

Summer 2015

D.E.S.S.E.R.T. Newsletter Summer 2015

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D.E.S.S.E.R.T*.

*DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH SUGGESTED SUMMER ENGAGED READING TITLES

Dr. David Larson
Interim Chair, English Department

When I retired in the summer of 2013, I imagined following an intensive course of improving reading—histories by Greek and Roman authors, Proust’s daunting masterpiece, and other works I had not time or energy to read while I was teaching and serving as Chair of English. That did not happen. Instead I taught one semester and then returned as Interim Chair of English.

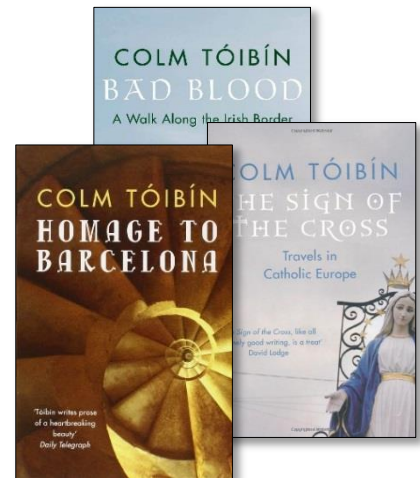
So what am I reading in my spare time during the year and the summer? I have been catching up on some secondary works by writers I particularly admire that I had somehow missed, such as William Dean Howells’

A Wedding Journey, which was not as charming as claimed, and George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, which has a female protagonist Eliot seems determined to punish and a male protagonist (Deronda himself) who is improbably enmeshed in a subplot straight out of Dickens. I am finding that there is a reason that neglected novels by major writers are neglected—they are not usually as good as the more famous ones.

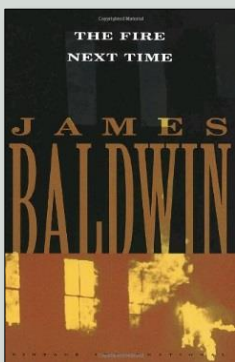
Tóibín is proof to me that for strong nonfiction the writer is more important than the subject.

Turning to contemporary writers, my current enthusiasm is Colm Tóibín. I have recently read his nonfiction works (*Barcelona, Bad Blood, and Travels in Catholic Europe*). I find that Tóibín, whose earlier novels I devoured after I

discovered them, has interesting things to say even on topics in which I have no particular interest. He is proof to me that for strong nonfiction the writer is more important than the subject. Later this summer I plan to read his most recently published novel, but for now I am saving that.



#BlackLivesMatter

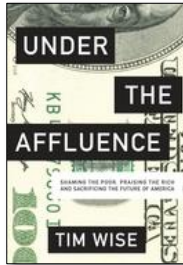
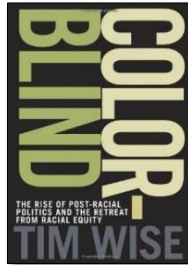
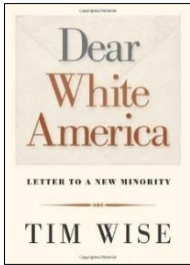


When twelve year old Tamir Rice was killed by a police officer here in Cleveland and our city became the focus of national civil rights protests, my students and I found in African American literature not only articulations of political rage, but a source of healing, and a way forward. As I saw CSU students, faculty, and staff protest, create art, and demand change, I was reminded of James Baldwin’s call for us to “achieve our country” in 1962’s *The Fire Next Time*: “If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”

In this special section of the summer reading recommendations, the English Department offers reading we go to for insight, healing, and historical contextualization for the moment and city in which we live. —Julie Burrell

Authors that focus on race in America recommended by Donna Henderson-Moore

Tim Wise



Dear White America: Letter to a New Minority

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Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity

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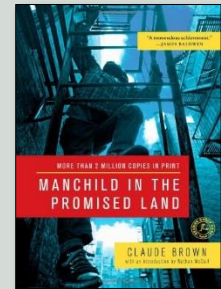
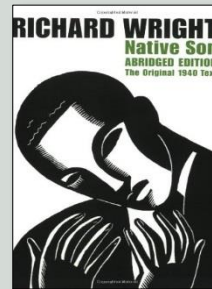
Under the Affluence: Shaming the Poor, Praising the Rich and Sacrificing the Future of America

"One of the most brilliant, articulate, and courageous critics of white privilege in the nation."

—Michael Eric Dyson, on Tim Wise

"Violence is a personal necessity for the oppressed...It is not a strategy consciously devised. It is the deep, instinctive expression of a human being denied individuality."

— Richard Wright, *Native Son*



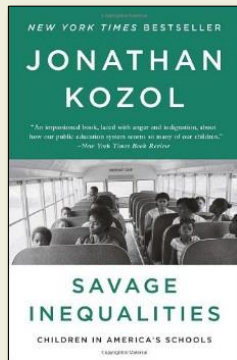
Native Son by Richard Wright

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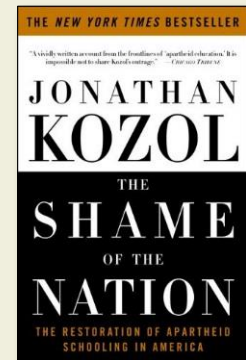
Manchild in the Promised Land by Claude Brown

Boo Geisse Recommends

Jonathan Kozol's books on race in the education system



The author I've been turning to for race-related issues in America is Jonathan Kozol. He writes about racism in the education system, but economic disparities and other significant factors are a large part of the conversation. I just recently read an early book of his called *Savage Inequalities* which was rereleased in 2012. Another book of Kozol's that I recommend reading is called *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid in America's Schooling*.



"Placing the burden on the individual to break down doors in finding better education for a child is attractive to conservatives because it reaffirms their faith in individual ambition and autonomy. But to ask an individual to break down doors that we have chained and bolted in advance of his arrival is unfair."

— Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*

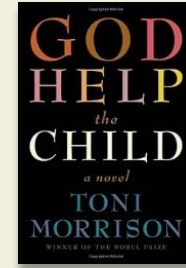
Caryl Pagel Recommends

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, a troubling multi-genre documentary lyric inquiry on race and perception in America. The book is concerned with chaos



and injustice, attention and pain. Rankine has long been one of my favorite poet-essayist-critics and she astonishes us anew with this follow up to *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. One of the more terrifying sections in the book includes a running list (updated in each new printing) of the names of new victims of race-related shootings around the country (my copy includes Jordan Russell Davis, Eric Garner, John Crawford, and Michael Brown—

I shudder to imagine a more recent version). She weaves criticism and anecdote, personal narrative and poetry into a book that addresses friendship, contemporary art, bigotry, creativity, fear, and dread.



God Help the Child
by Toni Morrison

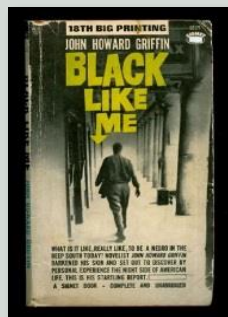
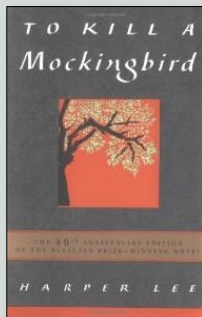
"I've enjoyed reading most of Morrison's novels and I'm excited to read her latest work."

—Robert Nowatzki

"Perhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context—randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out 'I swear to God!' is to be called insane, crass, crazy. Bad sportsmanship."

— Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

These classic texts from the 1960s might enlighten current protest in America.



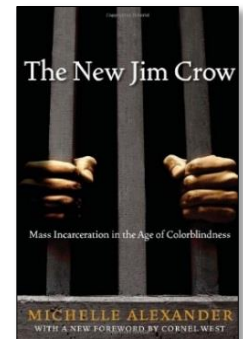
Jane Dugan recommends:
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin

Stephanie Nunley & Boo Geisse Recommend

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander

This book examines the complexities of race and the criminal justice system.

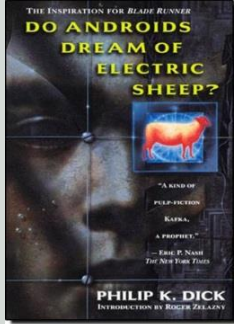
It argues that we as a society have replaced the overt racism of our past with a new systematic racism that is justified by our criminal justice system and propagated by society turning a blind eye to the overwhelming number of African Americans that are incarcerated and robbed of their rights.



"The fate of millions of people—indeed the future of the black community itself—may depend on the willingness of those who care about racial justice to re-examine their basic assumptions about the role of the criminal justice system in our society."

— Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

Science Fiction & Fantasy Recommendations



Robert Nowatzki Recommends a Classic

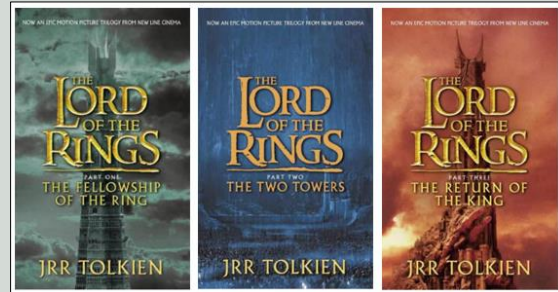
Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*: A classic science fiction dystopian novel that became the inspiration for the film *Blade Runner*. Much of this novel focuses on one of humankind's most important emotions: empathy. Like Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, this novel about a human bounty hunter who "retires" highly developed humanoid androids raises questions about what constitutes humanity.

"You have to be with other people, he thought. In order to live at all. I mean before they came here I could stand it... But now it has changed. You can't go back, he thought. You can't go from people to non-people."

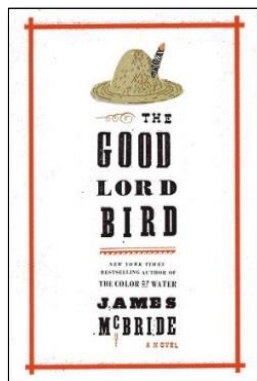
— Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Melanie Gagich Recommends Tolkien

I want to read *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* this summer to remind myself "not all those who wander are lost." -J.R.R. Tolkien



Humor Recommendations

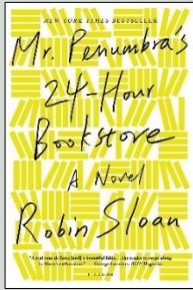


Robert Nowatzki Recommends

James McBride, *The Good Lord Bird*: A hilarious picaresque novel about a boy who becomes involved in John Brown's violent abolitionist mission in Bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry. The protagonist is a mixed-race adolescent who wears a dress and is taken for a girl by Brown. This novel has much to offer for readers interested in the crossing of gender and racial lines, and it reminds me of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but more bizarre.

"Whatever he believed, he believed. It didn't matter to him whether it was really true or not. He just changed the truth till it fit him. He was a real white man."

— James McBride, *The Good Lord Bird*



Humor Spotlight
Robin Sloan

Recommended by
Jane Dugan

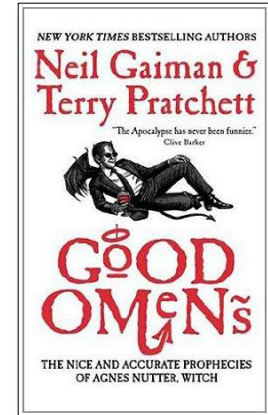
If you love the device called a book, if you are intrigued by game theory and global conspiracies and Google, if you can't decide whether you are a Luddite or a First Adopter, I think that you will enjoy *Mr. Penumbra's 24 Hour Bookstore*.

Maria Alberto Recommends

Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman

Why I'm recommending it: In a word? *Good Omens* is unexpected. Always. No matter how many times you read it.

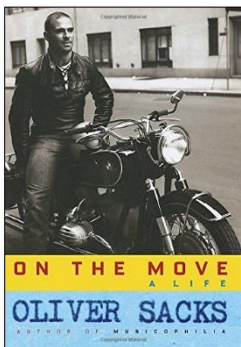
A quick summary might prove less helpful than usual, because how can the biblically-mandated Apocalypse possibly be summarized? Yet somehow *Good Omens* follows several characters through the apparent Last Days, with central appearances by the angel and the demon who were present at the advent of humanity in the Garden



of Eden. A plot like that offers numerous opportunities for satire, cultural commentary, and humor, and *Good Omens* makes use of them all.

Another point in its favor is that *Good Omens* can be read on a quick surface level for entertainment alone, or more critically as a way of considering exactly why a story about the end of the world might be so amusing. The appeal of this book lies as much in its re-examination of religious belief, particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition and its function, as in its wry humor. More, the supposedly nonhuman perspective on human beliefs and actions always prompts stifled laughter because they just don't get it – or on the flip side, as Pratchett and Gaiman seem to like leaving readers wondering, can we as human beings really justify why we act as we do?

Adam Sonstegard Recommends

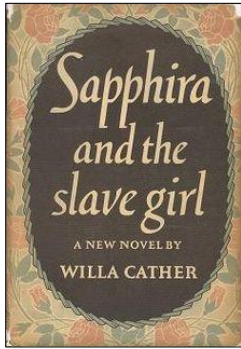


Oliver Sacks's new autobiography/journal *On The Move*. Ever since I attempted to teach *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* as a cub grad-student, this quirky philosopher-neurologist has always proven to be equal parts infuriating and enchanting. His books mostly obscure his own autobiography in favor of his patients-portraits, so the revelations of *On The Move* should be fascinating indeed, not the least because before he had remade himself into a neurologist-novelist, he was, of all things, a closeted-gay, motorcycle-riding, pill-popping weight-lifter in California's 1950s Venice Beach. Oh, my!

“But who was more tragic, or who was more damned—the man who knew it, or the man who did not?”

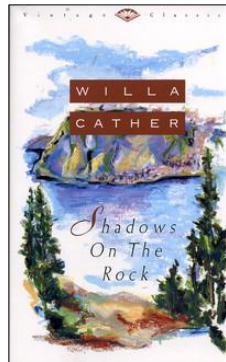
– Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat: And Other Clinical Tales*

David Larson Recommends

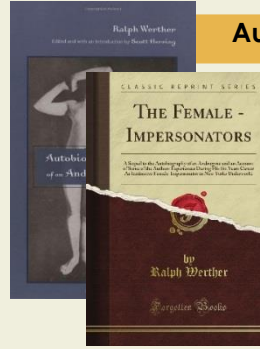


Most recently I have been deepening my knowledge of Willa Cather by reading her late, neglected novels. I have finished Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*, a work that seems to be a slighter reworking of themes Cather explored more satisfyingly in *Song of the*

Lark and *A Lost Lady*. Next I plan to read a couple of late novels for which even Cather enthusiasts offer only qualified praise, namely *Shadows on the Rock* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. I am not certain why I am doing this. I do admire Cather as a writer. I have read and taught all of her major novels and most of her short stories. So I suppose that I feel some obligation to read even works generally regarded as less than stellar.



Autobiographer's Spotlight



Ralph Werther/Earl Lind /Jennie June

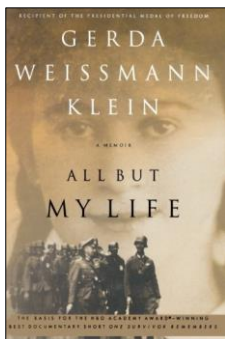
Recommended by
Adam Sonstegard

I've recently discovered an autobiographer who was variously, pseudonymously named Ralph Werther/Earl Lind/Jennie June, who wrote *Autobiography of an Androgyne* (1918, which I have read), and *The Female Impersonators* (1922, which I have not yet gotten to). He/She wrote them around 1900, managed to evade the censors to get them published during World War I, and just got the attention of Scott Herring, who edited new editions of these works, in the last few years. To read these bizarrely factual, always gender-bending memoirs is to realize RuPaul is almost a century less original in his/her trans* performances than even RuPaul would have us think.

“We must rest, he told himself, on our confidence in His design. Design was clear enough in the stars, the seasons, in the woods and fields. But in human affairs—? Perhaps our bewilderment came from a fault in our perceptions; we could never see what was behind the next turn of the road.”

— Willa Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

Melanie Gagich Recommends Readings on WWII



All But My Life, a memoir written by Gerda Weissmann Klein, poignantly captures the prejudice and atrocities enacted by the Nazis during the Holocaust, and reminds the reader of the importance of hope and solidarity among victims of such horrifying events.

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, a novel set during WWII, follows a French girl and German man through their childhood into adulthood. Doerr illustrates the need and importance of integrity and moral fortitude during a time of strife and conflict.

