This Autumn, I’m Returning to the Classics



I Read This Over Shabbos is a weekly newsletter from Rivka Bennun Kay about Jewish book culture, book recommendations, and modern ideas. Receive this free newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions, comments, or feedback? Email Rivka at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

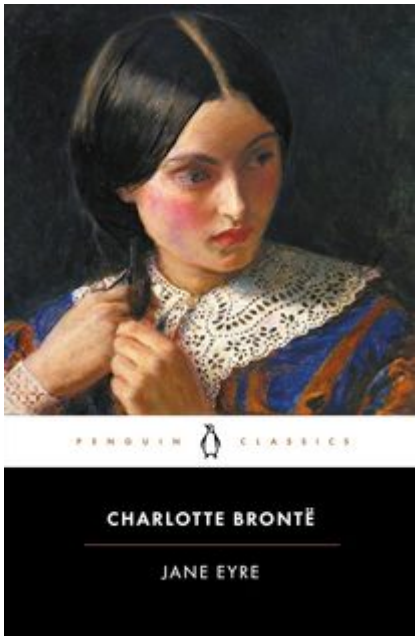
I’ve been in a bit of a reading funk lately. I don’t know if it’s the weather, or the season of life that I’m in, or burnout, but I open my book before bed, and I can’t get past one page.

When I’m in a reading funk, I like to go to the shelf where I keep all of my books from my childhood, high school, and college—most of them classics. I pulled a few down the other day and looked at the notes I dutifully took during class—about the era surrounding the book, about what the author was living through, about my own thoughts and feelings as I made my way through these novels.

I decided that this autumn, I’m returning to my roots and picking up the works that raised me and shaped me. Some are capital-C Classics. Others are childhood favorites I never outgrew. All of them reward a reflective, autumnal read, right for a season when the leaves turn, we settle into routine, and we take stock of how we’ve changed.

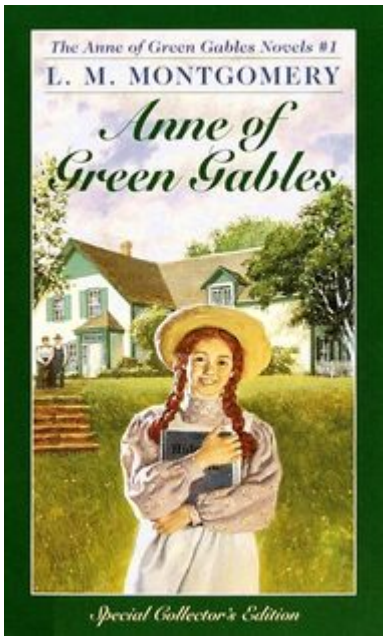
If you’re in a funk too, start here and let me know how it goes.

Jane Eyre **by Charlotte Brontë**



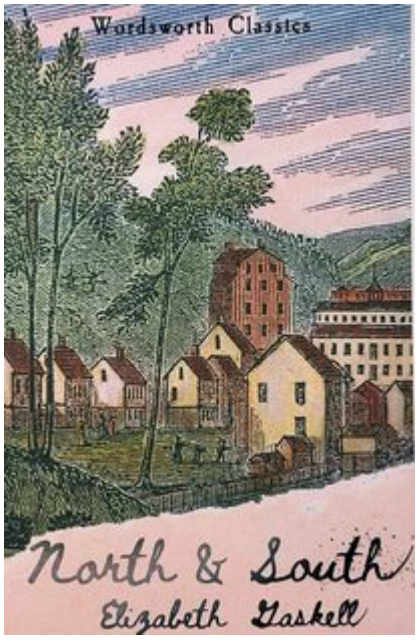
This might be the quintessential cozy-yet-daunting fall read. An orphaned young woman becomes a governess at a mysterious country estate, where she develops feelings for her employer while uncovering secrets about his past. It’s a story of love, independence, and finding your place in the world—and it’s also dark, gloomy, and brooding, which is perfect for a long November night.

Anne of Green Gables **by L. M. Montgomery**



I first read it in elementary school and have loved it ever since. Anne Shirley, an imaginative and talkative orphan, is unexpectedly sent to live with two siblings in a small Canadian town, and the book follows her through the seasons. It’s a novel about friendship, adventures, and the joys of growing up. It also feels like a warm hug.

North and South **by Elizabeth Gaskell**



Set in 19th-century England, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, Margaret Hale leaves the green warmth of the rural south for the industrial north, where she witnesses the growing tensions between mill workers and wealthy owners, and where she and the mill owner John Thornton start out as stiff and guarded with each other as the town around them. The best way to explain this book is that it simply feels chilly—in the best way. It's the book I'd open if I want autumn to feel like autumn.

Mansfield Park **by Jane Austen**



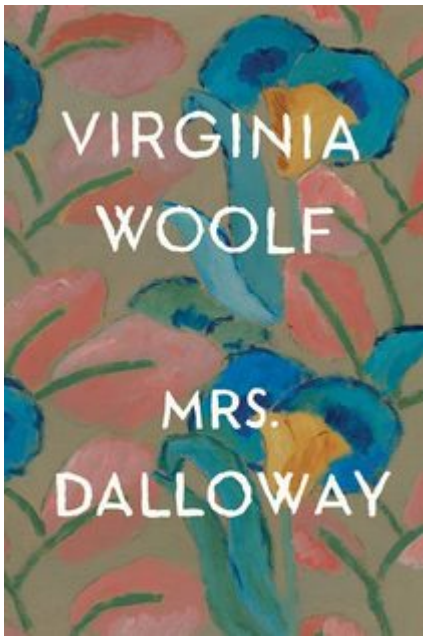
Mansfield Park is often regarded as one of Austen's most polarizing works, but it is a masterpiece nonetheless. It tells the story of the quiet Fanny Price, who is sent to live with her wealthy relatives at Mansfield Park, where she must navigate family expectations, friendships, and complicated relationships. Where Austen's other books feature vibrant heroines and witty societal commentary, *Mansfield Park* addresses morality the most seriously and reads as Austen's most somber work. (That's why it's my fall pick.)

Beloved **by Toni Morrison**



This is not an easy book to read, but it captivates you as a reader, which is why I'd reach for it to overcome my fall funk. To understand *Beloved*, you have to read it the way you would a poem—follow the punctuation, read slowly, and then read again. Set after the American Civil War, the novel follows Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman whose home and family are haunted by painful memories of the past. It's a powerful and painful story about motherhood, memory, and the lasting effects of slavery.

Mrs. Dalloway **by Virginia Woolf**

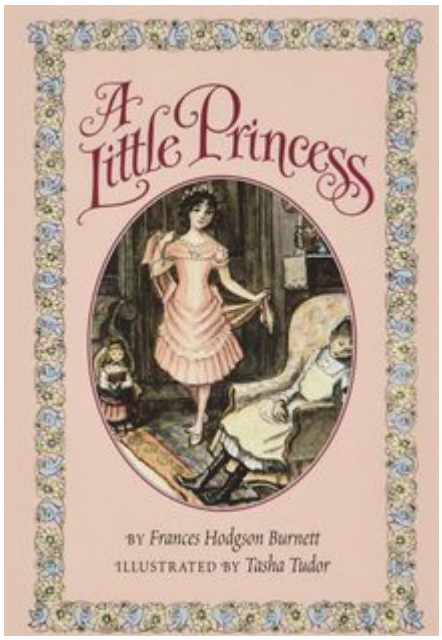


It takes place on a single June day in London, but its introspective mood is ideal for a slow Sunday afternoon in any season. Clarissa Dalloway moves through her thoughts and memories while preparing for a party. I love the way that Woolf homes in on one small detail and expands it into a reflection on identity and relationships. I'm currently reading this—very very slowly—and Woolf's clever commentary is delightful.

The Secret Garden **by Frances Hodgson Burnett**

Another elementary school read that has never left me. A lonely girl moves into her uncle's enormous English manor and finds a garden that's been locked for years. As she brings it back to life, she changes her own life and everyone else's. If you like old(er) movies with rich color and a stunning score, watch the 1993 film.

A Little Princess **by Frances Hodgson Burnett**



I'll admit I grew up on the 1995 film more than the novel. Either way, it's the ideal fall read. It follows Sara Crewe, a wealthy, imaginative girl attending a boarding school in London, until an unexpected change in circumstances turns her life upside down. Despite everything, she holds on to her kindness, imagination, and sense of self. Its old-fashioned boarding school setting, nostalgic feel, and comforting message make it a lovely seasonal read.