

WCU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT SUMMER READING LIST 2009

Each year, the faculty of WCU's Department of English publishes a list of selected, recommended readings. The English Department hopes that you enjoy these books as much as we do!

2666

Kuhio Walters

Roberto Bolano

The book is a sturdy 900 pages, containing hundreds of smaller stories within stories, and it lacks a traditional ending, leaving the reader to approach the text recursively. Within this challenging structure, though, there are amazing moments of lucid storytelling, where the novel leaps through history and through the lives of many of characters to arrive at the last part of the book, which is a catalogue of the hundreds of murders of women in Juarez, along the US/Mexico border. In this section's "brutal and quietly strange landscape where neither David Lynch nor Cormac McCarthy's Anton Chigurh would feel out of place," an Amazon reviewer tells us, Bolano "writes with a horror that is both haunting and deeply humane."

After Dark

Stacey Tartar-Esch

Haruki Murakami

An intelligent pop surrealism with a Japanese flavor.

American Rust

Lisa Konigsberg

Phillip Meyer

Set in a beautiful but economically devastated Pennsylvania steel town, *American Rust* is a novel of the lost American dream and the desperation—as well as the acts of friendship, loyalty, and love—that arise from its loss. From local bars to trainyards to prison, it is the story of two young men, bound to the town by family, responsibility, inertia, and the beauty around them, who dream of a future beyond the factories and abandoned homes.

Assassination Vacation

Rodney Mader

Sarah Vowell

This is a really funny account of the author's trips around the U.S., visiting sites associated with the assassinations of U. S. Presidents McKinley, Garfield, and Lincoln. Vowell is a hip history-nerd who builds great characters and narrates gripping events with sardonic wit. It's like Juno grew up to become a tour guide.

Austerlitz

Kuhio Walters

W.G. Sebald

The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears

Anne Herzog

Dinaw Mengestu

This first novel by was honored as a *New York Times* notable book of the year. It is a highly readable and engaging story of the friendship between three men, all immigrants from different African countries. Their friendship and the various ways they cope with the economic and cultural challenges they face are beautifully described by Mengestu. If you are familiar with Washington, DC (the novel's setting), you will appreciate the writer's descriptive talents. Gentrification and the destructive role it may play in urban impoverished neighborhoods contributes to some of the novel's most dramatic developments.

The Black Girl Next Door

Andrew Sargent

Jennifer Bazile

Bazile's nuanced, beautifully written memoir provides powerful personal testimony on what it was like to grow up as an African-American girl living in a predominantly white Southern California suburb (Palos Verdes) during the 1970s and 80s. As a member of the generation that came of age after the Civil Rights movement rendered racial segregation illegal, Bazile examines what happened when, as she puts it, "integration was made real" and the terrain of race relations shifted from courtrooms and lunch counters to soccer fields, classrooms, and high school dances.

Cosmopolis

Stacey Tartar-Esch

Don DeLillo

Will make you reflect on the all too real financial meltdown all around you. You may even reach for your Theodore Dreiser collection afterwards.

Dead Until Dark

Cherise Pollard

Charlaine Harris

The first novel in the Sookie Smith vampire series. Fun. The HBO series *True Blood* is based on this series. HBO makes the story a bit more sexy/raunchy than it is in the novels. Everyone that I have loaned the books to has loved them!

Deer Hunting with Jesus

Paul Maltby

Joe Bageant

Subtitled, "Dispatches from America's Class War," Bageant's study takes us on a tour of America's economically marginalized "heartland" communities. With their evangelical creed, attachment to guns, and hatred of federal government, Bageant's underclass constitutes a population ethnically distinct from the secular-liberal and (relatively) prosperous communities of the coastal metropolises. And yet their way of life remains largely neglected in our cultural studies departments.

The Dress Lodger

Rita Colanzi

Sheri Holman

Set in England during the Industrial Revolution and during a cholera pandemic, the novel focuses on fifteen-year-old Gustine who works in a pottery factory by day and as a prostitute by night to provide for her seriously ill infant son.

The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupifies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)

Tim Ray

Mark Bauerlein

This book focuses on how our reliance on technology is enabling us to access information more easily but leaving us unable to process and critically analyze that information. "The Dumbest Generation" refers specifically (and perhaps unfairly) to today's generation of college and high school students.

Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter

Rita Colanzi

Steven Johnson

Johnson argues that various forms of popular culture, such as video games, television, film, and the Internet, are beneficial because they offer us a "cognitive workout" (14).

Fingersmith

Cheryl Wanko

Sarah Waters

19th-century historical fiction about two women in a web of thievery, wealth, con games, madness, perversion, and mistaken identity. So many plot twists that I had to set the book down and take a rest. Waters brings it to a satisfying and unexpected conclusion.

The Glass Castle

Richard Scholl

Jeannette Walls

Chosen as "One Book Villanova" last year—and "must" reading for everyone on that campus—this novel speaks most eloquently to all who have grown up poor and/or those who have had to overcome adversity.

The Interpreter of Maladies

Michelle Blake

Jhumpa Lahiri

A Pulitzer prize winner and Lahiri's first published work (2000), this beautifully crafted collection of short stories focuses on characters from quiet to quirky who are either Indian, American, some combination, and/or somewhere in between—but always profoundly human. Lahiri also wrote *The Namesake* (2004), and she came out with *Unaccustomed Earth*, her second collection of short stories, this year.

Heat and Dust

Carla Verderame

Ruth Praver Jhabrala

This novel is a moving account of an English couple living in India and the granddaughter who traces their history.

Hens Dancing

B.G. Betz

Raffaella Barker

Hilarious and yet literary, a novel about a British woman stranded in the countryside with three young children.

How to Read the Bible

Michael Brooks

James L. Kugel

This is really an account of how different interpreters, operating with very different assumptions and aims, have interpreted Biblical texts. Kugel concentrates on the readings of the ancient Hebrews writing shortly after the Biblical texts had been assembled, the early Church fathers, and modern textual critics. His heart is with the ancient Hebrews, his mind is with the modern critics, and the conflict is fascinating to watch.

Island of the Lost: Shipwrecked at the Edge of the World

Allen Witkowski

Joan Druett

Based on journals and newspaper accounts, the author recreates the stories of two ships that wrecked within months in 1864 and only 20 miles of each other on one of the deserted Auckland Islands. With an impassable jungle between them, the first ship's crew survives because of organization, discipline, and positive thinking, but only 4 of 19 in the second crew survive because of infighting, greed, and lack of leadership. A well-written Big Lesson book for all ages.

The Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency

Vicki Tischio

Alexander McCall Smith

Novel/Mystery: about a detective agency in Botswana run by a woman. It is currently being made into an HBO series. It is an engaging read.

The Lay of the Land

Allen Witkowski

Richard Ford

This book evokes a wonderful sense of place of New Jersey. Going into middle-age, his "Permanent Period," the main character, Frank Bascombe, is a well-educated, divorced, realtor on the Jersey Shore who has survived his first bout with prostate cancer and is trying to understand his wife, girlfriend, daughter, and co-worker. His ruminations on "Responsibility colluding with pointlessness" are almost as interesting as the realistic, poetic descriptions of the Jersey Shore during the off-season. One reviewer said the antagonist in this character study belongs to Jersey, "as surely as Bruce Springsteen, William Carlos Williams or Tony Soprano."

Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer

Ruth Sabol

Fred Kaplan

Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas

Ayan Gangopadhyay

Hent de Vries

Taking his clues from the works of Theodor Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas - two thinkers whose works are fundamental in paving the way for a critique of the 'sacred' (Adorno) and the 'Other' (Levinas), whose works are seminal in the field of 'secular' reason and 'sacred', yet not 'holy' temporalities - de Vries insightfully figures out the limits of a purely secular reason in an age that "has already turned to religion" within the field of philosophy.

The Nine: Inside the World of the Supreme Court

Ruth Sabol

Jeffrey Toobin

The Odyssey

John Ward

Homer

One of the great foundational texts of world literature. More than most, this multifaceted work requires multiple, reflective readings.

1,000 Recordings You Must Hear Before You Die

Chuck Bauerlein

Tom Moon

You need not be a music geek to appreciate the effort that went into this book. Tom Moon, who served as the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* pop music critic from 1988 until he left the paper to pursue this book in 2005, has written the ultimate record guide. It will take years to appreciate this book because each entry that makes the grade has several other "catalogue choice" recommendations that considerably expands his list. Moon's book embraces the aesthetic that ALL music is valid and worth experiencing at least once, from head-banging punk rock to reggaeton and electronica to up to the classics by Mozart, Bach and Beethoven. No one writes as cogently about music as Tom Moon. You can argue with his choices on any single composer or artist, but you cannot argue with his passion for the subject. I will spend my summer looking for his recommendations. I may not finish the book before I die, but I will revel in the life-long search it presents to me.

Open House

Vicki Tischio

Patricia Williams

Memoir: She reflects on her experiences with the personal and political. Very nicely written. Good balance of seriousness and humor. A good choice for all those who saw her speak on campus this semester.

Orestes

Kostas Myrsiades

Euripides

It's a play little read, little taught but appropriate for our troubled times, and the most performed play in 5th century BCE Greece.

The Outliers

Malcolm Gladwell

Mary Buckelew

Non-fiction. Time, timing—place, space and experiences—birthdates!

Pemberley by the Sea

Abigail Reynolds

B.G. Betz

An updating of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, this version features a marine biologist Elizabeth Bennet and has a local angle too (the character supposedly teaches at Haverford College).

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Cheryl Wanko

This publication will be extinct unless you subscribe, or unless its management can find a way to make the online version generate revenue. Serious local reporting is crucial to political and business transparency and integrity in our region. You should read this every day, and you should *buy* it.

Set This House in Order

Matt Ruff

Lynne Cooke

This 2003 *New York Times* Notable Book of the year tells the story of Andy Gage, an average guy whose head is inhabited by many souls who share an imaginary house inside of Andy's head. The scenario is not as crazy as it may seem. If you remember the TV show "Herman's Head," Ruff's book shares the basic premise, but the book is more sophisticated and has storyline that's infused with humor.

The Shock Doctrine

Naomi Klein

Paul Maltby

After decades of lies about the "trickle down" benefits of the free market by the hired tongues at the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, it's enlightening to read Klein's hard-hitting best-seller. Klein exposes the violence needed to optimize global free market conditions (i.e. deregulation, privatization, cuts to government welfare spending) as advocated by the late Milton Friedman and the Chicago School. Klein wrote her book before the current economic meltdown, which has fully vindicated her critique of the free market as an inherently defective and unjust institution.

Song Yet Sung

James McBride

Cherise Pollard

A gripping novel about a slave revolt on Maryland's eastern shore.

Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers

Mary Roach

Jen Bacon

Part history and part journalism, Roach's book is a witty tour through the uses science has for dead bodies. Sounds gross, I know, but it's actually delightful. My WRT205 students loved it.

Straight Man

Richard Russo

Richard Scholl

A very funny--and masterfully written--satire of academe (read everything by Russo).

Suite Francaise

Irene Nemirovsky

Jeff Sommers

Had this novel been written by a post-WWII novelist, it would still be a memorable and great work of fiction. That it was written during the war as events continued to unfold makes it all the more remarkable—and even more heartbreaking. I can't recall a more vivid depiction of 1940-41 France. I marvel at her sensitive reading of people immersed in an upheaval the conclusion of which remains a mystery not only to them but

to the author herself. Nemirovsky was murdered at Auschwitz in 1942 before completing her entire planned "Suite."

A Theory of War

Allen Witkowski

Joan Brady

I love sad books, and this is one of the saddest. The story is of a great-grandchild trying to find out about her grandfather's experiences as a white slave on a Kansas farm in the 1860's. It's good but powerful therapy, having knocked me—and other friends who have read it—out of a funk.

To the Wedding

Kuhio Walters

John Berger

Twilight (& the *Twilight* series of 4 books)

Merry G. Perry

Stephenie Meyer

Teenage Human-Vampire Love Story! I told myself I would NOT like this book but I did. Good escapist fiction for summer reading, in my opinion. Most people seem to either love it or hate it. (The movie is pretty good, but I suggest watching it after reading the book.) And if nothing else, you might want to read *Twilight* because of its pop cultural significance/impact. According to *USA TODAY*'s Best-Selling Books list, "Sales of her [Stephenie Meyer's] novels accounted for about 16% of all book sales tracked by the list in the first quarter of 2009. That's about one in seven books." Hard to deny that this book is affecting reading practices!

Water for Elephants

Richard Scholl

Sara Gruen

Especially poignant for boomers with aging parents.

Were You Always an Italian?: Ancestors and Other Icons of Italian America

Rita Colanzi

Maria Laurino

The memoir explores Italian-American cultural identity. The question in the title of the book was posed to Laurino by former New York Governor Mario Cuomo. It speaks to the discomfort and shame she and others of her ethnicity experienced growing up Italian-American.

The World Without Us

John Ward

Alan Weisman

An informed and sobering (or reassuring, depending on one's perspective) speculation on how long it would take the planet to efface the deleterious effects of our species' presence if it were to disappear.

The Vagrants

John Ward

Yiyun Li

An impressive and troubling first novel set in the social, economic, and human upheavals of late 70s China.

The Yiddish Policeman's Union

Cheryl Wanko

Michael Chabon

A detective novel with earthy, compelling characters set in a temporary Jewish state established in Sitka, Alaska after WWII—apparently, an idea that had briefly been floated for real. A great plot, and you have never read sentences *this good*.