

2025 Colby Readings

At the Existential Cafe

Sarah Bakewell

Sarah Blakewell's engaging social history, *At the Existentialist Café* (2016), serves as our foundation. As Blakewell explains, "existentialists concern themselves with individual, concrete human existence," and individual existence is "whatever I choose to make of myself at every moment." She highlights biographical data and ideas of the most prominent existential theorists. Her focus in France are Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, while from Germany she highlights Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt. She insightfully describes how their works complemented their fascinating personalities. Essentially, *At the Existentialist Café* engages the reader with fundamental questions as to how people think about themselves and their relations with others.

The Stranger

Albert Camus

The novella, *The Stranger* (1946), by Albert Camus, is considered one of the most compelling, disquieting and haunting texts involving personal alienation of the twentieth century. Camus' compact style presents a stark and startling insight into the modern world. Jean Paul Sartre famously noted that every one of Camus' sentences in *The Stranger* is self-contained, with the world being "destroyed and reborn from sentence to sentence." *The Stranger* is essentially a novel of ideas which offers a concrete case where the claim that ideas have consequences can be succinctly scrutinized and studied. Camus boldly portrays the existential concept of absurdity, an experience Sartre described as "discrepancy, divorce, and disorientation."

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Catch 22

Joseph Heller

The dazzling tragicomic anti-war novel, *Catch-22* (1961), by Joseph Heller, himself a bombardier pilot in WW II, is a biting, satirical denunciation of war and those in charge of the military. Heller infuses absurdity into the characters at an air base, as well as in their conversations with one another, thereby creating buffoonery amidst the omnipresent horrors of combat. In this novel, the reader encounters not only the grim reality of war, but a whole other universe of fabulous fabrications, fantasy, farce and folly, where the fact-checking of falsehoods constantly falls short. Lurking behind Heller's tour-de-force absurdist comedy is the view of existentialists that at the heart of the universe there is only a stark, indifferent emptiness.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being

Milan Kundera

The philosophical postmodern novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), by Milan Kundera is framed by the demoralizing Prague Spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia. The psychology of the characters and their relationships with one another become weighed down by secretive surveillance of the Soviet's spy setup. Kundera addresses the question of whether happiness and love can coexist without political freedom and under a pall of disillusionment. His thoughtful meditation on these matters comes in the form of an unconventional love story that pushes the boundaries of free will, desire, and commitment, and in the process puts to the test the existentialists' claim that we always have free will and should always strive to act upon it.

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An Artist of the Floating World

Kazuo Ishiguro

The novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), by Kazuo Ishiguro is “a sensitive examination of the turmoil in postwar Japan, a time when certainties were overturned, gender politics shifted, the hierarchy of the generations seemed to topple, and even the geography of cities changed. All this is made more poignant when seen through the eyes of a man who is rejected by the future, and who chooses to reject his own past.” Part of the immense pleasure of this novel is Ishiguro’s beautiful writing which veraciously reflects Japanese culture. Ishiguro’s artistic protagonist is forced to face his former passionately held beliefs and their consequences and thereby struggles with the tenet of existentialism that we must always take full responsibility for all our actions. In doing so, Ishiguro deeply and deftly depicts his character’s wavering perceptions and deception of himself.

Love

Clarice Lispector

The imaginatively penetrating short story, *Love* (1952), by the highly acclaimed Ukrainian-born, Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector, is suffused with profound, yet sublime, existential insights experienced by an everyday woman. A moment of compassionate empathy, vivid and unsettling, leads to a moment of psychological mal de mar and a peek behind the complacency of domestic life, thereby offering the possibility of coming face-to-face with one’s inner depth. Clarice, as Brazilians lovingly refer to her, offers through *Love* what may be the most convincing and realistic depiction of how existential issues and life’s epiphanies often inform and reverberate with one another.

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Pigeon Feathers

John Updike

Our other dramatic coming-of-age short story, *Pigeon Feathers* (1956), by John Updike, poignantly portrays a youth struggling with faith and doubt, religion and science, who plummets into a panicky personal existential crisis. Updike craftily creates a situation that elegantly evinces how everyday reality, if approached and perceived with curiosity, an open mind, and reverence, may sometimes lead to enlightenment and a radical private revelation. *Pigeon Feathers* is an inspired attempt at showing how an epiphany may overcome a personal plight and light a way forward.