**Harvard Classics, originally known as Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf 1909 - Wikipedia Aug. 27 2015**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard\_Classics

 

Charles William Eliot, compiler and editor of the Harvard Classics anthology. 

   

 The **Harvard Classics,** originally known as **Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf,** is a 51-volume [anthology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthology) of classic works from world literature, compiled and edited by [Harvard University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_University) president [Charles W. Eliot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_W._Eliot) and first published in 1909.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_Classics#cite_note-kirsch-1)

Eliot had stated in speeches that the elements of a [liberal education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberal_education) could be obtained by spending 15 minutes a day reading from a collection of books that could fit on a five-foot shelf. (Originally he had said a three-foot shelf.) The publisher [P. F. Collier and Son](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Fenelon_Collier) saw an opportunity and challenged Eliot to make good on this statement by selecting an appropriate collection of works, and the *Harvard Classics* was the result.

Eliot worked for one year with [William A. Neilson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Allen_Neilson), a professor of English; Eliot determined the works to be included and Neilson selected the specific editions and wrote introductory notes.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_Classics#cite_note-kirsch-1) Each volume had 400-450 pages, and the included texts are "so far as possible, entire works or complete segments of the world's written legacies."[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_Classics#cite_note-findarticles-2) The collection was widely advertised by Collier and Son, in [*Collier's*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collier%27s_Magazine) and elsewhere, with great success.

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**Enduring success**

As [Adam Kirsch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Kirsch), writing for [*Harvard* magazine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_Magazine) in 2001, notes, "It is surprisingly easy, even today, to find a complete set of the Harvard Classics in good condition. At least one is usually for sale on eBay, the Internet auction site, for $300 or so, a bargain at $6 a book. The supply, from attics or private libraries around the country, seems endless — a tribute to the success of the publisher, P.F. Collier, who sold some 350,000 sets within 20 years of the series' initial publication".[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_Classics#cite_note-kirsch-1)

The hardcover set of the Harvard Classics (now in the [public domain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_domain)) was still being offered by [Easton Press](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easton_Press) until 2010, but now only paperback versions are available through [Kessinger Publishing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kessinger_Publishing).

The Five-Foot Shelf, with its introductions, notes, guides to reading, and exhaustive indexes, may claim to constitute a reading course unparalleled in comprehensiveness and authority.

—*Notes on the Lectures* by [William Allan Neilson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Allan_Neilson)

**Similar compendia**

The concept of education through systematic reading of seminal works themselves (rather than textbooks), was carried on by [John Erskine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Erskine_%28educator%29) at [Columbia University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbia_University), and, in the 1930s, [Mortimer Adler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mortimer_Adler) and [Robert Hutchins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Hutchins) at the University of Chicago, carried this idea further with the concepts of education through study of the "[great books](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Books)" and "great ideas" of Western civilization. This led to the publication in 1952 of [*Great Books of the Western World*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Books_of_the_Western_World), which is still in print and actively marketed. In 1937, under [Stringfellow Barr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stringfellow_Barr), [St. John's College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._John%27s_College_%28Annapolis/Santa_Fe%29) introduced a curriculum based on the direct study of "great books". These sets are popular today with those interested in [homeschooling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeschooling).

**References**

 Adam Kirsch, [The "Five-foot Shelf" Reconsidered](http://harvardmagazine.com/2001/11/the-five-foot-shelf-reco.html), *Harvard Magazine*, Volume 103, Number 2. November–December 2001

1.  [Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf of Books: Toward a Centennial of The Harvard Classics, *Papers on Language and Literature* - Find Articles](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3708/is_200604/ai_n17178495)

**Further reading and external links**

* [Harvard Classics (all volumes)](http://www.archive.org/details/harvardclassics) at the [Internet Archive](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Archive) ([Archive.org](http://www.archive.org))
* [Harvard Classics (Bookshelf)](http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Harvard_Classics_%28Bookshelf%29) Online version at [Project Gutenberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Gutenberg)
* [Complete Harvard Classics at MobileRead](http://wiki.mobileread.com/wiki/Harvard_Classics_Available_at_MobileRead) free downloads in Sony BBeB/LRF, Mobipocket/PRC, and eBookwise/IMP formats
* [Metafilter: Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf](http://www.metafilter.com/64166/Dr-Eliots-Five-Foot-Shelf)
* [David Mehegan, "The reading of life: A story about a grandfather, a box of old books, and the meaning of success,"](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2006/12/23/the_reading_of_life/) [Boston Globe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Globe), December 23, 2006. Viewed Sept. 26, 2007
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* ["The Complete Harvard Classics By Volume - Free PDF Downloads"](http://www.myharvardclassics.com/categories/20120212). *MyHarvardClassics.com*.
* ["The Harvard Classics"](http://www.feedbooks.com/list/3166/the-harvard-classics). *Feedbooks*.
* ["The Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction"](http://www.feedbooks.com/list/21/the-harvard-classics-shelf-of-fiction). *Feedbooks*.
* ["The complete MobileRead edition of the Harvard Classics"](http://www.mobileread.com/forums/showthread.php?t=12412).
* [Greater Books](http://www.greaterbooks.com) - a site documenting lists of "great books," classics, and canons, including Harvard Classics

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