

## Generations

# Classics that almost didn't make it

**L**ike all aspiring writers, I've had my share of rejection slips (a drawer full). After the initial sting, one learns not to take it personally and continue to do what you love doing.

So, it was kind of refreshing to read in a *Reader's Digest* article by Jennifer Brozak that some of our greatest writers were panned by critics but that their magnificent novels proved those critics wrong.

I get it — we need critics. Life would be boring. F. Scott Fitzgerald, however, didn't agree and openly showed his disdain for all critics. It didn't help that his famous "The Great Gatsby" didn't make a good first impression. Fitzgerald's tragic story about a man who worked hard to gain riches and the best life had to offer, except ultimately to lose Daisy, his one true love, became so admired that it is required reading in many high school English classes.

However, when it was first published in 1925, it sold only 21,000 copies and critics called it a "dud," a "glorified anecdote," and cautioned people to read the book with a "sense of regret." Today, Fitzgerald is considered one of America's greatest authors.

Even more surprising was Margaret Mitchell's 1936 Pulitzer Prize-winning "Gone with the

Wind." We've all seen the hugely successful movie with Gable and Leigh, but when the book came out, some critics weren't kind.



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A 1936 *New York Times* review called the 1,037-page book "oversized," and said it would be better if it had been edited down to "about 500 pages." The reviewer called Mitchell's writing "lively" but "never distinguished," with a "good many questionable touches" to the dialogue.

My favorite authors were the Bronte sisters, and I've read "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte and "Wuthering Heights" by Emily many times. While "Wuthering Heights" is considered a classic piece of English literature, early reviews were mixed.

Some reviewers praised the story's imaginative writing, yet others called it "disagreeable" and "in-artistic." An 1848 review in the *Examiner* called the novel "wild, confused, disjointed, and improbable."

Mark Twain's 1884 novel "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" relates the adventures of the mischievous title character as he comes of age in the rural, segregated South.

Even though it's widely considered as one of Twain's finest writings and

lauded as a "Great American Novel," it was called "trashy and vicious" in an early *New York Times* review and was compared to "the dime novels which flood the blood-and-thunder reading population."

Another book that was required in English class was Herman Melville's "Moby Dick," and I confess that I also enjoyed the movie starring Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab.

Upon its publication in 1851, the novel's got a mixed reception. While some critics praised Melville's "high philosophy" and "ingenious construction," others labeled it "trash," a "manifestation of bad taste" and "absurd."

One publication goes a bit further in its review, sarcastically noting, "If there are any of our readers who wish to find examples of bad rhetoric, involved syntax, stilted sentiment, and incoherent English, we will take the liberty of recommending to them this precious volume of Mr. Melville's."

Whew! Tough fighting words from some blind critics. You've got to give Melville credit for continuing his craft as evidenced by his final novel, "Billy Budd," edited and published posthumously after his untimely death.

J.D. Salinger's 1951 coming-of-age novel, "The Catcher in the Rye," with its hero, Holden Caulfield,

is another required book in English class, but when it was published, critics called it "disappointing," "monotonous" and "too long," echoing the sentiments of other critics at the time.

Despite the early negative press, the book became a cultural phenomenon and has sold an estimated 65 million copies since it was first published.

Joseph Heller's 1961 satire "Catch-22," about a soldier's life during World War II, was met with reviews on both sides of the spectrum.

Some critics lauded it, while others loathed it. *The New York Times* said, "It's not even a good novel by conventional standards." However, since its release in 1961, it's sold over 10 million copies, not to mention becoming a phrase used by many of us to describe a frustrating situation in which one is trapped by contradictory regulations or conditions (courtesy of Webster).

Yes, I've been in a few Catch-22 situations during my lifetime, and you probably have as well. Thank you, Mr. Heller, for summarizing those instances so eloquently in your superb novel.

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