

WCU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT SUMMER READING LIST 2011

This annual list presents suggestions for summer reading from individual faculty of the West Chester University English department. You can also find this list at http://www.wcupa.edu/_academics/sch_cas.eng/faculty/.¹ There's something here for every reader!

Title & author:

Recommended by:

All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning In a Secular Age

Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly

Stacy Esch

Popular Berkeley podcaster/philosophy professor Dryfuss and his former student/protégé/Harvard professor Kelly breathe contemporary meaning into several western classics. Not exactly elegantly written, this is a book you'll love for its substance more than its style.

An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England

Gabrielle Halko

Brock Clarke

Both this and my other suggestion (*The Lonely Polygamist*) are weird, sad, funny novels – I recommend them to all of my friends, even the ones who aren't weird, sad, and/or funny.

The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Vol. 1

Jordan Schugar

Mark Twain (Harriet E. Smith, Editor)

On the 100th Anniversary of Twain's death, the Mark Twain Project finally publishes the real *Autobiography* of Twain in the manner that he desired. Twain always felt that a true autobiography of his life could only be published many years after his passing to protect the innocent (and the not so innocent). As Twain is one of the greatest American authors, his perspective on life, friendship, and family is a definite summer read – all 760 pages!

The Beetle

Robert Fletcher

Richard Marsh

A late-Victorian (1897) imperial-gothic romance. Came out the same year as *Dracula* and sold better initially.

The Belly of Paris

Vicki Tischio

Emile Zola

The narrative focuses on the experiences of a political prisoner (Florent Quenu) who is sent to Devil's Island after Napoleon's coup-d'état. He escapes from the island prison and returns to

¹ To be posted soon!

Paris to find that the city has been, at least partly, transformed to make way for a kind of urban renewal project, Les Halles. The action takes place in the new and grand food markets in Les Halles, and is a critique of bourgeois society, where there is both abundant food and abundant poverty. The mix of rich descriptions and social critique makes the reader feel, at once, both hungry and disgusted.

The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why it Matters

Rose George

Rodney Mader

George, a journalist, offers a wide-ranging examination of how various cultures, both now and in the past, have dealt with the end products of human digestion. She's a brave investigator with a sense of humor, and she explores the effect of excreta on issues of public health, the environment, architecture, design, and social relations.

Blood, Bones, and Butter

Gabrielle Hamilton

Lynette McGrath

Scary levels of food and psychological intensity. Really well written.

Brothers

Yu Hua

Stacy Esch

Really entertaining, Cervante-esque novel about cultural change in China as seen through the eyes of two stepbrothers in a small provincial city near Shanghai.

The Dante Club

Matthew Pearl

Jen Bacon

A fictional account of H.W. Longfellow, O.W. Holmes, J.R. Lowell and J.T. Fields as obsessive Dante translators who must also solve a Dante-esque murder.

Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending

Elizabeth L. Eisenstein

Eleanor F. Shevlin

The author of *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979) turns her attention to charting the persistent ambivalence toward print from its first appearance through today.

The Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 2 (available at <http://collection.eliterature.org/2/>)

Various authors - Electronic Literature Organization

Robert Fletcher

A couple of years ago, I offered the first volume of the ELO's Electronic Literature Collection as a suggestion. Like the previous volume, this one gathers together a number of previously published hypertext narratives, flash poems, interactive fictions, experimental web videos, networked novels, and other emergent forms, from some of the leading creators of electronic literature. One entry, "Facade," is an intriguing attempt at an interactive, animated drama.

The Elegance of the Hedgehog

Muriel Barbery

Teddy West

The art of concealing true natures in Paris.

Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture

Aamir R. Mufti

Ayan K Gangopadhyay

Addressing the problem of History as the supremely Hegelian moment of the West's self-realization in the political figuration of the State – that also entails that the alleged role of the genre of “novel” as the expression of political will of the non-western worlds must be questioned – Mufti's book tries to posit “lyric” as a possible alternative to chart and map the cartography of problematic of postcoloniality in a world already transnationalized.

The Forest of Hands and Teeth

Merry Perry

Carrie Ryan

Mary lives in a fenced village run by the Sisterhood and protected by the Guardians. The fence protects the village from the dangerous Unconsecrated (aggressive flesh-eating undead) who live in the forest. This novel combines beautiful descriptions with horror, and I found it so enjoyable that I've just purchased the second book in the series.

The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic – and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World

Rodney Mader

Steven Johnson

Johnson is one of the most interesting “science journalists” writing today. Much of his recent work focuses on complex systems theory as applied to scientific communities and ideas. *The Ghost Map* is a page-turner about the London cholera epidemic of 1854, and how a few people used reason, cartography, and data analysis to figure out what caused the outbreak ... and, as a result, moved modern epidemiology one step closer to germ-based theories of disease.

Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies

Jen Bacon

Jared Diamond

Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age.

William Powers

Bill Lalicker

Brings broad perspectives from intellectual history – Plato's *Phaedrus*, Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, with Ben Franklin and Thoreau and McLuhan and Anne Morrow Lindbergh and others along the way – to make sense of how we spend time in a 24-hour digital-access culture. Now, if I can just put down my BlackBerry Curve 9330 long enough, I'll finish the book ... or I'll have to read it through an app on my tiny screen.

Heidegger and a Hippo Walk Through Those Pearly Gates: Using Philosophy (and Jokes!) to Explore Life, Death, and the Afterlife, and Everything in Between AND

Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar ... Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes

Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein

Ayan K Gangopadhyay

Heidegger and a Hippo is a great introduction for anyone interested in understanding the meaning of being alive, and what “life” itself might imply—especially against the face of death. The authors use Heidegger and his philosophy to explore such questions using cartoons from

New York Times and other (practical) jokes. Great fun to read! In *Plato and a Platypus*, Cathcart and Klein deliver, yet again, a magnanimously funny exploration of Western philosophy in this book. A great introduction to Western philosophy from a funny, meaningful, and yet engaging perspective. Although published two years before *Heidegger and a Hippo*, this one was a great initiation to the other; a must for everyone who thinks and laughs and wants to enjoy.

Her Fearful Symmetry

Meg Muller

Audrey Niffenegger

Twin sisters inherit their late, estranged aunt's flat and uproot from America to London, where they begin to explore the city while meeting strange tenants (some alive, some questionable ...), and they start to search for their own independence. Through the adventure, they are also trying to solve the mystery of why their mother and aunt hadn't spoken in years, and questions about where one goes and what one can do after death are raised. A quick read with a few shocks along the way. (By the author of *Time-Traveler's Wife*.)

A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization

Chuck Bauerlein

Jonathan Kirsch

Ever since it was first preached, St. John's Revelation has haunted and inspired hearers and readers alike. The mark of the beast, the anti-Christ, the number 666, the Whore of Babylon, the battle of Armageddon, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are just a few of the frightening images, phrases, and codes that have burned their way into the fabric of our culture. The questions they raise go straight to the heart of the human fear of death and obsession with the afterlife. Honed into a weapon in the ongoing culture wars between states, religions, and citizens, Revelation, in Kirsch's view, has changed the course of human history and will help shape its future. This is essential reading for citizens who question and wrestle with the political and cultural ramifications of Revelation and hope to navigate the future with those who hold strong fundamental beliefs that the end is nigh.

How to Breathe Under Water

Stacy Esch

Julie Orringer

Really well crafted collection of short stories, thematically related – powerful coming of age tales about mainly young female protagonists dealing with issues of loss and identity.

The Hunger Games

Merry Perry

Suzanne Collins

This novel is being made into a movie and I can see why. Katniss is a 16-year-old narrator who must compete in a gladiator-style, reality tv-like arena for the amusement of the country (and to remind the poor citizens that they are completely oppressed by the government). In this supposed last-person-standing fight to the death, Katniss proves to be strong, smart, and caring. This wonderful book made me go out and buy the next two books in the series as soon as they were published.

Infinite Jest

David Foster Wallace

Wallace was an enormously inventive, funny, crazy, and talented writer. I've read this novel and *Fate, Time, and Language* this past year, and *Oblivion* and other efforts earlier. Looking forward to *Pale King*.

Lynette McGrath

Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know

Alexandra Horowitz

Horowitz applies her work as a professor of animal behavior and comparative cognitive psychology to analyze dogs and dog-human interaction, never anthropomorphizing, convincingly revealing the motivations and worldview of a familiar but oft-misunderstood companion creature.

Bill Lalicker

Jubilee

Margaret Walker

Originally published in 1966, *Jubilee* is a historical novel that continues to offer readers a fascinating glimpse into the past. This sweeping narrative chronicles the life of Walker's grandmother, Vvry Ware, from her childhood as a slave (she was the Master's child) through the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction. As our nation begins to recognize the 150th Anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, Walker's descriptions of slavery's impact on the lives of average people is particularly resonant for readers of all ages.

Cherise Pollard

The Kindly Ones

Jonathan Littell

A powerful, flawed novel that offers a compelling examination of humankind's ability to rationalize its vilest actions (in this instance, the Holocaust). Not pleasurable reading in any simple sense of the term but a book that deserves our attention.

John Ward

The Likeness AND Into the Woods

Tana French

Jen Bacon

The Lonely Polygamist

Brady Udall

Gabrielle Halko

The Long Song

Andrea Levy

Eleanor F. Shevlin

The latest novel by the author of *Small Island*, this work takes place in early nineteenth-century Jamaica on a sugar-cane plantation and straddles the period before and after slavery was abolished on the island. Constructed as a memoir of an elderly mulatto woman who had been born into slavery, the novel was short-listed for the 2010 Booker Prize. The memoir is being printed by her son who learned the trade in Britain, and the sparring between the son and mother about the contents of the memoir makes for interesting metafictional commentary.

Matched

Ally Condie

Merry Perry

Cassie lives in a “perfect” world run by the Society, the ruling group who decides what people wear, what jobs they hold, what they do with their free time, and even with whom they should be “matched.” Marketed as a “dystopian love story,” this novel combines romance with considerations of free will and government control. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone

Eduardo Galeano

Walter Fox

This book by the distinguished Uruguayan writer is a fascinating mosaic of stories that never made it into the history books.

The Moviegoer

Walker Percy

Bill Lalicker

Now at the 50th anniversary of its achievement of the National Book Award, this novel traces a New Orleans stockbroker’s quest for authenticity in a world where experience is mediated through films, celebrity sightings, and other simulacra of experience – more trenchant than ever in our era of avatars and Facebook friends. Also, it’s very, very funny.

Never Let Me Go

Kazuo Ishiguro

Elizabeth Nollen

A quick, poignant, and very disturbing read. I liked the movie version even better!

Open: An Autobiography

Andre Agassi

Andrew Sargent

As a tennis player (in a previous life) and a big fan of the sport, I found this book to be riveting, moving, and almost absurdly entertaining. But I'd recommend it to anyone, regardless of your interest in tennis. The central through-line in Agassi's acclaimed memoir is his lifelong ambivalence toward the sport that made him famous: he candidly discusses his "hatred" of tennis, which he was forced into playing as a very young child by his abusive father, an Iranian-born boxer who was determined to mold his son into a top professional, at any cost. What makes the book so compulsively readable is its immediacy (it's written entirely in present tense); its rich literary style and structure (Agassi co-wrote the book with Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and memoirist J.R. Moehringer); and its insights into the pain of trying to figure out the kind of life you want to lead when the thing you do best may not be the thing that gives you the most joy.

Open City

Teju Cole

Lynette McGrath

Mesmerizing, cross-cultural, political insights into America and New York.

Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void

Mary Roach

Jordan Schugar

Have you ever wondered what it would take for humans to travel to Mars? Or to travel deep

into space? In this book, Roach explores several of the obstacles and hurdles humans must overcome to successfully fly to Mars. Roach talks about everything from food (and "disposal" of that food), to psychology, to the politics of long space flights. Roach asks good questions and her style is witty, curious, and introspective. (Also written by Roach – *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex* and *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*.)

Parrot and Olivier in America: A Novel
Peter Carey

Peter Kent

Point Omega
Don DeLillo

Teddy West

A brief novel (117 pages) that tells you all you need to know about Time, Space, God and the movie "Psycho."

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies
Seth Grahame-Smith

Elizabeth Nollen

A fun literary mashup that is supposed to be made into a film starring Natalie Portman.

The Quiet American
Graham Greene

Graham MacPhee

While the Vietnam War is remembered as a kind of existential test of American virtue or valor in the US, it is remembered as a late-colonial war by the colonized Vietnamese and their erstwhile European colonizers, in which the US first propped up the colonial power and then replaced it. Greene's novel explores the competing perspectives of the old colonizers and the new global hegemon in the figures of the cynical British journalist Thomas Fowler and the earnest American Alden Pyle, as they vie for the attention of Phuong, a young Vietnamese woman whose fate seems to lie in the power of one or other of them. The novel has many resonances with the present, and for my money it is Greene's best work: it's politically astute (Greene worked as a journalist in Vietnam and in nearby Malaya, where the British Empire was fighting a parallel late-colonial war), and more sophisticated in its narration and characterization than much of his other writing. Don't be taken in completely by his narrator – there's a touch of Nabokov here. And avoid the 1958 film, which turns the whole novel on its head.

The Red and the Black
Stendhal

Peter Kent

Story of a young man in the make who learns a lot about life *and* himself. A "sexy French novel."

Regarding the Pain of Others
Susan Sontag

Kuhio Walters

Regarding the Pain of Others challenges some of the essential assumptions Sontag made in her own earlier analysis of photography (*On Photography*, 1977). In the earlier book, she argues that photography – because of its tendency to make meaning endlessly ambiguous – makes us less sensitive to the horrors of contemporary life (e.g., the carnage of modern warfare, consumerist hypocrisy and waste, and the capacity of art to deepen class divisions). In this book – though

still skeptical of the ways society digests its images – Sontag finds a new value for photography. Certain kinds of art photography, especially, provide a way to "see" the reality of contemporary life in ways that might productively challenge a too-easy relation to the suffering of others.

Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology

Robert Fletcher

James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel (Editors)

A collection of fairly recent short stories about the "future present," which offer some interesting perspectives on technology and society.

Righteous Porkchop

Gabrielle Halko

Nicolette Hahn Niman

Last summer while travelling, I read Niman's awesomely-titled book about livestock practices in the U.S. and what happens to our food before it gets to our plates. Worth reading for the manure cannons alone.

Sag Harbor: A Novel

Carolyn Sorisio

Colson Whitehead

Whitehead draws upon recollections of summers spent in the African American neighborhood of Sag Harbor in a collection that evokes and challenges nostalgia.

The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains

Eleanor F. Shevlin

Nicholas Carr

Highly readable, Carr's thought-provoking examination of how the Internet is altering our cognitive processes draws from work in neuroscience to support many of its claims. That Carr himself is heavily invested in technology (he found it necessary to "unplug" himself from his technological tools to write this book) makes it all the more compelling. While he gives short shrift to the cognitive benefits afforded by digital changes, and while some of the scientific evidence is still work in progress, *The Shallows* is nonetheless a work worth reading. It was a 2011 Pulitzer finalist for generalist non-fiction.

Solar Storms

Carla L. Verderame

Linda Hogan

Five generations of Native American women struggle to maintain Native traditions while they fight the government for land and water rights in the northwestern U.S. *Solar Storms* is a beautifully written novel with poignant subplots about family, loss, and forgiveness.

Special Topics in Calamity Physics

Lynne Cooke

Marisha Pessl

This is one clever book that is tightly edited – the author's word choices are excellent! Academics will appreciate the in-text citations and references to the oddities of our profession. In short, the book is narrated by Blue Van Meer, the daughter of a distinguished college professor, who becomes part of a "club" run by a charismatic female professor. I don't want to summarize the plot because it's got some twists and turns. Read it!

The Story of Stuff

Annie Leonard

Cheryl Wanko

Subtitled "How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health – and a Vision for Change," Leonard's book analyzes American stuff from extraction (mining, forestry, etc.) through production, distribution, consumption, and disposal, exposing the waste, poison, and short-sightedness of the whole cycle, and asking readers to consider fundamental social changes to address it. You can see her original short video at <http://www.storyofstuff.com/>. In the spirit of the book, you'd probably want to borrow it from the library rather than buy it!

Strength in What Remains

Tracy Kidder

Anne Herzog

Powerful autobiographical tale of Deogratias, a medical student whose life is virtually destroyed in the genocidal civil war of the early 1990's in Burundi and Rwanda. Written by Tracy Kidder but "as told" by Deogratias, this is the harrowing tale of Deo's arrival in NYC through the generosity of a classmate's father, who provides a one way ticket to New York and \$200.00 in cash. Deo speaks no English when he arrives and has no contacts. The story is ultimately one of triumph, but in its telling, readers are provided a compelling, first-person account of Deo's scramble to survive amidst the homeless, largely invisible, underclass of NYC. I won't say more to spoil other unexpected twists in this story, but suffice it to say that this book belongs amidst other first person narratives about one person's passionate pursuit of education and access to opportunity in the face of the "savage inequalities" (Kozol) that continue to limit so many in the U.S. and globally today.

The Swan Thieves

Elizabeth Kostova

Karen Fitts & Dennis Godfrey

Prof. Fitts says: *The Swan Thieves*, which follows *The Historian* as Elizabeth Kostova's second novel, tells a complex story of art and obsession across centuries and national borders. Of interest is the fact that Kostova began her graduate career in the English department at WCU before eventually earning an MFA at University of Michigan. It's a long read (500+ pages!), so it isn't for everyone. But it rewards persevering readers with finely-drawn characters, circumstances, and events.

Prof. Godfrey says: This second novel by a former WCU MA-TESOL program student follows a psychologist's attempts to unravel the mystery behind a renowned, but institutionalized, artist's obsessive painting of a 19th century woman's image. While this book hasn't created the spark that Kostova's first novel did – *The Historian* topped best-seller lists for several weeks in 2005 – nonetheless, it is wonderfully crafted and presents a fascinating window into the psyche and world of the artist.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoët: A Novel

David Michell

Peter Kent

True Confessions

Jeff Sommers

John Gregory Dunne

Set in post-WWII Los Angeles, this novel is the story of two brothers, a Catholic Monsignor and a police detective. Atmospheric and memorable, the novel was the basis of a classic 1981 film with Robert Duvall and Robert DeNiro.

True Grit

Jeff Sommers

Charles Portis

The terrific Coen Brothers movie is based on this terrific novel—a picaresque, funny, western novel with a memorably articulate teenage protagonist/narrator.

The Uncommon Reader

Cheryl Wanko

Alan Bennett

What would happen if the Queen of England discovered a bookmobile and became a voracious reader? A short, hilarious, but also thoughtful read by the writer of *The Madness of George III*, who was also a member of the *Beyond the Fringe* comedy group.

Washington: A Life

Ruth Sabol

Ron Chernow

What can be said about George Washington that has not already been written? Chernow dwells on Washington's temperament and personality as a real person, not a myth. A quite easy read.

The Weird Sisters

Cheryl Wanko

Eleanor Brown

Three daughters of a Shakespeare-spouting English professor (who follows a languid lifestyle quite alien to WCU faculty!) return to their childhood home to come to terms with their mother's cancer and their own problematic presents. Written by one of our own M.A. alums.

Zeitoun

Erin Hurt

Dave Eggers

"Through the story of one man's experience after Hurricane Katrina, Eggers draws an indelible picture of Bush-era crisis management. Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a successful Syrian-born painting contractor, decides to stay in New Orleans and protect his property while his family flees. After the levees break, he uses a small canoe to rescue people, before being arrested by an armed squad and swept powerlessly into a vortex of bureaucratic brutality. When a guard accuses him of being a member of Al Qaeda, he sees that race and culture may explain his predicament. Eggers, compiling his account from interviews, sensibly resists rhetorical grandstanding, letting injustices speak for themselves. His skill is most evident in how closely he involves the reader in Zeitoun's thoughts. Thrown into one of a series of wire cages, Zeitoun speculates, with a contractor's practicality, that construction of his prison must have begun within a day or so of the hurricane." – From *The New Yorker*

The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story

Michelle Blake

Diane Ackerman

A striking book about Antonina and Jan Zabinski, the keepers of the Warsaw Zoo, and their lives during the German occupation. The book is striking, certainly, in its content: Ackerman highlights the profound difference between the life-affirming worldview of the Zabinskis (who hid hundreds of Jews and were central actors in the Warsaw Underground) and the corrosive, destructive worldview of the Nazis. But the book is also striking in that Ackerman's account blends the memoirs of Antonina and a tremendous amount of historical and social research, so it crosses genres in an intriguing and powerful way.

