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Novel Advocacy

Much of nonprofit advocacy involves culture change. Public attitudes about smoking, drunk driving, sexual harassment, and more didn't change because politicians enacted laws. Rather, attitudes changed – the culture shifted – and the laws caught up to modern mores.

Sometimes, those changes occurred as a result of demonstrations, a damning report with detailed data and analysis, a shocking news exposé, direct lobbying, and letter-writing campaigns. More often than you'd imagine, those things followed in the wake of a ground-breaking novel that captured the public's imagination and shifted perceptions on a subject. August being the prime month for beach/vacation/staycation reading, let's look at some novels that have moved the culture.

Every student in America knows that ***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** by Harriet Beecher Stowe helped transform the debate over the abolition of slavery. The book was only a small part of the abolitionist "marketing campaign," but other materials have mostly faded into history and that novel is what's remembered. (The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. has some fascinating examples on display.)

No one can deny the impact of Upton Sinclair's ***The Jungle*** on the public's awareness of the violence and filth of the early 20th Century meatpacking industry. State and federal laws and oversight are the sequel. Two classics George Orwell

wrote in the 1940s to illustrate the dangers of totalitarian propaganda, ***Animal Farm*** and **1984**, hardened Americans' Cold War views against Russia for generations. Ayn Rand's famous works ***The Fountainhead*** and ***Atlas Shrugged*** undoubtedly shaped libertarian thinking and approach to public policy for more than 50 years. (Although we have to admit, John Galt's 100-page speech skews as far from beach reading as is humanly possible.)

The point, of course, is that the Great American Novel can greatly advance the arc of culture changes. Here are more examples:

War and Military Conflict

Novels about war are as old as the art form and are still being written to highlight the drama, horrors, valor, and loss resulting from human conflict. Amazon alone identifies 80,000 titles in the genre. Anti-war books, however, stand out as a distinct sub-genre, above the fray. Notable, and eminently readable, anti-war novels include ***All Quiet on the Western Front*** by German writer Erich Maria Remarque (WWI), ***Catch 22*** by Joseph Heller (WWII), and ***M*A*S*H*** by Richard Hooker (Korean War). The fact that each was made into a popular movie indicates that the anti-war nerve was indeed struck, and the pop culture took notice.

Race in America

While ***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** was in its era a seminal work that helped change attitudes about slavery, its negative stereotypes about Black people and other flaws deny it accolades as great literature and don't pass the test of time. There are numerous life- and attitude-altering novels about race in America that changed, and continue to change, how readers and the public think. James Baldwin's ***Go Tell It on the Mountain*** and Ralph Ellison's ***The Invisible Man*** are still read, discussed, and taught – as history, as African-American studies, and as great literature.

The [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](#) has recognized several works of great significance that seek to express and alter views on race and racism. Pulitzer fiction awardee for 1961, [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) by Harper Lee, is often listed among the great works of American literature. More recently, Pulitzer Prizes for fiction have singled out for highest distinction [Beloved](#) by Toni Morrison (1988), [The Known World](#) by Edward P. Jones (2004), and [The Underground Railroad](#) (2017) and [The Nickel Boys](#) (2020),

both by Colson Whitehead. Other than Whitehead, only William Faulkner and John Updike have won the Pulitzer twice.

We'll also extend praise for the 2021 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, [*The Night Watchman*](#) by Louise Erdrich, a novel the Pulitzer Committee describes as "A majestic, polyphonic novel about a community's efforts to halt the proposed displacement and elimination of several Native American tribes in the 1950s, rendered with dexterity and imagination." This novel deserves bonus points for making grassroots lobbying exceedingly interesting and relevant in today's world.

And Much More

Sticking with the Pulitzer fiction awardees (because we don't want the heat for trying to define greatness), here are more issue-advancing and enlightening recent novels. All of these works address many interrelated issues in addition to the primary ones identified here at the risk of oversimplification:

Conservation and Environmentalism - [*The Overstory*](#) by Richard Powers (2019)

Gender/LGBTIA Identity - [*Middlesex*](#) by Jeffrey Eugenides (2003)

Poverty and Labor - [*The Grapes of Wrath*](#) by John Steinbeck (1940)

Race/Gender/LGBTIA Equality - [*The Color Purple*](#) by Alice Walker (1983)

Sexual Abuse - [*A Thousand Acres*](#) by Jane Smiley (1992)

Vietnamese Immigrants - [*The Sympathizer*](#) by Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016)

Vision Impairment - [*All the Light We Cannot See*](#) by Anthony Doerr (2015)

Finally, we'll have to wait to see whether this year's ***Olga Dies Dreaming*** by Xochitl Gonzalez will make a lasting difference. It examines political corruption, familial strife, and the very notion of the American dream.

In some ways, all great art is about "issues" in a sense: love and loss, tragedy and comedy, human morality and human foibles, and people trying to live in community on a shared planet with finite resources and limited time. When focused on aspects of the human condition - and the culture that reflects them - that can be improved,

we have the stuff that ignites the imagination and action items of the nonprofit advocate. Read on!