was fifteen, and it felt like the first time being allowed to sit at the grown-ups' table. I may not have followed every word, but I was mesmerized. And I learned without even knowing I was being taught.

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## 5. *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides

One of those literary, award-winning adult novels that I secretly think was written for teens all along (see *To Kill a Mockingbird*). No, it won't encourage suicide, but it will encourage an appreciation for elegant writing and ring true for how isolating the teenage years can feel. Plus, it's in first-person plural! What's not to love?

## 6. *Dracula* by Bram Stoker

Next, a couple of classics that are better in your teens. *Dracula* first because it's still fast-paced, scary, and appealingly pervy. Plus, it's important to know that vampires don't play baseball. And honestly? They never would.

## 7. *Middlemarch* by George Eliot

Because *Middlemarch* should be read when you're fourteen. And again when you're twenty-three. And again at thirty-one. And forty-five. And fifty-two. And sixty-eight. And eighty-four. It will, astoundingly, be a different book every time.

## 8. *Maul* by Tricia Sullivan

Two personal choices now. Read Tricia Sullivan's fantastic, profane, and mind-bending *Maul* mainly because it's very important to start loving brilliant genre fiction before older readers can tell you to be a snob about it. Plus, far-future gender politics and teenagers with machine guns in a shopping mall. I ask again, what's not to love?

## 9. *Jitterbug Perfume* by Tom Robbins

Tom, not Harold. This book is the whole reason for this list. I read it probably a dozen times from ages fifteen to seventeen, and was amazed to discover that fiction could be, of all things, playful. That it didn't always need to be polite. That it could have runaway metaphors just for a laugh. And that the naughty bits could be told with a smile. It opened my eyes to a world of possibilities in my own writing, and is probably the most formative book I ever read. And you know what? I haven't read it since. I can't bear to. Seen through the eyes of my adult self, who knows how disappointed I'd be? Let it remain forever, gloriously, in my teenage years.

## 10. Unrecommended by Unnamed

And here's where it gets tricky. I can't possibly recommend some of the books that I and others read when we were teenagers. I mean, really, is *Trainspotting* in any way appropriate for a teenager? And what about the Jilly Coopers and the Jackie Collinses and, heaven help us, *Flowers in the Attic*? We older folks may have cherished, er, survived reading them at your age, but you're too young, way too young, to read any of these books that are easily available at your local library. Listed alphabetically by author. So the Cs would be near the front and Ws near the back. But I couldn't possibly recommend that.

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