

From the Stacks
By Julie Orf
Dunklin County Library
07/08/2026

There are books I have enjoyed and books I recommend. Then, there are the ones that become part of my personal timeline, the ones I remember not just for the story, but also for when and how I was when reading them. I have considered those kinds of reads lately. The ones that did not just entertain me, but shaped something: how I understood love, how I processed loss, even how I saw the world at the time. They were not just good books. They were experiences.

And if I could, I would not just reread them. I would return to that exact moment, reading them for the first time with no expectations, no spoilers, and no idea how these books would stay with me. It is not just about the stories themselves. It is about the versions of me who read them. The girl who stayed up too late turning pages, the one who believed in certain kinds of love, the one who did not yet know which lines would stay with her for years. Maybe that is why we hold on to these books so tightly. Not because we want to relive them exactly, but because they remind us of who we were when we first experienced them.

Kindhearted and unforgettable, the main character and title character, *Forrest Gump* by Winston Groom, stumbles into an extraordinary life despite his limited intellect. From football star and Vietnam hero to world-class Ping-Pong player and successful businessman, Forrest's unlikely adventures carry readers on a funny, heartwarming journey through three decades of American history. The novel is presented entirely from Forrest's perspective, and it is written in his own distinct Southern dialect. Through Forrest's naivety, he pointed to the absurdity of war which had me pondering the value of life. His simple direct goodness is how he saw a character's integrity and kindness.

Set in California's Salinas Valley, John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* follows two families whose lives intertwine across generations. As love, jealousy, betrayal, and forgiveness shape their destinies, the novel explores humanity's enduring struggle between good and evil, emphasizing the power of free will and the possibility of redemption. Free will is a major theme in this novel, and the characters' power to choose strongly influenced my desire to turn pages quickly. Some of Steinbeck's characters held onto bitterness and resentment disturbing their peace and contributed to their inability to move forward in their lives.

I picked up this short novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne, in a used bookstore because I still think about Anne Frank's diary and all the young men drafted into the military. When nine-year-old Bruno moves with his family to a remote home, he befriends Shmuel, a boy living behind the fence of a nearby concentration camp.

Unaware of the camp's horrors, Bruno's innocence contrasts with the devastating reality surrounding them. Their unlikely friendship underscores that hatred is taught, not inherited, and that innocence alone cannot shield anyone from the devastating consequences of evil.

Two short stories that I read as a student in Mrs. Petty's high school English class remain vivid in my shock of the plot twists. Hearing the entire class collectively gasp would be a renewed thrill, too. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is an engrossing tale of the annual harvest and traditions. This profound act of following the crowd warns of the destructive power of mob mentality. "The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allen Poe warns that revenge fueled by pride and hatred ultimately destroys the humanity of the person seeking it. Poe also reminds readers that appearances can be dangerously deceptive, making trust and sound judgment essential.