

# WCU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT SUMMER READING LIST 2010

This annual list represents suggestions from individual faculty of the West Chester University English department. There's something here for every reader!

*Acts of Religion*

Ayan Gangopadhyay

Jacques Derrida (edited by Gil Anidjar)

The authoritative collection of Derrida's musings on religion in English. This book is seminal as Derrida deconstructs religion and its surrounding machinery on historico-discursive grounds. Drawing upon his own previous works on anti-Semitism and Arab-Jew hatred in the West, Anidjar in the Introduction traces Derrida as that figure who, quite literally, embodies a marginality that poses "terror" to the contemporary core of liberal (humanist) democracy.

*A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*

Kuhio Walters

Josh Neufeld

Graphic Nonfiction – describes the experiences of seven survivors of Hurricane Katrina just before the storm, throughout the flooding, the devastation and failures of FEMA, and the difficult return to the destroyed area over a year later.

*The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation  
Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*

Robert Fletcher

Richard Holmes

Great stories about Joseph Banks and Tahiti, the Herschels (William and Caroline) and their astronomical discoveries, and Sir Humphry Davy and his safety lamp (and the development of chemistry). Also offers insights into how science finds its way into literary romanticism.

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

Vicki Tischio

Michael Chabon

This novel won the Pulitzer in 2001. It is set in the backdrop of World War II and is about two men, one American and one Czech, who end up collaborating on comic books. It addresses the tragedies of World War II, among other emotional, interpersonal and political issues.

*Animals in Translation:*

Cheryl Wanko

*Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*

Temple Grandin

Grandin has become known for her work in developing more humane livestock-handling systems, as well as for her work in understanding her own autism and its relationship to

animal life. This book is an excellent introduction to how these disparate topics overlap and will interest anyone fascinated by animal behavior – including that of those pesky human animals.

*Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the  
19<sup>th</sup>-Century Congo* Jim Trotman

Pagan Kennedy

A good read for our majors, and anyone else, because it leads one into a different cultural context with recognizable human patterns of ambition and greed, as the author traces the life and character of William Sheppard, the black Livingstone of the title.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* Robert Fletcher  
Junot Diaz

Dominican-American Diaz won the 2008 Pulitzer for this, his first novel.

*Charlotte Gray* Peter Kent

Beautifully crafted WWII story of a young woman dropped into France, where she finds herself. Plays with Proustian concept of the relation of past with present tense.

*Collected Poems* Kostas Myrsiades

C.P. Cavafy (trans. Daniel Mendelsohn)

This has been Cavafy's year with about a half dozen new translations being published. The one I'm recommending took first place in poetry at the New York Book Show 2010. Cavafy has influenced a number of contemporary American and British poets and is considered among the great poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*A Conspiracy of Paper* Cheryl Wanko

David Liss

This densely-plotted detection novel follows the career of Benjamin Weaver, Jewish boxer and "thief-taker" in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London. If recent Wall Street shenanigans infuriate you, this novel about paper money, credit, murder, and the run-up to the infamous "South Sea Bubble" – 1720's answer to 2008 – will remind you that nothing is new: where there is the possibility of profit; there is corruption.

*Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* Ayan Gangopadhyay

Edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson

Although this book appears to be a collection of articles to forge the possibility of interfacing deconstruction with justice, it is rather much more than that. It seeks to understand the foundational moments in establishing the institutions of Law and Religion in modern polity in the West.

*The Disappointment Artist* Andrew Sargent

Jonathan Lethem

A moving, thoughtful, and beautifully written collection of autobiographical essays in which Lethem (an acclaimed contemporary novelist) examines his obsessive relationship

to art and popular culture and considers the impact of his mother's death on his life. Particularly memorable is "13, 1977, 21," a self-conscious reflection on how the act of viewing *Star Wars* 21 times as a 13-year-old in 1977 was his own attempt to deny the reality that his mother was dying of cancer.

*Dolce Agonia*

Michael Brooks

Nancy Huston

The premise is familiar (friends get together for Thanksgiving) but the range is vast and the depth of insight is extraordinary.

*A Drink Before the War*

Paul Maltby

Dennis Lehane

While not a devotee of the crime genre, I recently read this gritty, hard-hitting novel. The story is set in a working-class neighborhood of contemporary Boston. A private eye risks his life among thugs and corrupt local politicians in order to investigate a child abuse crime. (BTW, many of Lehane's novels have made impressive movies: *Mystic River*, *Shutter Island*, *Gone, Baby, Gone*.)

*Duke Ellington's America*

Eleanor Shevlin

Harvey G. Cohen

Offering what will no doubt become the definitive account of Ellington for decades to come, Cohen's book benefits from his extensive use of previously unexplored archives at the Smithsonian. Its 720 pages offer an exhaustive but consistently highly engaging, intimate portrait of Ellington from his early years in Washington, DC on. As its title suggests, this work contextualizes Ellington within the larger racial and sociocultural history of twentieth-century America. That Cohen is not only a skilled cultural historian but also a musician and intimately familiar with the music business adds to the depth of this work. <http://www.duke-ellingtons-america.com/index.html>

*Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*

Peter Kent

Hilary Mantel

British expats in Saudi Arabia. A satire on both Brits and Saudis.

*Epileptic*

Kuhio Walters

David B.

Graphic Nonfiction – memoir of the author's childhood with his older brother who suffers from increasingly more severe bouts of epilepsy, and the family's desperate attempt to find a cure through various misadventures with magnetic therapists, mediums, and macrobiotic communes.

*Erasure*

Cherise Pollard

Percival Everett

It's a great novel that explores issues related to race, class, and representation. It will be especially interesting for those of you who have seen the film *Precious*, or read Sapphire's *Push*.

*Full Tilt: Ireland to India With a Bicycle*  
Dervla Murphy

Cheryl Wanko

What more do you need to know beyond what the title tells you except that she made this cycling trip in 1963, she named her bike Roz, and she was packing heat? Astounding travel narrative that puts us coddled tourists to shame.

*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*  
Alison Bechdel

Kuhio Walters

Graphic Nonfiction – memoir of the author's childhood with her father, an English teacher and local funeral home director. Just after the narrator comes out as a lesbian in college, her father dies. The history of his secret life as a gay man slowly unfolds.

*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*  
Stieg Larsson

Carla Verderame

Wealthy industrialist, Henrik Vanger, hires Mikael Blomkvist to solve the mysterious death of one of the Vanger clan. The investigation leads Blomkvist and his assistant, Lisbeth Salander, on a frightening journey, which involves local politicians, newspaper reporters, and some of the Vanger family members as suspects.

*The Help*

Mary Clark

Katherine Stockett

OUTSTANDING – one of the top five books I've ever read! It's 1962, a time when tensions are rising between some whites and "coloreds." Stockett tells a story of what life is like for the maids of middle class white people in Jackson, Mississippi. She tells the story in three different points of view, the "help," the spoiled white women who lunch, and Miss Skeeter, a young woman who is a friend with the wives, but is looking for a different life, to be a journalist and move to New York. She decides to write a book about the life and dreams of the maids, and what *really* goes on behind closed doors in Jackson. The roller coaster ride then begins.

*In the Last Analysis,*  
*The James Joyce Murder,*  
*The Theban Mysteries.*

Karen Fitts

Amanda Cross, pseudonym for Carolyn Heilbrun, the noted literary scholar Dr. Kate Fansler, a 1960s English professor, has excellent skills in searching out answers to questions about missing persons and mysterious deaths; both the mysteries and their resolutions are usually portrayed in literary terms. In addition, she's a fascinating case study in issues common to the 60s when women were first establishing themselves as independent and liberated.

*Just Kids*

Anne Herzog

Patti Smith

While this is not a particularly literary choice, I found poet, performance artist, and musician Patti Smith's memoir about her early adult relationship with and lifelong soul friendship with Robert Mapplethorpe to be a fascinating read. Both Smith and

Mapplethorpe came from working-class backgrounds that were certainly no predictor of the avant-garde, romantic, Blake-loving artists both became. Descriptions of their early years together sharing a tiny room at the Hotel Chelsea and meeting figures like Harry Smith, Janice Joplin, Gregory Corso, Diane Arbus, Allen Ginsberg, Andy Warhol (and others) make for lively description of a particular slice of bohemian life in late 1960's, early 1970's New York City. I did not find myself admiring Smith's writing, in particular, but her devotion to the development of her own artistry and Mapplethorpe's fascinated me.

*The Known World*

Bill Lalicker

Edward P. Jones

This novel takes the reader into the interior lives of free blacks, slaves, and slave-owners through several generations before and after the Civil War. Often referencing historical documents, the novel follows myriad intersections of race, sex, and the slave economy to create a more whole and human, if sometimes disturbing, story of the era and of the people of Manchester County, Virginia.

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving*

Tim Ray

*Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*

Richard Louv

This book, recipient of the 2008 Audubon Medal and a national best-seller, discusses the ramifications of living in our technological age and how it has separated us from the natural world, to the point that many children today have no significant relationship with the natural world, and that deprivation has led this generation of children to be anxious toward and fearful of nature and to suffer from neuroses such as ADD/ADHD and other anxiety-related disorders that could in fact be treated more homeopathically if we quit treating kids with prescription drugs and instead encouraged them to put down their Playstations and computers and go out and explore the natural world around them and engage in unstructured play.(117 words/1 sentence!) Well-written, insightful, and provocative. Not a curmudgeonly treatise. Well supported with data as well as anecdotal evidence.

*Let the Great World Spin*

Jeff Sommers

Colum McCann

An award-winning novel – and deservedly so – that traces the interconnected lives of several characters in New York City on the day Phillippe Petit walked the wire between the World Trade Center Towers.

*Lighthousekeeping*

Lisa Konigsberg

Jeanette Winterson

Very short, historical feel (fiction) about an orphan who is raised in a lighthouse. Winterson's writing is fluid – the story goes back and forth between two time periods.

*Little Children*

Paul Maltby

Tom Perrotta

A story that keeps gathering momentum as we read about the corrosive effects of suburban alienation.

*Madame Bovary*

Peter Kent

Gustave Flaubert

Read it again! Sexiest novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century!!

*Midnight's Children*

Linda Myrsiades

Salman Rushdie

*My Ántonia*

Anne Herzog

Willa Cather

I've been pecking away at Cather's life's work for a number of years now. In my own education, I was never assigned a single work by her. I believe she is an important and under-studied figure in American Literature. In *My Ántonia*, Cather writes in the voice of a male narrator about Antonia, daughter of a Bohemian immigrant family trying to make a life in a culture and geography (Nebraska) that is basically hostile to their survival. Cather's depiction of the tenuous economic status of families like Antonia's, the desperate desire for education and language fluency among the children, and the vulnerability of women in a time and culture of sexual repression and confining gender mores made for a wonderful read. I did not want this book to end.

*The 19th Wife*

Teddy West

David Ebershoff

For a look inside the world of Mormonism.

*No 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series

Gabrielle Halko

Alexander McCall Smith

I savored them one by one last summer, both before and after a trip to Africa. Deceptively soft-spoken, beautifully rendered fiction. (The HBO series is pretty good too.)

*The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History*

Eleanor Shevlin

Linda Colley

Transforming conventional perceptions of biography as a genre, Colley's account of the eighteenth-century Elizabeth Marsh "charts a world in a life and a life in the world" as it argues "for re-casting and re-evaluating biography as a way of deepening our understanding of the global past" (xix). While the introduction notes that this work offers three stories—that of an individual, a family, and a global world—there's a fourth tale here, too. Specifically, alongside ample evidence of skilled, traditional historical scholarship, the work is a testament to how our digital world is altering the possibilities for research and the fruits these new tools afford.

*Push*

Cherise Pollard

Sapphire

This is a contemporary African American classic that explores the ways in which poverty and abuse affect the life of a young black woman living in New York City in the early 80's.

*The Rise of Silas Lapham*

Carolyn Sorisio

W.D. Howells

Why read this, as well as my other suggestion on this list? Because one may be just "in the mood" because of the economy.

*The Savage Detectives*

Teddy West

Roberto Bolano

Written by the noted Chilean author, this novel is a challenge, but well worth it.

*The Secret Scripture*

Eleanor Shevlin

Sebastian Barry

A finalist for the Man Booker Prize, *The Secret Scripture* intertwines the narrative of a 100-year-old Irish woman, confined for many decades to a mental institution, with that of Dr. Grene, the institution's psychiatrist and director. While the narratives assume the form of diary and commonplace journal entries, the accounts embody not just personal histories and tragedies but the history of twentieth-century Ireland as well.

*Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet-Sour  
Memoir of Eating in China*

Bill Lalicker

Fuchsia Dunlop

This is a memoir by (probably) the first woman, and (certifiably) the first Western woman (British by birth, English and Turkish by heritage), to officially complete a course of study in one of the premier Chinese culinary academies. Dunlop earned a James Beard Award for her culinary writing, and has several acclaimed cookbooks. This is a delicious story of intercultural experience that includes plenty of enticing recipes (I will be experimenting with them over the summer, and will report the results as requested).

*Sister Carrie*

Carolyn Sorisio

Theodore Dreiser

*The Sun Magazine*

Cortie Ervin

This is a recommendation for those who might want to extend their summer reading resolution into fall, winter, and spring. To find out whether you would like to subscribe to *The Sun*, see <http://www.thesunmagazine.org/>. They are smart enough not to give away all their content online, but you can view selections from the current issue on their site to see whether you like the tone and style. I've been subscribing for several years and read every monthly issue. Each contains an interview with an author or activist, as well as the usual contents of a literary magazine: fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. There is also an interesting section each month called "Readers Write," which publishes vignettes

submitted by readers on a selected topic each month. There are no advertisements in the magazine.

*Theology and the Political: The New Debate*

Ayan Gangopadhyay

Edited by Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek

An anthology of articles interrogating the 'Freudian field' in the interface between the theological and the political, this book seeks to understand the materiality of matters spiritual, and in so doing dislodges the problematic binary between the sacred and the profane.

*Ulysses*

Graham MacPhee

James Joyce

An unbelievably funny, profound, and endlessly rewarding novel – every single time I read it I find a wealth of new insights and ideas. Don't be intimidated – Joyce just asks you to have a sense of humor, a brain, and an imagination.

*Vienna Blood*

Geetha Ramanathan

Frank Tallis

Psychoanalytic murder mystery set in Vienna during the time the discipline emerges.

*The Way the Crow Flies*

Jen Bacon

Ann-Marie MacDonald

*We Need to Talk About Kevin*

Lynne Cooke

Lionel Shriver

Winner of the 2005 Orange Prize (a prestigious UK literary award), this book tells the chilling tale of a deeply disturbed 17 year-old from his mother's point of view. Shriver presents a fascinating psychological study / social commentary in clear, crisply crafted prose. I could not put this book down.

*World Made By Hand*

Chuck Bauerlein

James Howard Kunstler

Fans of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins* will enjoy Kunstler's knowing take on the inexorable disintegration of social norms in America's coming dystopia. Two great cities have been destroyed; epidemics ravage the population; transportation is slow and dangerous. The New Faith Order, a radical religious sect fleeing the troubles of their native Virginia, has moved into a vacant high school. A gang of motorcycle thugs run the town dump as a mining operation and bully the townspeople, who are struggling to feed their families and hold what's left of their community together. A page turner that manages to find hope for America's future in unexpected places.