The time is 1933, the place, Berlin, when William E. Dodd becomes America’s first ambassador to Hitler’s Germany in a year that proved to be a turning point in his story. Suffused with the tense atmosphere of the period, and with unforgettable portraits of the bizarre Göring and the expectedly charming—yet wholly sinister—Goebbels, In the Garden of Beasts lends a stunning, eyewitness perspective on events as they unfold in real time, revealing an era of surprising nuance and complexity. The result is a dazzling, addictive ly readable work that speaks volumes about why the world did not recognize the grave threat posed by Hitler until Berlin, and Europe, were awash in blood and terror.

Unbroken: A WWII Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption by Laura Hillenbrand

On a May afternoon in 1943, an Army Air Forces bomber crashed into the Pacific Ocean and disappeared, leaving only a spray of debris and a slick of oil, gasoline, and blood. Then, on the ocean surface, a face appeared. It was that of a young lieutenant, the plane’s bombardier, who was struggling to a life raft and pulling himself aboard. So began one of the most extraordinary odysseys of the Second World War.

Heft by Liz Moore

Former academic Arthur Opp weighs 550 pounds and hasn’t left his rambling Brooklyn home in a decade. Twenty miles away, in Yonkers, seventeen-year-old Kel Keller navigates life as the poor kid in a rich school and pins his hopes on what seems like a promising baseball career if he can untangle himself from his family drama. Through Arthur and Kel’s own quirky and lovable voices, Heft tells the winning story of two improbable heroes whose sudden connection transforms both their lives.

English III Honors required: any one of the choices listed on this page, as well as A Farewell to Arms (below)

A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway

The best American novel to emerge from World War I, A Farewell to Arms is the unforgettable story of an American ambulance driver on the Italian front and his passion for a beautiful English nurse.

The Art of Racing in the Rain by Garth Stein

If you’ve ever wondered what your dog is thinking, Stein’s third novel offers an answer. Enzo is a lab terrier mix plucked from a farm outside Seattle to ride shotgun with race car driver Denny Swift as he pursues success on the track and off. Denny meets and marries Eve, has a daughter, Zoë, and risks his savings and his life to make it on the professional racing circuit. When Denny hits an extended rough patch, Enzo remains his most steadfast if silent supporter. Enzo is a reliable companion and a likable enough narrator, though the string of Denny’s bad luck stories strains believability. Much like Denny, however, Stein is able to salvage some dignity from the over-the-top drama.

In the Garden of Beasts by Erik Larson

The time is 1933, the place, Berlin, when William E. Dodd becomes America’s first ambassador to Hitler’s Germany in a year that proved to be a turning point in history. Suffused with the tense atmosphere of the period, and with unforgettable portraits of the bizarre Göring and the expectedly charming—yet wholly sinister—Goebbels, In the Garden of Beasts lends a stunning, eyewitness perspective on events as they unfold in real time, revealing an era of surprising nuance and complexity. The result is a dazzling, addictive ly readable work that speaks volumes about why the world did not recognize the grave threat posed by Hitler until Berlin, and Europe, were awash in blood and terror.

Blackbird: A Childhood Lost and Found by Jennifer Lauck

When the author was five, her mother suffered a relapse of a medical condition that changed Lauck’s life from dependent child to nurse... The sights and sensibilities of the early ‘70s are brought to life by this professional journalist as she both inculcates her memoir with a mature understanding of the world and retains her child’s-eye view of the tragedies, dilemmas, and hopes that made up her elementary school years. Contemporary teens will find this a compelling read as character study, cultural history, and family investigation.

- Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CA