
West Chester University
Department of English
Summer 2018

***84, Charing Cross Road***
**Helene Hanff**
*Recommended by B.G. Betz*

This short work is a charming, nonfiction exchange of letters between a brash New York writer and a quiet London bookseller that begins during the years of austerity right after the Second World War.

***Abnormal: Lectures at the College De France***
**Michel Foucault**
*Recommended by Ayan K. Gangopadhyay*

Recently I watched the 2005 remake of the film *King Kong*, directed by Peter Jackson. Its last half an hour very poignantly reminded me of this book (initially lectures, later transcribed and published in a book form). Kong is being exhibited as part of a freak show in New York city. It forced me to think why Kong is a "freak." His sheer size being an obvious reason for him to be 'different' from "normal" people, is it the forever shrinking definition of what is normal, or is it the forever-widening gap between the definitions of 'nature' and the normal, and which one of these can be located as the discursive source behind the idea of the abnormal? Foucault's book precisely traces that.

***The Alienist,* TV series**
*Recommended by Jamie Woodlief*

Based on one of my favorite crime drama novels written by Caleb Carr, the new TV series stars Dakota Fanning who is virtually the only well-known actor in the cast. The story is set at the turn of the century in New York and based around Dr. Kriezler, a prominent alienist at the time, as he and his crew search for a sadistic serial killer. There are quite a few real historical figures and events that factor into the story as well such as Theodore Roosevelt and J.P. Morgan. If you are a fan of the book, or simply a fan of psychological crime thrillers, it is fairly true to the novel and quite entertaining. Warning: It does take a couple of episodes to build steam.

***All for Nothing***
**Walter Kempowski**
*Recommended by John Ward*

This monumental novel offers a realistic and thoughtful treatment of the closing weeks of WWII in East Prussia when the German population faces the choice of remaining in place hoping to survive the depredations of the invading Red Army (one character remarks that the Russians behaved "pretty well" in WWI) or fleeing to the West. The novel's central character is an adolescent boy from an aristocratic family whose father is on relatively easy military duty in Italy and whose beautiful but passive mother is executed for uncharacteristically providing a Jewish refugee one night's shelter. The survival of the boy provides perhaps the only qualifying note to the novel's apparently despairing title.

***Astral Weeks: A Secret History of 1968***
**Ryan H. Walsh**
*Recommended by Chuck Bauerlein*

I received the record this book refers to way, way back in the days of vinyl on my 18th birthday, just before I left for college in New Orleans. It was folk rock music for jazzbos, and I didn't much care for folk tinged rock and I wasn't really aware yet of jazz. But soon, over dozens of listenings to Van Morrison's soulful mysticism and the thumping underpinnings of a rhythm section led by a stand-up bassist Richard Davis, it pushed me into a new way of listening to and understanding music. *Astral Weeks* was genre bending and hard to pin down, to say the least. It was Van Morrison's first solo album for Warner Brothers, and most of these songs were captured in just one or two takes. This informative book is not just about the serendipitous and mysterious circumstances that surround this iconic record, it is also a chronicle of the Fort Hill Community of Roxbury, the progenitors of the Boston underground arts scene and a kind an East Coast mirror to the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco. Timed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the release of *Astral Weeks*, Walsh's compelling story captures Morrison's watershed moment in time like a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph that remains etched in our collective memories.

***Beartown***
**Fredrik Backman**
*Recommended by Erin Hurt*

I couldn't put this novel down once I started reading it. Backman's book follows the life of a tiny failing town somewhere in the very northern part of the U.S., as the town seeks to revive itself via a winning high school hockey team and an event that changes everyone's lives. The characters in this book are detailed and compelling and, even though you come to understand them, surprise you with the choices they make. Both hopeful but also intensely sad at times, this book is the best novel I've read this year.

***Black Panther,* film**
**Ryan Coogler, director**
*Recommended by Sarah Paylor*

See it 'cause it's good.

***The Color of Law: The Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America***
**Richard Rothstein**
*Recommended by Eleanor Shevlin*

The product of years of research, Rothstein's work offers a highly moving and cogent account of how policies at the local, state, and federal levels government deliberately segregated our country, especially our metropolitan areas. The legacy of these policies manifests itself daily in our society. Rothstein not only consistently presents a human face to this history and its aftermath across the entire United States, but he also concludes with preliminary proposals for addressing the ongoing, steadily intensifying problems wrought by these policies.

***Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century***
**Elana Levine, editor**
*Recommended by Ashley Patriarca*

This edited collection addresses topics as varied as the influence of Scandal fandom, beauty and fashion blogging, and cupcakes. Interests that are typically coded as feminine are all too often ignored or, worse, mocked, so it's heartening to see this thoughtful collection of analytic essays. As an early adopter of Pinterest, I particularly appreciate the "Pinning Happiness" chapter by Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim.

***The Daily, podcast***
**Michael Barbaro**
*Recommended by Andrew Sargent*

"This is how the news should sound" is *The Daily's* somewhat boastful tagline, but I have to agree. Over the past year, this *New York Times* podcast has become an essential part of my morning routine and my most cherished source of news. It provides an in-depth, compulsively-listenable audio examination of a single news story each day, often centering on host Michael Barbaro's tightly focused interviews with Times reporters about the stories they've just published. I've learned so much from *The Daily* about the challenges of making real journalism in the "fake news" era and about the deeper complexities of news stories that are too often reduced to partisan soundbites.

***Delayed Response: The Art of Waiting from the Ancient to the Instant World***
**Jason Farman**
*Recommended by Eleanor Shevlin*

While this Yale University Press work will be published later this year, the 50-minute preview Farman offered at a recent Library of Congress seminar compelled me to put it on this list. Farman's highly original work examines messages from a broad historical perspective, arguing that the waiting between the sending of a message and the receipt of a response forms a significant but often overlooked component of messages. Conceived when Farman was observing Japanese use of the Line app and its related effects, *Delayed Response* offers fascinating looks at messages within the context of Elizabethan seals, Aboriginal Australian message sticks, American Civil War letters, and four other periods including our Twitter-age. Finally, Farman wrote this work for trade publication by a New York house, but tenure demands resulted in having Yale publish it, in part because this academic press is interested in crossing the academic and public divide.

***Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India***
**Ranajit Guha**
*Recommended by Ayan K Gangopadhyay*

One of the primary sources of inspiration behind both postcolonial studies and the subaltern studies initiative, Guha's book has been a pioneer in ushering in a whole new range of vocabulary to study colonial and postcolonial conditions. Re-reading this book, because I am planning to edit a book—a collection of articles—that addresses the possibility of connections between postcolonial methodologies and today's ultra-right and urban Hindutva.

***Ecotopia***
**Ernest Callenbach**
*Recommended by Stacy Esch*

The secession of the West? Callenbach's 70s-era speculative novel imagines a new "new world" where people live sustainably within their means and the environment's needs, and happiness is still attainable. It's a utopian dream, but that's what dreamers do. It's a thankless job but someone has to do it! This book feels relevant for the world-rebuilding we need to do in 2018 and into the future.

***Fascism: A Warning***
**Madeleine Albright**
*Recommended by John Ward*

A first-hand and historical analysis of fascism which includes a (not quite) subliminal warning that it can happen here.

***The Fortunes***
**Peter Ho**
*Recommended by Carolyn Sorisio*

Separated into four sections spanning four time periods of U.S. history, this novel draws upon historical fact to examine U.S. national identity through the experiences of Chinese American immigrants.

***The Good Place,* television show**
**Michael Schur, creator**
*Recommended by Ashley Patriarca*

If you've seen me in person recently, there's a very good chance that I've recommended this show to you. Created by Michael Schur (who also created *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *Parks and Recreation*, and was a producer/writer for *The Office*), *The Good Place* is a sharp, smart, absurd comedy about what it means to be a good person. There's no other comedy on television that could (or would) dive headfirst into the works of Kant, Aristotle, and Kierkegaard. It's forking fantastic.

***Greatest Showman,* soundtrack**
**Music by John Debney and Joseph Trapanese**
*Recommended by Sarah Paylor*

This movie was definitely a musical: I really enjoyed the music and the overall story, even if some of the plot points and character development moments shouldn't be thought about too deeply. The soundtrack is full of enjoyable songs.

***Heads: A Biography of Psychedelic America***
**Jesse Jarnow**
*Recommended by Timothy Ray*

In this impressively-researched and well-written book, Jarnow, a rock journalist (*Rolling Stone*) and a member of the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, traces the history (or as he prefers to call it, "biography") of psychedelic culture in America during the second half of the 20th century by focusing heavily on the unheralded and often-overlooked aspects of the psychedelic counterculture rather than the more high-profile figures in the movement. In doing so, Jarnow presents the movement as an underground cultural phenomenon taking place among bohemians, punks, skater-punks, graffiti artists, musicians and others in countercultural pockets all across the country. He invokes Humbead's Revised Map of the World as a motif for mapping out this psychedelic culture, adding new locales previously overlooked and positioning them not so much where they are geographically in relation to one another, but instead, in Humbeadian (and psychedelic) fashion, where they are conceptually in relation to one another. Using a "new journalism" style similar to Thomas Wolfe's, Jarnow succeeds in pulling the reader into the text as participants on a journey of exploration. A hefty (408 pps.) but absorbing read.

***Henry David Thoreau: A Life***
**Laura Dassow Walls**
*Recommended by Carolyn Sorisio*

This new biography interweaves Thoreau's deeply lived life of the mind with the intellectual and reform movements that influenced him. It also details Thoreau's exploration of and commitment to the environment.

***Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World***
**Peter Wohlleben**
*Recommended by Vicki Tischio*

Wait! What?! Trees feel? Trees communicate? After reading this book I can't look at my backyard the same way. As is so often the case, when we take the time to stop and think about other species, we learn that we are much less sophisticated than we thought. That is definitely the case with Wohllenben's book, which has shifted my thinking about the magnificent world of trees around me. It is very nicely written, clear and smooth and, yet, chock-full of lots of research on the life of trees.

***The House Behind the Cedars***
**Charles W. Chesnutt**
*Recommended by Joseph Navitsky*

*The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) is Chesnutt's first novel, published shortly after the release of the author's successful short collection called *The Conjure Woman*. Chesnutt worked on the novel for close to ten years, integrating a romantic short story with new material to develop a provocative, if somewhat sentimental, tale about crossing the color line in the Reconstruction South. The story concerns the fortunes of two siblings and their efforts to change their identities in order to seek their futures in a white America that doesn't know—and can never tolerate—the secret of their past. Readers familiar with the canon will enjoy teasing out the novel's many intertextual allusions to the works of Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Smollett, and Richardson, among others—and will no doubt feel compelled to ask: how does the novel's insistence on the relevance of the British literary tradition add new dimensions to this distinctly American narrative?

***How Democracies Die***
**Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt**
*Recommended by Chuck Bauerlein*

"Is our democracy in danger? It is a question we never thought we'd be asking." But Levitsky and Ziblatt, two professors of government at Harvard, put that very question to readers of this compelling new book. Their academic interest and research into democracies in other parts of the world made them uniquely qualified to report on the authoritarian overtures the Trump administration has been making since the 2016 presidential campaign. Ziblatt's previous research focused on 19th-century Europe to the present; Levitsky's on South American dictatorships. Drawing on decades of research from 1930s Europe to contemporary Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela to the American South during the Jim Crow era, they show how democracies slowly erode and eventually die if they are not carefully tended by vigilant citizens – and they offer hope that ours can be restored.

***Incryptid,* book series**
**Seanan McGuire**
*Recommended by Sarah Paylor*

7 books in the series so far. This might be the best urban fantasy series I've read. The books follow different members of the Price family, who split off from the "all nonhumans are monsters to be killed" Covenant of St. George a few generations ago, and are now hiding out in North America, assisting and studying the various non-human races. There is also a race of talking, deeply religious mice. The books are fun, well-written, and feature a diverse cast of characters – these are not your usual fantasy creatures – as well as a solid, interesting world.

***Life 3.0: Being Human in an Age of Artificial Intelligence***
**Max Tegmark**
*Recommended by John Ward*

This rather loosely written book (it's too chatty by half) offers a series of possible scenarios—all of them negative—that will confront humankind after it is rendered obsolete by mechanical beings possessing artificial super intelligence. If the book's author, a research professor at MIT, is right, as he almost certainly is, Homo Sapiens will probably be remembered—if it is remembered at all—as the species that invented itself (and possibly organic life in general) into extinction.

***Lincoln in the Bardo***
**George Saunders**
*Recommended by Margaret Ervin*

Saunders has a brilliant gift for inventing the language of an alternate world, in this case the language of bardo-beings in the graveyard in which Abraham Lincoln's son, Willie, was laid to rest. Bardo is a term for the liminal time between lifetimes, borrowed from the Buddhist cosmology. Saunders' language and characters had me hooked and laughing from page three. To create an additional web of voices, Saunders enlists quotations from conflicting eye witness contemporaneous accounts of Willie's death and the Lincolns' mourning, as well as conflicting historical accounts of those events. In doing so, he calls into question the existence of any shared reality even among beings we can agree did exist.

***The Music Shop***
**Rachel Joyce**
*Recommended by B.G. Betz*

This novel about a vinyl record store in 1988 and then again in 2009 focuses on a neighborhood, its quirky residents, and of course the everlasting love of vinyl records and different genres of music.

***My Year of Meats***
**Ruth Ozecki**
*Recommended by Cheryl Wanko*

Filmmaker Jane Tagaki-Little is hired to create a show called *My American Wife!* to help sell Japanese housewives on an American meat-based diet, and the book progresses through episodes that mirror Jane's progressively radicalized view of her topic. Her story is accompanied by that of Akiko Ueno, an abused and unhappy Japanese housewife, and the narrative lines converge in a satisfying conclusion. The multigenre narrative ranges from wry to sad to inspirational, as the women grapple with motherhood, oppression, cultural assumptions, and a hormone-poisoned food supply that threatens all of us.

***Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder***
**Caroline Fraser**
*Recommended by Carla Verderame*

This well-written and exceptionally well-researched biography provides a rich account of Wilder's life as a journalist and farmer in the Midwest during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

***The Secret Wife***
**Gill Paul**
*Recommended by Michelle F. Blake*

Moving between present-day upstate New York and 1914 Russia, this story explores themes of love, loss, and loyalty, and how stories from long ago and far away can affect us today. In the modern story, Kitty Fisher flees a cheating husband in England by escaping to the remote cabin of her great-grandfather on Lake Akanabee in New York, where she discovers that she is connected to the events of the Russian revolution. In the story from 1914, Dmitri, a Russian soldier, and Tatiana, daughter in the royal Romanov family, develop and maintain an epistolary secret love affair that carries them through and beyond the Russian revolution. I enjoyed each story on its own as well as discovering, with Kitty, how they intertwined. I think you will, too!

***The Sellout***
**Paul Beatty**
*Recommended by Eleanor Shevlin*

A winner of the Man Booker Prize (and the first win for an American author since the eligibility rules changed), this novel offers a biting satire of race in America or perhaps more aptly "post-racial America." Opening with the protagonist's trial at the Supreme Court, the novel soon moves to a segregated suburb of Los Angeles where much of its plot takes place. It is at once comic, learned, subversive, and more. Beatty's use of language is often rollickingly poetic—"They will pore over the legal briefs and thumb through the antebellum vellum …"—and the novel abounds with literary, pop culture, and historical references that enhance its cleverness without ever being pretentious or gimmicky.

***Solar Storms***
**Linda Hogan**
*Recommended by Cheryl Wanko*

I don't usually like sad books, but this story of a Native American woman's quest to understand her past and preserve her community's future haunts me in a good way, and it taught me emotional truths of Native Americans' continuing struggle for land and respect. I read it in the aftermath of the Dakota Access protests, and it takes on new resonance as we watch the Trump administration plot to devastate other indigenous homelands such as the Bears Ears National Monument.

***Space Opera***
**Catherynne M. Valente**
*Recommended by Ashley Patriarca*

When writer Seanan McGuire recommended Catherynne M. Valente's *Space Opera* on Twitter, she called it "Eurovision in space." I immediately pre-ordered the book, and I haven't regretted it. Like McGuire's description suggests, it's a little weird and definitely delightful: Decibel Jones and the Absolute Zeros, a one-hit-wonder, glam-rock band from the mid-2000s, must win an intergalactic talent show called the Megagalactic Grand Prix to ensure humanity's survival. The band's journey is colorful, chaotic, and definitely comedic. Valente's writing here owes quite a bit to Douglas Adams, but it's never derivative. I'm looking forward to reading more of her work this summer.

***Up the Down Staircase***
**Bel Kaufman**
*Recommended by B.G. Betz*

A huge bestseller in the 1960s, this novel centers on Miss Sylvia Barrett's first year teaching English at a city high school. Dated if only for its intra-office communications and mimeographs, the story still provides an engaging look back at teaching in a different time.

***Welcome to the Goddamn Ice Cube: Chasing Fear and Finding Home in the Great White North***
**Blair Braverman**
*Recommended by Erin Hurt*

Braverman's memoir is ostensibly a narrative about the years she spends living in Norway, learning to drive sled dogs, and working as a musher on a glacier in Alaska, but this book is so much more than that. The book follows her as she moves from one cold locale to the next, finding herself and her own strength and courage, but also making her own family as she goes. I read this book more than a year ago, and think about it constantly. The writing is beautiful and, if you are into audio books, Braverman's narration of her novel is terrific, too!

***Who's Your God?*** **podcast**
**Amy Miller, John Michael Bond, and Steve Hernandez**
*Recommended by Cheryl Wanko*

A trio of comedians who come from church backgrounds interview other comedians about religion in this perfect combination of laughter, ribaldry, and earnestness. In each episode, they ask their guests to identify the three requirements or tenets of the hypothetical church they would found. An entertaining window into the lives of stand-up comedians as well as into America's complicated relationship with religion.

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